Qualitative research on the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people of working in the childcare and playwork sector in Wales

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Glossary

Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (ArWAP)

The Welsh Government's [Anti-racist Wales Action Plan](#) (ArWAP) sets out the vision for Wales to be an anti-racist country. Its aim is to promote joint working to make a measurable difference to the lives of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people.

The ArWAP sets out a firm commitment to combating racism and promoting inclusivity across all sectors, including the childcare and playwork sector.

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

All ethnic groups except White British, including White minority groups such as Romani Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Roma or Jewish people, and parents and children of mixed heritage.

Childcare and playwork sector

The childcare and playwork sector encompass services that provide care, early education and play opportunities for children, typically from birth to 12 years of age. It includes regulated childcare such as nurseries, childminders and out of school clubs, as well as playwork settings that support children's play, wellbeing and development through supervised, child led activities, often outside formal education.

MEL Research

A social research agency commissioned to explore Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people's views on and experiences of working in the childcare and playwork sector in Wales using qualitative research methods.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and policy context

The childcare and playwork sector in Wales plays a central role in supporting children's early development, family wellbeing, and wider social and economic participation. Provision includes nursery settings, childminding, out-of-school care, and playwork delivered in community and school-based environments. Those working and volunteering in the sector contribute not only to children's learning and development, but also to their emotional wellbeing, sense of belonging, and early experiences of social relationships.

The workforce is therefore critical to delivering high-quality, inclusive provision that reflects the diversity of communities across Wales. Childcare and playwork settings are also among the main public services that children and families engage with, giving the sector a particularly important role in shaping early experiences of inclusion, representation, and social connection.

The Welsh Government has made a clear commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion across public services, including through the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan (ArWAP). The Plan sets out an ambition for Wales to become an anti-racist nation by 2030 and identifies the need for action across a range of policy areas, including education, early years, childcare, and workforce development. Within this context, there is increasing recognition of the importance of understanding how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people experience working in, volunteering in, or training to enter the childcare and playwork sector.

At the same time, the childcare and playwork workforce faces a number of challenges, including recruitment and retention pressures, low pay, limited progression routes, and the impact of wider labour market conditions. While these challenges affect the sector as a whole, there is growing awareness that they may be experienced differently by different groups within the workforce. In particular, concerns have been raised about the under-representation of people from ethnic minority backgrounds in the sector and about the barriers that may affect entry, progression, and retention, as reflected in the childcare and playwork workforce actions within ArWAP (see p.80).

There is also a policy focus on ensuring that childcare and playwork settings are inclusive environments for both children and adults, as reflected in the childcare and playwork workforce actions within ArWAP (see p.81). Workforce representation is increasingly recognised as an important aspect of inclusive practice, both in relation to fairness and equality for workers and in shaping children's experiences and families' engagement with services. For children, early exposure to diversity and positive relationships with adults from different backgrounds can influence understanding, belonging, and attitudes towards difference. For families, seeing a workforce that reflects the diversity of the local population can affect trust, confidence, and perceptions of quality.

Despite this policy context, there has been limited detailed evidence focused on the lived experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds within the childcare and playwork workforce in Wales.

This research was commissioned to address that gap by providing qualitative, lived-experience evidence to inform policy development and implementation.

1.2. Aims and objectives of the research

The overall aim of this research was to explore the views and experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds who are working in, volunteering in, or training to enter the childcare and playwork sector in Wales.

The specific objectives were to:

- explore motivations for entering the childcare and playwork sector, including personal, cultural, and community influences

- understand experiences of working, volunteering, or training within the sector, including feelings of inclusion, belonging, and support

- identify barriers to entry, retention, and progression, including structural, cultural, and institutional factors

- explore experiences of racism, bias, discrimination, or differential treatment, where these occur, and how individuals respond to them

- gather views on training, qualifications, career development, and recognition of skills and experience

- identify what participants believe would make the sector more welcoming, inclusive, and supportive for people from ethnic minority backgrounds

The findings from the research are intended to inform Welsh Government policy, particularly in relation to ArWAP, workforce development, and early years and childcare policy. It is not an evaluation of specific programmes or interventions, but an exploration of lived experience to help identify priorities for action.

1.3. Relevant past research

There is limited published research focused specifically on the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds within the childcare and playwork workforce in Wales. The Welsh Government has, however, developed a range of policy and evidence-informed outputs relating to the childcare and early years workforce, including workforce strategies and survey-based research on recruitment, retention, skills and progression. These include the Childcare, Playwork and Early Years Workforce Plan which sets out the Welsh Government's strategic ambitions for the workforce, alongside evidence such as the Department for Education's Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey, which relates to England only. Together, these sources provide important contextual insight into workforce pressures, capacity and sustainability, and survey findings indicate very low representation of people from ethnic minority backgrounds within the sector. However, ethnicity is largely addressed at a high level, and there remains limited in-depth qualitative evidence exploring the lived experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds working in childcare and playwork settings.

The Welsh Government's wider work on race equality, including ArWAP, highlights systemic inequalities and the need for action across public services and the workforce. This body of work emphasises the importance of valuing lived experience, addressing workforce safety and wellbeing, and strengthening inclusive employment practices. While it provides essential context for understanding racial inequality in Wales more broadly, it does not focus specifically on the childcare and playwork sector or on the day-to-day experiences of individuals working or training within it.

In addition, recent evidence produced in partnership with the International Public Policy Observatory (IPPO) and the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) has identified the childcare and playwork workforce as a key driver of access to services for ethnic minority children and families, and highlighted the impact of low workforce diversity on uptake and engagement (Mendizabal-Espinosa et al, 2023). Alongside this, a parallel qualitative study has been commissioned to explore the experiences of ethnic minority families' use of childcare and playwork services, further underlining the need for complementary evidence focused on the workforce itself.

Alongside sector-specific workforce research, the Welsh Government has published a growing body of evidence on racial inequality in Wales more broadly. This includes analysis of the 2021 Census, administrative data, and thematic reports which highlight disparities in employment outcomes, progression, and lived experience for people from ethnic minority backgrounds in Wales. While this evidence does not focus specifically on the childcare and playwork workforce, it provides important context for understanding the structural conditions and inequalities that shape experiences of work and progression across sectors.

As such, there remains a gap in the Welsh evidence base in relation to the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds within the childcare and playwork workforce. This study looks to address that gap by providing qualitative insight into lived experience, supporting ArWAP's aims.

1.4. Structure of the report

This section outlines how the remainder of the report is organised:

- section 2 sets out the methodology used for the research, including recruitment, data collection, analysis, and limitations

- section 3 presents the main findings from the qualitative interviews

- section 4 draws together the key conclusions from the research

- section 5 sets out recommendations informed by the findings

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The study used a qualitative research design to explore the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds working in, volunteering in, or training to enter the childcare and playwork sector in Wales. One-to-one depth interviews were used to explore lived experience, including motivations, perceptions of inclusion, experiences of bias, and views on what supports or hinders participation and progression.

As part of the original research design, participants were offered the option to take part in an online community hosted on Recollective, an online qualitative research platform designed to facilitate structured discussion, reflective tasks and shared responses over a period of time. The community was intended to complement the interviews by enabling more reflective, ongoing engagement and shared responses to prompts over time. However, as interviews progressed, it became clear that participants working in childcare and playwork were often time poor, balancing their roles with family commitments.

At the same time, the interviews were generating sufficient depth across accounts, reducing the additional value that an online community was likely to add. The research team therefore weighed the additional value that the platform would provide against the additional burden on participants, and the decision was taken not to proceed with the Recollective community and to focus instead on interviews as the primary qualitative method.

2.2. Recruitment approach

Given the challenges associated with identifying and reaching people from ethnic minority backgrounds working in, volunteering in, or training to enter the childcare and playwork sector in Wales, participants were recruited through a multi-stage outreach strategy designed to reach people from ethnic minority backgrounds with experience of, or aspirations to enter, the childcare and playwork sector in Wales.

Recruitment emails were issued to intermediary organisations, with the intention that information about the study would be shared with potential participants through existing networks and channels. The recruitment emails clearly set out the purpose of the research, explaining that it had been commissioned by Welsh Government as part of ArWAP and aimed to explore the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds working in, volunteering in, or considering entry to the childcare and playwork sector in Wales. Emails were sent to a wide range of sector bodies, training providers and local authorities, including national organisations such as Early Years Wales, Care Inspectorate Wales, Play Wales, and PACEY, as well as representative bodies within the childcare and playwork sector.

Recruitment emails were also circulated to further education colleges offering childcare and playwork courses, alongside higher education institutions such as Cardiff Metropolitan University. A full list of these organisations is provided as Annex B.

In addition, emails were sent to 22 local authorities in Wales and to 1,105 CIW registered childcare and playwork providers.

All recruitment communications invited potential participants to contact MEL Research directly if they were interested in taking part in an interview. The emails outlined that participation would involve a 45-minute interview conducted remotely or in person at a time suitable to the participant, with the option to take part in Welsh or English. Emails were issued in both English and Welsh, and bilingual participant information sheets were provided where appropriate for internal sharing. The voluntary and confidential nature of participation was emphasised.

Despite the scale of this outreach, response rates were much lower than anticipated. The research team consider that this may reflect the relatively small size of the ethnic minority workforce within the sector, alongside wider capacity pressures.

As such, to supplement the email referral approach, Roots Recruitment Consultancy, a specialist recruitment agency was used by MEL Research to undertake recruitment specifically for this study. Potential participants were invited to take part based on information they had previously provided when registering with the recruitment agency's research participant panel, which is made up of individuals who have opted in to be contacted about future research opportunities. However, Roots also had trouble recruiting suitable participants, further highlighting the challenges associated with recruitment for this study.

While the use of social media channels to further boost recruitment was initially explored, this approach was subsequently discounted following discussion, reflecting both the sensitive nature of the research topic and safeguarding considerations associated with open recruitment.

2.3. Sampling and participants

Participants all self-identified as being from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic background and either working in childcare and playwork roles, volunteering in childcare and playwork settings, or undertaking training with the intention of entering the sector.

In total, interviews were conducted with 13 individuals. This included four volunteers and two trainees, alongside seven people currently working within the childcare and playwork sector.

While the sample was not designed to support formal subgroup analysis, participants' accounts were interpreted with attention to differences in role, employment status, and route into the sector, including volunteering, training, and paid work.

2.4. Data collection

Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis via Microsoft Teams, reflecting participants stated preferences. All participants were offered the option to take part in Welsh or with a Welsh speaking interviewer, however none chose to do so.

Semi-structured interview topic guides were used, with separate but closely aligned guides for workers and volunteers, and for trainees.

Interviews typically lasted up to 45 minutes. With consent, and following Welsh Government data security processes, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to aid analysis.

2.5. Ethical considerations

The research was conducted in line with established ethical principles. Participants received clear information about the study and provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time.

All data was treated confidentially and verbatim quotes included in the report have been anonymised.

2.6. Narrative analysis

Transcripts were analysed using a narrative analysis approach, focusing on how participants described and made sense of their experiences over time. Analysis attended to the structure, content, and emphasis within participants' accounts, as well as the meanings they attached to key events and experiences.

The analysis sought to preserve participants' narratives and to understand how experiences were situated within wider personal, cultural, and workplace contexts. Participant accounts were treated as holistic narratives rather than as isolated thematic fragments. As a result, some verbatim extracts are used to illustrate more than one theme where participants' accounts spoke simultaneously to overlapping issues.

2.7. Limitations and recruitment challenges

As a qualitative study, the findings are not intended to be statistically representative of the ethnic minority childcare and playwork workforce in Wales.

It was recognised at the outset of this qualitative research that a key challenge would be reaching and recruiting the intended participants. Evidence from Welsh Government workforce mapping and survey research, including the 2024 Childcare and Early Years Workforce Survey, indicates very low ethnic minority representation within the childcare and playwork workforce, with just 2% of respondents identified as being from ethnic minority backgrounds. This contextual evidence is directly relevant to the present study, as it highlights the relatively small potential participant pool. In addition, there is currently no register or database of individual childcare and playworkers in Wales, and no direct contact methods exist for targeting potential research participants from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Estimates from the 'Mapping the Childcare and Play Workforce, Phase 2 Report' indicate that there are 16,638 people working in registered childcare and playwork settings in Wales (as of 2023). Although the exact number of individuals in the workforce from ethnic minority backgrounds is unknown, if the 2% value from the research is extrapolated, this equates to just 320 individuals, giving a sense of the scale of the challenge, either due to low numbers present in the workforce, or lack of engagement with previous research from these groups.

Recruitment did prove to be challenging despite extensive outreach and multiple recruitment routes. This likely reflects the small size of the ethnic minority workforce within the sector,

reliance on organisations to cascade information, and potential (but unconfirmed) reluctance to discuss sensitive experiences.

These challenges provide important context for interpreting the findings and underline the relevance of the issues explored. Despite these limitations, the recurrence of key themes across interviews provides confidence that the findings offer meaningful insight to inform policy and practice.

3. Research findings

3.1. Motivations for entering the sector

This section explores the motivations that led participants to enter the childcare and playwork sector, highlighting the values, experiences, and circumstances that shaped routes into the workforce. Participants described a wide range of motivations, reflecting different life stages and personal circumstances, but accounts were commonly grounded in a strong commitment to working with children and a belief in the value of care, support, and early intervention. Across interviews, participants framed their motivation as meaningful and purposeful rather than instrumental or accidental.

3.1.1. Values led and intrinsic motivations

For a substantial proportion of participants, motivation was described as intrinsic and longstanding. Participants spoke about a deep enjoyment of being around children, often framed as something they had felt from an early age or had long recognised in themselves. In these accounts, childcare was described not simply as a job, but as a vocation, with participants emphasising love for children, emotional connection, and a strong ethic of care.

One participant reflected, "I love children as long as I can remember, even at the age of five", while another described childcare as something they felt called to do, saying, "I absolutely love kids so much… I always say it's a calling". This sense of vocation was, in some accounts, reinforced by early experiences such as babysitting, volunteering, or growing up in family environments where caring for children was normalised, including accounts of being raised "in a house full of children" or accompanying relatives who regularly cared for others' children.

Across interviews, working with children was described as emotionally rewarding. Participants spoke about feeling fulfilled by children's learning, development, and everyday interactions, and about the satisfaction of seeing children grow in confidence or acquire new skills. These experiences were cited as sustaining motivation, particularly where other aspects of the role or sector were challenging.

3.1.2. Life stage, parenthood, and volunteering as routes into the sector

Parenthood emerged as a significant driver in a distinct subset of interviews, particularly among participants who entered the sector later in life. Participants in this group described childcare and playwork as closely aligned with their own parenting experience and highlighted practical considerations such as flexibility, alignment with school hours, and the ability to combine paid or voluntary work with caring responsibilities. One participant explained that parenting involves "teaching, having to play several roles" and described childcare as closely aligned with this experience. Another reflected that volunteering in their child's school "kind of brought me and my kids together as well". For these participants, motivation was shaped by a desire to remain close to their children while also developing skills, experience, or employment in a familiar and meaningful setting.

3.1.3. Gaining experience and exploring routes into the sector

Participants often described volunteering as their initial point of entry into the childcare and playwork sector, as well as a source of motivation in its own right. Participants spoke about volunteering in nurseries, schools, after-school clubs, churches, or community settings, sometimes initially "just to help out" or to gain experience. In a number of accounts, volunteering was described as a low-risk way to explore whether childcare and playwork was the right fit. One participant described starting by volunteering "because I wanted to understand how things work here", while another participant recalled volunteering in an after-school club as something they felt "really excited about". Over time, positive experiences through volunteering were described as reinforcing motivation and leading to paid roles, apprenticeships, or training.

Professional and skills-based motivations were evident among a small subset of participants, particularly those with prior experience or training in related fields such as healthcare, psychology, education, or youth work. Participants in this group described childcare and playwork as a way to apply existing skills in a new context, or as a stepping stone towards longer term career goals.

A distinct set of accounts described entry into the sector through practical or opportunity driven routes, rather than through an initial sense of vocation. These included taking up work experience because it was local, volunteering because an opportunity arose, or accepting an apprenticeship after being encouraged by others. Participants describing these routes often went on to explain how motivation developed over time, as they discovered they were well suited to the work or found it personally rewarding. One participant reflected that although entry was initially circumstantial, they "found that actually I was really good with children" and that this reinforced their decision to stay.

3.1.4. Cultural identity, representation, and community connection

Cultural, community, and representation related motivations were evident in several interviews. Participants described a desire to support children from ethnic minority backgrounds and emphasised the importance of cultural understanding, shared language, and community connection in helping children to feel safe, understood, and supported within childcare and playwork settings. In these accounts, visible representation was described not simply as symbolic, but as something that could shape children's everyday experiences. Participants suggested that when children see adults who share aspects of their cultural background, language, or lived experience, this can strengthen children's sense of belonging, reduce feelings of difference or isolation, and reinforce positive identity development. Representation was therefore framed as having practical and relational value, enabling more meaningful communication with children and families, supporting culturally responsive care, and helping children feel recognised rather than marginalised within early years environments. One participant spoke about wanting to provide "the cultural connection with children" and to make a "community impact", while another highlighted the importance of visible representation, stating that "someone from the black ethnicity would be very, very helpful".

In a limited number of interviews, participants explicitly framed their motivation in terms of addressing inequality or bias affecting children. These justice-oriented motivations were not widespread across the sample, but where present they were articulated clearly and strongly. Participants expressing this motivation spoke about wanting to represent children who lacked support or fair treatment and about using their role in childcare and playwork to challenge practices they perceived as inequitable. One participant spoke directly about entering the sector because of "racism and bias that affect child protection and practices", while another described wanting to "represent children that actually needed help".

Overall, motivations for entering the childcare and playwork sector were diverse and often layered, combining intrinsic interest, personal circumstance, cultural identity, practical considerations, and, for a limited number of participants, a desire to address wider inequalities.

3.2. Experiencing belonging and purpose through work with children

This section examines how relationships with children sustained participants' engagement once they were in the sector, shaping experiences of belonging, purpose, and emotional reward that helped maintain involvement over time.

While motivations for entering the sector varied, participants consistently described relationships with children as central to how they experienced the role once they were in it. Across interviews, children were positioned as a source of emotional connection and purpose, and, for many participants, as a key route to belonging within settings, particularly where adult environments felt more complex or less consistently supportive. This was expressed in statements such as "I really enjoy working with children" and "I really love this job", as well as through more reflective accounts in which participants linked children directly to a sense that their work mattered. For example, "working with children gives me a sense that what I'm doing matters".

While motivations for entering the sector varied, participants consistently described relationships with children as central to how they experienced their role once in it. Across interviews, children were positioned as a source of emotional connection, belonging, and purpose. Participants described feeling welcomed and accepted by children, often contrasting this with more complex adult environments. As one participant explained, "I feel welcome because the children are all around. I feel welcome by them", while another reflected that "children are very open, they don't judge you".

This sense of acceptance contributed to feelings of emotional safety and belonging. Participants described children as seeing them without scrutiny, including, "Children don't see you the way adults do… they just see you as you are", and linked this directly to belonging: "I feel like I belong more when I'm with the kids". For some, time with children was described as calming and grounding, including "when I'm with the children, I feel more relaxed".

Beyond acceptance, participants described deep relational bonds built over time. Children were framed not simply as recipients of care but as individuals with whom participants formed relationships rooted in responsibility and attachment. Some spoke about treating

children as if they were their own, including, "my goal is to look after children and bring them up as my own", and "as soon as you leave your child with me, they are mine". In some accounts, these bonds extended into a wider sense of family or community, for example, "My child has gained 15 siblings… every single one they will tell you this is my brother and sister".

Alongside belonging, participants described a strong sense of purpose rooted in everyday moments of trust and development. Small gestures were described as meaningful, including "the rewarding moments are when a child comes up to you and says I drew this for you", and "when a child sees that you've got their back". Participants spoke of satisfaction in seeing children "grow and learn" and noted, "It gives me satisfaction when you see a child progress". In several interviews, this sense of purpose was described as the primary reason for remaining in the sector, including, "That's what keeps me going".

Importantly, however, experiences of belonging were not uniform. For some participants, belonging extended beyond relationships with children into the wider workplace culture. For others, children were primarily a source of purpose rather than a broader sense of inclusion. In these accounts, meaningful engagement with children coexisted with more fragile or conditional belonging within staff teams. Participants sometimes framed their work in moral or advocacy terms, for example, "Working there will actually make me represent children that actually needed help", suggesting that commitment to children could persist even where workplace inclusion was less secure.

Children were also described as a counterbalance to adult exclusion. Several participants contrasted children's openness with adult judgement, including the observation that "Children are just open. Adults are more complicated". In this way, children were positioned not only as central to the work itself, but as a stabilising force that enabled participants to sustain engagement even where adult systems felt challenging.

Taken together, these findings show that relationships with children play a critical role in shaping participants' sense of belonging, purpose, and professional identity within the childcare and playwork sector. However, they also reveal that belonging rooted in relationships with children does not always translate into secure inclusion within adult workplace systems. This distinction is important for understanding both motivation and sustainability within the sector and highlights the tension between the emotional rewards of the role and the variability of wider workplace experiences.

3.3. Experiences of inclusion and exclusion in settings and training environments

This section explores participants' experiences of inclusion and exclusion within childcare and playwork settings and training environments, focusing on how everyday behaviours, organisational context, leadership, and representation shaped adult working and learning environments. Experiences described by participants arose through a range of adult interactions within the childcare and playwork sector, including relationships with colleagues and managers, training environments, and, in some cases, interactions with parents.

3.3.1. Exclusionary behaviours in adult environments

Participants described a range of exclusionary behaviours within adult environments across childcare and playwork settings and training contexts. While a small number of participants reported experiences of overt racism, more commonly participants described everyday bias, assumptions, and subtle forms of exclusion that accumulated over time. These experiences were linked to interactions with other adults, including colleagues, managers, trainers, and, in some cases, parents, rather than to interactions with children.

Where overt racism was described, participants emphasised its significant impact. One participant described facing "quite a lot of […] very racist remarks" and reflected on how the normalisation of inappropriate comments could be reinforced by a lack of challenge from others, stating, "When no one speaks up, people think it's appropriate". In this account, the accumulation of these experiences ultimately led to withdrawal from the setting, with the participant stating, "I had to leave in the end".

More frequently, participants described lower-level racism and assumptions linked to appearance or background. These experiences were often framed as ongoing rather than isolated, contributing to a sense that difference was constantly being noticed or interpreted within adult environments. One participant noted, "You do come across low level racism", while another described how visible difference shaped assumptions, stating, "People come with assumptions about you because of the way you present".

Participants also described exclusion through everyday workplace behaviours, including being left out of conversations, excluded from informal networks, or allocated heavier workloads. One participant described this plainly, saying, "You're not always included in conversations", while another captured the experience of social isolation in everyday settings: "Everyone is chatting and then you're just left alone", and, "You can see that you're not invited". Others described unequal task allocation, including, "They're leaving the bulk of the job to you". These experiences were described as cumulative, contributing over time to feelings of loneliness and marginalisation, including, "Sometimes it can feel very lonely".

Across these accounts, participants described reluctance to challenge exclusionary or racist behaviour directly. This reluctance was not framed as indifference, but as a pragmatic response to perceived risk. Participants explained that such behaviours were difficult to challenge because they were not explicit and could be downplayed or dismissed if raised. One participant explained, "You don't talk about it, because you don't want to be accused of paranoia", while others described choosing not to escalate situations, including, "I didn't let it escalate", and "I didn't want to make that a point". Participants described coping through self-management rather than formal escalation, using pragmatic strategies such as "You kind of just crack on", or "I just focus on the work". Others described emotional adaptation over time, including, "I think I've grown a thick skin", and "If I keep taking everything personal, I really wouldn't do anything". In these accounts, coping strategies were described less as choice and more as necessity.

Parents were also identified as a source of exclusion in a small number of interviews. Participants described feeling treated differently by parents, including preferences for being supported by someone else. One participant said, "Some parents would prefer to have

someone else attend to them", framing this as a subtle experience rather than an overt confrontation. In another account, a participant described experiences with parents who they felt believed that their children would not progress as quickly if cared for by someone from a different cultural background. These experiences were not described as explicit complaints or challenges, but as underlying assumptions that shaped interactions and contributed to discomfort.

3.3.2. Organisational context, underrepresentation, and structural contributors

Alongside exclusionary behaviours, participants' accounts highlighted how organisational context and underrepresentation shaped experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Participants described considerable variation between settings, with inclusion influenced by local culture, individual relationships, and leadership, rather than by consistent or embedded organisational practices. Experiences ranged from environments described as "absolutely amazing… it was very inclusive" to those where, as previously mentioned, participants encountered "very racist remarks" and felt unable to remain in their post. Even where inclusion was described positively overall, participants suggested that it could sit alongside moments of exclusion, uncertainty, or omission, rather than being consistently assured.

A recurring theme across the interviews was the impact of underrepresentation. Participants described being one of very few people from an ethnic minority background within their workplace, training cohort, or placement. This lack of representation contributed to feelings of isolation and self-consciousness, particularly during training and early career stages. Participants described this in direct terms, including, "There wasn't much diversity… apart from me", and "I was the only person of colour in the whole place".

In some cases, underrepresentation was experienced as intimidating, particularly at points of entry into new settings. One participant described this explicitly, saying, "I felt slightly intimidated because I was the only Asian". Others described the emotional impact of limited representation in ways that went beyond discomfort, including feelings of diminished self-worth, "It make me feel less of myself. This emotional impact was closely linked to experiences of isolation, with participants describing being the only person of colour in their workplace or training environment and questioning their sense of belonging, including, "When you don't see anyone like you, you do start to question whether you belong".

Participants also discussed underrepresentation in relation to leadership and progression, reinforcing perceptions of limited visibility and opportunity. Senior leadership was described as overwhelmingly white, including, "The people that I knew are on a high level are all from a predominantly white background", and, "I have never ever seen a headteacher from any other background". In these accounts, patterns of underrepresentation were experienced as barriers to progression, with participants stating, "I've been denied of getting to key positions that I'm actually qualified for", and describing perceptions that, "They actually look at Africans as if they are not qualified for some key positions".

Experiences of inclusion were often described as fragile or conditional. Feeling welcomed was frequently linked to particular individuals, such as supportive managers, tutors, or colleagues, rather than to formal systems. These relationships were described as providing reassurance and psychological safety. In contrast, where such relationships were absent,

inclusion was described as limited and uneven. A small number of participants described uncertainty about where to seek support or raise concerns, with one stating that they "wouldn't know who to speak to". Participants referred to the absence of clear organisational structures, including comments such as "there are no policies". Some also suggested that inclusion could vary depending on who was present, for example, "When the supervisor is around… they are up and doing", indicating shifts in behaviour linked to oversight rather than embedded practice.

3.3.3. Inclusive practice, leadership, and what makes a difference

Despite these challenges, participants also described examples of genuinely inclusive practice, often characterised by supportive leadership, visible diversity, and intentional efforts to recognise culture and faith. In these environments, inclusion was described as being reflected in everyday practice rather than solely in policy.

Examples of inclusive practice included visible recognition of diversity within settings, such as a reception area where "What they had was in each language it said hello or welcome…and underneath were flags from the individual country", and activities where "They have multicultural days where parents from different backgrounds brought in food and [the children] listened to each other's music". Participants also described the importance of visible recognition of culture and identity, including, "They have your flags on", "They celebrate cultural day", and, "Our pictures… it's on the school board". Participation in these activities was described as important in making inclusion visible within everyday practice. One participant referred to their involvement directly, stating, "I volunteered in the event", highlighting how staff were not only observing but actively contributing to multicultural events within the setting. In these accounts, participation itself was framed as a way of affirming cultural identity and signalling that diversity was recognised and valued.

Participants also described practical forms of support within inclusive settings, including being actively checked in on or offered help by managers or colleagues. In a small number of accounts, this support extended beyond day-to-day work tasks and was described as practical and responsive to individual circumstances. This included comments such as, "They take more concerns on us… they are more particular about helping you", and, in one case, being asked whether practical help was needed, for example, "They'll ask you… if you don't have like maybe a washing machine.".

Programmes such as Flying Start were highlighted as examples of more structured and intentional inclusion, particularly in relation to children and families. One participant described practice that explicitly recognised ethnicity and language, stating, "Each child has each key worker… we did a care plan for them about their ethnicity, their language", and described this as "very impressive".

However, even where inclusion was described positively, accounts contrasted these experiences with less inclusive environments elsewhere. Some settings were described as performative or tokenistic in their approach to diversity, with one participant stating that inclusion felt "just there for the sake of, oh, we are not discriminating", adding, "There's no difference… it's still the same thing over and over again". Faith-related needs, in particular, were described as being accommodated informally through individual managers rather than

through clear organisational guidance. One participant described confusion among managers who "don't fully grasp that idea of our religion", leading to informal workarounds such as advising prayer in alternative spaces.

Across the interviews, participants contrasted their experiences with adults to their interactions with children. Children were consistently described as more accepting, open, and non-judgemental, while adult environments were described as more complex or difficult to navigate. One participant captured this contrast succinctly, stating, "Children are just open. Adults are more complicated". Participants also described children as a refuge when adult environments felt exclusionary, including, "When I look at the innocent children… I just forget about everything". In these accounts, this contrast helped participants remain focused on the purpose of their role even where workplace culture felt less supportive.

Overall, participants' experiences of inclusion and exclusion were described as highly variable and dependent on local culture, leadership, and individual relationships. Participants described both genuinely inclusive environments and experiences of subtle or overt exclusion, limited representation, and a lack of formal support. Inclusion was frequently dependent on informal relationships and individual allies rather than on consistent systems, and participants often described coping through resilience and adaptation rather than escalation. These experiences sit alongside the strong sense of purpose and belonging participants described in relation to children, highlighting a tension between the emotional rewards of the role and the challenges of navigating adult systems within the sector.

3.4. Barriers to progression, retention, and development

This section examines the barriers that limited participants' ability to progress, develop, or remain in the sector, highlighting how structural, cultural, and practical constraints shaped longer term sustainability over time.

Participants' accounts point to two broad sets of barriers: those rooted in sector and workplace structures, and those arising from wider personal, financial, and immigration related circumstances that sit outside the immediate control of individual settings.

3.4.1. Structural barriers to progression and retention

While participants described strong motivation to enter the childcare and playwork sector and a deep sense of purpose in their work with children, accounts across the interviews also identified barriers that limited the ability to progress, develop, or remain in the sector over time. These barriers were often structural rather than individual and were experienced as constraining opportunities for advancement despite participants' skills, commitment, and experience. In several accounts, barriers were described not as isolated incidents but as pressures that accumulated over time, affecting confidence, shaping expectations, and influencing whether participants could sustain their involvement in the sector. Participants' descriptions also suggested that barriers were unevenly distributed, with progress possible in supportive environments but made less likely where culture, systems, or practical requirements created obstacles.

A prominent barrier across interviews was the lack of clear and transparent progression pathways. Participants described uncertainty about how to move forward within the sector, with limited guidance on next steps or opportunities for advancement. This was captured in the statement, "You don't really know where you can go next", which reflects a pattern of unclear routes beyond entry level roles. In several accounts, progression was perceived as informal and dependent on personal relationships rather than on clear criteria or structured development routes. One participant described how "Promotion was more like if you're very friendly with the managers", suggesting that advancement could be shaped by informal dynamics rather than transparent assessment. Where encouragement or access to training did occur, it was attributed to individual advocates rather than consistent organisational practice. Participants described how an ally could make opportunities happen, for example, "She straight away was like, okay, I'm going to get you on that", and "That person made it happen". Participants also described repeatedly requesting development opportunities without success, including, "I asked many times… I was never on that training", illustrating how access to development could feel inconsistent and uncertain.

In a small number of interviews, agency working was discussed as a factor that could exacerbate existing barriers to progression and stability within the childcare and playwork sector. Three participants with experience of agency roles described feeling peripheral to teams, with limited continuity and fewer opportunities to demonstrate capability or access development opportunities over time. This sense of marginality was captured in the description of "always a feeling that you are generally on the periphery of what's going on", alongside the repeated need to prove oneself in different settings, described as "carrying a baton for your agency".

Participants linked this lack of continuity to the practical limitations of agency work, including short placements, disrupted relationships and limited time within any single setting. As a result, participants described reduced opportunities to show skills consistently over time or to build the familiarity and trust that might support progression or recognition. In this context, agency working was described as intensifying the impact of other existing barriers rather than creating distinct new ones. In particular, participants suggested that limited continuity made it harder to challenge or counter the wider sector issue of non-recognition of overseas experience, noting that individuals could have "ten years in their former country… but they can't refer to that". These experiences were described as emotionally demanding, with participants referring to the effort involved in repeatedly having to prove themselves, including statements such as, "Getting over those in order to prove yourself", and "It's exhausting work, I've got to be honest".

3.4.2.   Representation, recognition, and informal gatekeeping

Underrepresentation in senior and leadership roles was described as a barrier to progression across the interviews. Participants noted the absence of ethnic minority staff in decision making positions, which contributed to perceptions of a ceiling on advancement and reduced confidence in long term career prospects. Participants described this in personal terms, including, "I don't see people like me in senior roles", and described leadership as overwhelmingly white, including, "You look at all the managers and the higher managers, but it was just white, white, white", and, "The people that I knew are on a high

level are all from a predominantly white background". In these accounts, lack of visible representation discouraged aspiration and reinforced the sense that progression relied on self-belief and persistence rather than institutional processes and procedures, contributing to emotional strain and uncertainty about whether advancement was realistically achievable.

The non-recognition of overseas qualifications and experience emerged as a significant and recurring barrier. Participants with extensive prior experience outside the UK described their skills and years of work as being discounted, with progression assessed primarily on UK specific experience. This was expressed by one participant who said, "They said the qualification over from [my home country] doesn't work here", and another participant who described how their experience was reduced or reinterpreted through a UK lens: "I've got over 12 years' experience, but then I'm [told] you [only have] four years". This sense of experience being dismissed, rather than evaluated, was vocalised as "What happened to the eight years? It was thrown out of the bush", and "When you say career experience… the years I worked before are thrown out". Participants described being asked explicitly to evidence UK experience, including, "They ask you how many years work experience have you got in the UK". These experiences created frustration and disengagement, particularly where participants felt their competence was not reflected in formal assessments or recruitment processes. One participant described coping by lowering expectations or disengaging emotionally over time, stating, "Somehow along the way, I just don't bother about it anymore".

3.4.3.   Qualification requirements, language expectations, and barriers

Qualification requirements, language expectations, and bureaucratic processes also acted as gatekeepers to development. Participants described difficulties meeting formal criteria that were not always adapted to diverse backgrounds or learning needs. One participant stated, "Getting qualifications was one of the barriers I faced", and described how requirements could feel intertwined with language expectations, particularly where confidence in spoken or written English affected participants' ability to complete assessments, engage with training materials, or demonstrate competence, rather than reflecting their practical skills or experience.

Participants also described barriers as not solely about not currently meeting criteria but about the lack of structured support available to help them do so, with one participant stating, "Having someone who I can talk to will be very, very helpful", and emphasising the absence of support. Participants also described the wider administrative demands of the sector as burdensome, including references to extensive paperwork and bureaucracy. These processes were described as time consuming and emotionally demanding, particularly where tailored support was lacking. In some accounts, these pressures contributed to doubts about belonging and capability, such as, "It does make you question yourself".

3.4.4.   External constraints affecting access and progression

Caring responsibilities and financial constraints were also described as limiting participation in training and development. Participants with young children highlighted the difficulty of attending appointments, training sessions, or placements without access to affordable

childcare. One participant stated, "I do have a young baby so it was hard to make those appointments" and described the structural nature of this constraint: "I don't have any baby care, day care or any facilities at the moment". Financial pressures also limited what was feasible, including "I don't have the financial ability to do so at the moment", and reliance on family support. These barriers shaped not only development but also retention, because they influenced whether participants could realistically sustain the steps required to progress.

Participants also described practical requirements that constrained access to roles and progression, particularly where transport expectations operated as a hidden barrier. One participant described this directly, saying, "They wanted someone driving", and linked this to employers' preferences around transport arrangements rather than to the role itself. Participants described the time and effort involved in meeting such requirements, including, "That all takes a long time", as well as the underlying financial constraints. In these situations, practical requirements functioned as structural barriers, shaping access and opportunity in ways that were not always visible at first.

3.4.5. Immigration related barriers

Visa status and immigration related restrictions were described in a limited number of interviews but had a significant impact where present. Barriers included ineligibility for public funds, limited access to free advice, and high costs associated with seeking guidance. One participant stated, "You're not eligible for public funds", and described the resulting uncertainty about where to get information and support, including, "We don't even know where to go". Participants also described advice as costly and difficult to access, stating, "They will tell you, you have to pay a big fee", and "It's just a simple question… but you have to pay". In these accounts, immigration related constraints did not sit separately from employment barriers but compounded them, affecting access to work, training, and stability.

3.4.6. Cumulative impact on retention and sustainability

Across interviews, barriers to progression and development were described as cumulative. Participants described emotional fatigue arising from repeated obstacles, lack of recognition, and the need to constantly prove themselves. This was expressed directly through phrases such as, "It can be draining", and "It really used to affect me". In some cases, these pressures contributed to decisions to disengage from progression, reduce hours, remain in voluntary roles, or leave particular settings altogether. Participants also described persisting through barriers but with limited optimism about progression, or by adapting expectations. They also described remaining in the sector primarily because of commitment to children rather than because of positive career prospects or development opportunities. This included statements such as, "I stay because of the children" and where volunteering provided a sustainable route to remain connected to the work, "I'm still volunteering there because it's something I like to do".

Overall, the findings suggest that while motivation and purpose are strong, progression, retention, and development within the childcare and playwork sector are constrained by a combination of structural, cultural, and practical barriers. These barriers include unclear progression pathways, underrepresentation at senior levels, informal gatekeeping, unequal

access to training, non-recognition of overseas qualifications and experience, agency related instability, and constraints linked to caring responsibilities, transport requirements, and financial pressures. In a limited number of interviews, immigration related restrictions added an additional layer of complexity. Taken together, these barriers shape not only who progresses, but also who remains in the sector and under what conditions. They highlight a tension between commitment to children and the sustainability of careers within the sector, with retention often sustained through personal dedication rather than supported through accessible and equitable development opportunities.

3.5. Support needs and what would make a difference

This section explores the forms of support participants identified as most important to sustaining their involvement in the sector, focusing on encouragement, guidance, representation, leadership, and practical assistance, particularly where such support was described as absent or uneven.

3.5.1. Support as informal, uneven, and relationship dependent

Building on the motivations, experiences, and barriers described in the preceding sections, participants identified a range of support needs and forms of assistance that they felt would make a meaningful difference to their ability to remain in the sector, develop professionally, and feel supported in their roles. These needs were closely shaped by participants' lived experiences and were framed in contrast to the absence of formal or consistent support structures. Across the interviews, support was described not as a single intervention but as a set of practical and relational conditions that helped people to feel valued, navigate challenges, and sustain their commitment in the face of uncertainty. Where those conditions were absent, participants described relying on personal resilience or informal networks, which brought additional emotional input on their part and did not feel secure or dependable.

3.5.2. Encouragement, mentoring, and trusted leadership

A recurring theme across interviews was the importance of encouragement, reassurance, and being believed in. Participants described the impact of not receiving active encouragement to progress, with one stating plainly, "No one's ever said, you should go for that". This absence was not framed as a desire for praise but as a lack of recognition that could shape confidence, ambition, and perceptions of what was achievable over time. Participants described the value of simple affirmation and belief, including, "Sometimes you just need someone to see your potential", which suggests that encouragement can operate as a form of permission to aspire and as a counterweight to the self-doubt created by other barriers. In the absence of such encouragement, participants described drawing on internal motivation rather than on structured or relational support. However, participants also emphasised the emotional cost of sustaining motivation without adequate encouragement or guidance, including, "It can be draining if you don't have support", highlighting that encouragement and trusted leadership played an important role not only in progression but in protecting wellbeing.

Mentoring and guidance were identified as key support needs across the interviews, particularly in relation to progression, training, and navigating complex systems. Participants described uncertainty about where to turn, with one stating, "You don't really know where to turn", and another describing the broader confusion and lack of clear advice routes that can develop when support is not signposted. Participants also described an absence of consistent mentoring, including, "There's no one to guide you", suggesting that even where informal help existed, it did not replace a structured sense that someone was responsible for supporting development. Where mentoring was available, it was described as informal and relationship dependent. Participants spoke about relying on friends, for example, "It's usually just friends I talk to", or about navigating systems through personal connections, such as, "I try to navigate them with friends". While these networks could be important, they also shifted the burden of support onto individuals and their personal circumstances, rather than ensuring equitable access to guidance across the workforce.

Trusted managers and supportive senior colleagues were described as particularly valuable, especially when they were approachable, consistent, and willing to invest time. Participants spoke positively about managers who provided detailed support, including, "any time I asked him a question he would just sit down with me and give me in depth details". In some cases, support extended beyond formal job responsibilities and was described as holistic and practical. One participant gave examples of a manager helping with major life tasks, including, "He was helping me go through insurance and finding the right car", and described support that covered wider planning and stability, such as, "He was also giving me advice on university, how I could manage my time, how I could manage my money". This kind of support appeared especially meaningful for younger entrants and those managing multiple pressures, suggesting that what made a difference was not only formal supervision but the experience of being supported as a whole person.

3.5.3. Representation, inclusive training, and everyday adjustments

Support was also linked to representation and shared experience. Participants described the value of being able to speak to people who shared similar cultural, ethnic, or faith backgrounds, or who had lived experience that enabled deeper understanding. This was expressed as a comfort in communication, including, "I felt like it was more comfortable to speak to someone that spoke the same language as me", and also in the value of support from people who felt culturally familiar.

Participants described the importance of mentors or senior colleagues who could understand their experiences without requiring detailed explanation. One participant reflected on their first interaction in a setting, noting, "My first interaction… I spoke to the older senior Somali worker" and explained that this was significant because the individual shared a similar cultural and faith background. Another participant emphasised this point by noting, "She was from a Muslim background", describing this shared understanding as enabling conversations that felt more comfortable and supportive, without the need to repeatedly explain cultural or religious context.

Participants also expressed a need for peer support and representation in more general terms, such as, "Someone from the same background", and described how representation

could reduce isolation and support confidence. Where representation was limited, participants described needing to rely on resilience rather than feeling actively supported. This was implicit in accounts where support was described as absent, alongside the emotional impact of navigating training or work environments without others who shared similar experiences.

Culturally aware and inclusive training and resources were also identified as an important area of support. Participants described gaps in culturally relevant materials, including limited representation of diverse cultures, ethnicities, languages, and faith practices within training resources and learning materials. including the statement, "There were really no culturally relevant resources", and explained that they had needed to compensate for these gaps themselves, for example, "I had to look outside Wales". Participants described this as bringing additional strain, including, "It came with emotional strain for me", and a practical burden, including, "I had to give extra time commitment". These accounts suggest that where systems do not provide appropriate resources, individuals may take on unpaid work to bridge gaps, which can affect sustainability and retention. Participants also described the importance of training materials being reviewed and improved, including the view that "those materials could have been provided", referring to learning and training resources that better reflected diverse cultures, faiths, languages, and lived experiences within childcare and playwork settings. Participants also raised concerns about bias embedded in learning resources, stating that "that automatically gives you a bias", where materials were perceived as reflecting a narrow or dominant cultural perspective and lacking wider representation.

Linked to this, participants emphasised that support should be experienced as meaningful and embedded rather than symbolic. One participant described the emotional impact of visible inclusion, stating, "It gives me a different joy when I'm seeing my country flag being displayed", but contrasted this with experiences that felt tokenistic, including, "I feel like it is just there for the sake of, oh, we are not discriminating" and "There's no difference… it's still the same thing over and over again". Participants also highlighted omissions in cultural and faith recognition, such as, "I don't think they specifically do anything concerning Ramadan" and described the implications of this for children's everyday learning and identity, for example, "My son knows about Christmas more than he even knows about Ramadan". In this sense, equality, diversion and inclusion (EDI) and culturally inclusive practice was described not simply as a workplace issue but as part of how settings communicate value and belonging to both staff and children.

Practical workplace adjustments were also described as an important way in which culturally and faith-inclusive support was enacted in everyday practice. Participants highlighted the need for greater understanding and accommodation of faith-related practices, noting gaps in awareness among managers, such as, "Sometimes it does cause a bit of confusion for the managers that don't fully grasp that idea of our religion". Participants suggested that education and awareness could help address this, including, "Maybe educate the youth and the workers about different religions", alongside practical measures such as, "Implement maybe a little prayer room". Beyond formal adjustments, participants also emphasised the importance of everyday interpersonal behaviours in shaping inclusive environments. Patience, understanding, and being welcomed were described as particularly meaningful for individuals who were new, working through

agencies, or navigating vulnerability. One participant described feeling marginalised as an agency staff member, with this reduced through relational support, including "They always say it's nice to see you again", and "She was brilliant with me". Another participant highlighted the importance of giving people time to settle and avoiding rapid judgement, emphasising the value of cultures that will, "Give them a chance and understand". Taken together, these accounts suggest that inclusion was experienced not only through visible recognition or policy, but through practical adjustments and everyday interactions that shaped whether work felt supportive and sustainable.

Leadership and management played a central role in shaping whether participants felt supported. Supportive managers were described as fair, consistent, and willing to intervene, and participants described the difference made by management behaviour that felt impartial. One participant described a manager as supportive through fairness and integrity, stating, "He is brilliant… he's going to be fair", and "He's not going to be partial". Participants emphasised the importance of leadership in setting expectations and intervening when issues arise, rather than allowing inappropriate behaviour to become normalised. In accounts where leadership did not intervene or where standards were not upheld, lack of support was linked directly to attrition, most often described as participants themselves leaving particular settings or deciding they could not remain in those roles. Participants also highlighted gaps in formal reporting and support structures, reinforcing reliance on individual managers and personal relationships rather than clear organisational routes for accountability.

3.5.4. Support needs beyond the workplace

In a limited number of interviews, support needs extended beyond the workplace and were shaped by wider pressures relating to immigration status, finances, and access to basic support. These accounts were provided by participants facing immigration related restrictions, such as limited eligibility for public funds, rather than reflecting the experiences of all migrant workers. Participants described the stress of not knowing where to seek help, including, "Sometimes we are stopped. We don't even know where to go", and "We don't know who to ask. You're asking the wrong person". They described cost barriers to advice and connected this to their position as people who were, "not eligible for public funds". Participants described a desire for a single access point for advice and enquiries, including, "Maybe they set up a place where you can make enquiries", and emphasised the need for support to be accessible and free, stating, "Let it be free". They suggested trusted community locations, including, "Even in the library… put someone there like maybe once in a week", and described support needs that covered basic stability as well as advice, including, "Where you can get help with clothes, with food". In these accounts, support was not only about workplace experience but about access to guidance that could reduce uncertainty and enable people to remain engaged in volunteering or work.

Across the interviews, participants consistently described support as most effective when it was proactive, relational, and accessible. Support that made a difference was described as encouragement that helped people see a future for themselves, mentoring and guidance that reduced uncertainty, culturally aware training and resources that prevented individuals from carrying additional unpaid labour, and leadership that set and upheld standards while

providing clear routes for support and escalation. In the absence of formal systems, participants relied on informal networks, individual goodwill, or personal resilience, which could be fragile and uneven. While commitment to children often sustained participants' involvement in the sector, participants' accounts suggest that more consistent and visible forms of support would play a crucial role in helping individuals feel valued, develop their skills, and remain in the workforce over time.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Bringing the findings together

The findings set out in Section 3 present a coherent picture of how people from ethnic minority backgrounds experience entry into, participation in, and progression within the childcare and playwork sector in Wales. Across the interviews, participants described values-driven motivations for entering the sector and a strong sense of purpose derived from working with children. These motivations were sustained over time, including in accounts where participants encountered difficulty, and were described as central to decisions to remain engaged in the work.

At the same time, participants' accounts highlight that commitment and purpose operate within a wider context shaped by organisational culture, leadership, and structural arrangements. Experiences of inclusion and exclusion, barriers to progression, and access to support were not experienced in isolation, but interacted in ways that shaped participants' confidence, aspirations, and perceptions of long-term sustainability within the sector. The findings therefore point to a dynamic relationship between individual motivation and systemic conditions, rather than a simple narrative of resilience or attrition.

Taken together, the findings suggest that while the sector attracts and retains individuals with strong commitment and values, this commitment is often sustained despite, rather than because of, the structures and systems participants encounter. The discussion that follows explores the implications of this tension.

4.2. Commitment, purpose, and the sustainability of careers

Participants' accounts demonstrate a clear distinction between commitment to the work itself and experiences of the sector as an employment environment. Childcare and playwork were described as meaningful, relational work that aligned closely with participants' values and sense of identity. Relationships with children were described across the interviews as a source of belonging, motivation, and emotional fulfilment, providing an anchor even when other aspects of the role were challenging.

The findings also indicate that commitment alone does not guarantee sustainable careers. Barriers to progression, limited development opportunities, and uneven access to support created pressures that accumulated over time. In a subset of accounts, these pressures resulted in reduced hours, stalled progression, or decisions to leave particular settings. Importantly, such outcomes were rarely framed as a loss of interest in the work itself, but rather as responses to structural or organisational constraints.

This distinction has implications for how retention is understood. The findings suggest that retention driven primarily by personal commitment may mask underlying risks to workforce sustainability. Where individuals remain in the sector despite limited progression or support, this may reflect the strength of their values rather than the effectiveness of workforce structures. Over time, reliance on commitment alone may place an uneven burden on individuals, particularly those navigating additional challenges linked to representation, recognition, or access to opportunity.

4.3. Variation between settings and the role of leadership

A prominent feature of the findings was the extent to which experiences varied between settings. Participants described markedly different experiences depending on local culture, leadership, and management practice. In some settings, individuals felt welcomed, supported, and able to develop, while in others experiences of exclusion, isolation, or limited opportunity were more pronounced.

Leadership emerged as a key factor shaping these differences. Supportive managers were described as approachable, fair, and proactive, often providing guidance, advocacy, and practical support that extended beyond formal job requirements. In these contexts, participants described feeling more confident and better able to navigate challenges. Conversely, where leadership was perceived as disengaged, inconsistent, or unclear in its expectations, participants described greater uncertainty about how to access support or raise concerns.

These findings suggest that positive practice exists within the sector, but that it is unevenly distributed and often dependent on individual leaders rather than embedded systems. While this can result in strong local experiences, it also creates fragility. Where inclusion, support, and progression depend on particular individuals, changes in leadership or staffing can quickly alter the conditions under which people work, with implications for confidence and retention.

4.4. Representation, visibility, and progression

Participants' accounts point to representation and visibility as central to how opportunities for progression are perceived and experienced. Across the interviews, underrepresentation of people from ethnic minority backgrounds in senior and decision-making roles was noted repeatedly. This was not always described in terms of explicit exclusion, but rather as shaping expectations about what progression was possible and for whom.

In this context, the findings align with the ambitions set out in ArWAP, which recognises that improving representation and addressing structural barriers within workforces is essential to achieving meaningful change in lived experience. ArWAP places emphasis on leadership, accountability, and the use of lived experience as evidence to inform action.

Participants' experiences suggest that the presence or absence of visible representation has practical as well as symbolic significance. In accounts where participants encountered leaders or mentors with shared backgrounds, this was described as increasing confidence, trust, and willingness to seek guidance. In contrast, persistent homogeneity at senior levels contributed to perceptions of informal ceilings on progression, even where formal barriers were not always articulated.

The findings also highlight that progression pathways were often experienced as informal or opaque, with access to opportunities shaped by personal relationships rather than transparent criteria. In this context, underrepresentation and lack of visibility may interact with informal systems in ways that unintentionally disadvantage those without access to established networks. While participants were careful not to attribute intent, their accounts

suggest a gap between policy commitments to equity and the consistency of lived experience within the sector.

4.5. Informal support versus structural support

Support featured prominently in participants' accounts but was most often described as informal and relational rather than systemic. Participants relied on individual managers, colleagues, or peers for guidance, reassurance, and advocacy. Where such support was present, it was described as making a meaningful difference to confidence and wellbeing.

At the same time, reliance on informal support introduced vulnerability. Participants noted that access to support could vary depending on who was in post, how approachable they were, and whether there was shared understanding or trust. In the absence of clear structures, individuals were often left to navigate complex issues alone, drawing on personal networks or resilience rather than formal systems.

This pattern mirrors earlier findings around leadership and variation between settings. Informal support can be highly effective in specific contexts, but its uneven availability raises questions about equity and sustainability. Participants' accounts suggest that more visible, consistent forms of support could reduce reliance on individual goodwill and help ensure that support is available regardless of setting or circumstance.

4.6. Implications for workforce retention and development

Taken together, the findings suggest that the childcare and playwork sector in Wales benefits from a workforce with strong values, commitment, and motivation, but that these strengths coexist with structural challenges that shape long-term sustainability. Experiences of inclusion, progression, and support are uneven, and are influenced by representation, leadership, and access to opportunity.

For ethnic minority participants, these dynamics are particularly salient. While participants described positive experiences and strong commitment to the sector, accounts also highlighted how underrepresentation, informal systems, and limited support could constrain progression and contribute to fatigue over time. These experiences do not negate the positive aspects of the sector, but they point to areas where greater consistency and structural clarity could help align lived experience with policy ambition.

The discussion in this section provides a foundation for the conclusions and recommendations that follow, which consider how insights from participants' lived experiences might inform future approaches to workforce development, retention, and support within the sector.

4.7. Overall conclusions

This research highlights how the experiences of people from ethnic minority backgrounds in the childcare and playwork sector are shaped by the interaction between strong personal commitment and the structural conditions that support or constrain engagement over time. Participants described deeply held, values-driven motivations for entering the sector, and

relationships with children emerged as a consistent source of purpose and meaning that sustained involvement, including in the face of difficulty.

However, the findings also show that commitment alone does not ensure sustainable participation. Experiences of inclusion, progression, and support varied considerably between settings and were shaped primarily by local culture, leadership, and representation rather than by consistent sector-wide practice. While some participants described supportive and inclusive environments, others experienced more fragile or conditional inclusion, characterised by subtle exclusion, isolation, or uneven access to informal networks.

Barriers to progression and development were widely described as structural rather than individual. These included unclear progression pathways, underrepresentation in senior and decision-making roles, non-recognition of overseas qualifications and experience, and practical constraints linked to caring responsibilities, financial pressures, and, for a small number of participants, immigration-related restrictions. For many, progression was experienced as uncertain or dependent on individual advocacy rather than transparent systems.

Support emerged as a critical factor moderating these experiences. Where participants had access to supportive managers, mentors, or peers, this was described as making a meaningful difference to confidence, wellbeing, and the ability to navigate challenges. However, such support was most often informal and unevenly available, leaving individuals to rely on personal resilience or informal networks where formal structures were limited.

Taken together, the findings point to a clear tension within the sector. While childcare and playwork attract individuals with strong commitment and motivation, the systems surrounding progression, development, and support do not consistently sustain that commitment, particularly for people from ethnic minority backgrounds. Addressing underrepresentation and strengthening consistency in support and development are therefore central to aligning policy ambition with lived experience and to supporting a more inclusive and sustainable workforce.

5. Recommendations

The Welsh Government should work with key partners, including Cwlwm and local authorities, to explore how these recommendations may be taken forward in ways that reflect existing structures, responsibilities, and resource considerations across the childcare and playwork sector.

The recommendations below are grounded directly in participants' lived experiences and are intended to support greater consistency between policy ambition and everyday practice. They focus on practical, proportionate steps that could strengthen inclusion, progression, and retention within the childcare and playwork workforce, while recognising variation between settings and existing resource constraints.

5.1. Improve clarity and visibility of progression pathways

Clearer and more transparent progression pathways should be developed and communicated across the sector, setting out typical routes into supervisory, leadership, or specialist roles, alongside expectations and development opportunities. Improving visibility of progression routes would reduce reliance on informal networks and individual advocacy, supporting confidence, aspiration, and retention among those who may otherwise feel progression is uncertain or inaccessible.

5.2. Strengthen recognition of overseas qualifications and experience

Clearer guidance should be provided on how overseas qualifications and prior experience are assessed and recognised within the childcare and playwork sector. Where full equivalence is not possible, more visible bridging or recognition routes could support fairer and more consistent decision making, reduce frustration and disengagement, and enable a more accurate assessment of capability and experience.

5.3. Strengthen leadership capability to embed inclusive practice consistently

Continued emphasis should be placed on supporting leaders and managers to embed inclusive practice within everyday workplace culture. This includes strengthening confidence in setting standards, responding to issues related to race, representation, and bias, and ensuring consistency across teams and settings. Building leadership capability in this way would reduce reliance on individual goodwill and help ensure inclusion is not dependent on particular individuals.

5.4. Strengthen support for staff experiencing racism from parents

The findings highlight that, while less frequently reported than workplace-based experiences, racism or discriminatory behaviour from parents can be particularly difficult for individuals to manage and address. Clearer organisational guidance and support should be strengthened to ensure that responsibility for responding to such incidents does not fall solely on individual staff members. This includes supporting managers and leaders to intervene appropriately, setting clear expectations around acceptable behaviour, and providing reassurance and backing to staff who experience racism from parents.

Strengthening these responses would help protect wellbeing, reinforce professional boundaries, and support retention within the sector.

5.5. Improve representation and visibility within senior and decision-making roles

Greater attention should be given to representation within leadership and decision-making roles across the childcare and playwork sector. Reviewing recruitment and promotion practices, supporting leadership development, and monitoring representation over time would help ensure that workforce planning aligns with the childcare and playwork workforce actions set out in the Anti-racist Wales Action Plan and supports confidence and aspiration among ethnic minority staff.

5.6. Strengthen access to structured support, mentoring, and guidance

More visible and structured forms of support should be strengthened, including mentoring, clearer points of contact for guidance, and improved signposting to existing support. Reducing reliance on informal networks would help ensure that access to encouragement, advice, and advocacy is more consistent across settings, particularly during periods of change or leadership transition.

5.7. Review training and professional learning resources for cultural inclusion

Training materials and professional learning resources should be reviewed regularly to ensure they reflect diverse cultures, ethnicities, languages, and lived experiences. Attention to representation and bias within learning materials would help embed inclusion in everyday practice and reduce the additional emotional and practical burden placed on individuals to compensate for gaps themselves.

5.8. Improve signposting to practical advice and support beyond the workplace

Clearer signposting should be provided to trusted and accessible sources of practical advice, including community-based support, for individuals facing wider challenges such as immigration related restrictions, financial pressures, or limited access to public funds. While these needs are not universal, clearer information about where to seek help could reduce uncertainty and support continued engagement with work or volunteering.

5.9. Develop more sustained and embedded approaches to understanding the ethnic minority childcare and playwork workforce

The recruitment challenges encountered in this study highlight the difficulty of engaging a relatively small and dispersed workforce, particularly where research explores sensitive issues relating to race, inclusion, and lived experience. These challenges point to important considerations for strengthening recruitment and participation in future research, and to the potential value of exploring more sustained and embedded approaches to understanding the experiences and needs of people from ethnic minority backgrounds within the childcare and playwork workforce.

Future research may benefit from allowing more time for recruitment and from working more closely with trusted intermediaries and community organisations that already have

established relationships with potential participants. Creating opportunities for engagement that sit alongside existing networks, training settings, or sector activity, rather than relying solely on standalone research recruitment, may also help to reduce barriers to participation and make engagement feel more accessible and relevant.

In addition, the recruitment process for this study was shaped by the limited availability of detailed workforce data and the absence of direct contact routes to individual childcare and playwork staff. While this is not unique to this research, it constrained the ability to target potential participants more precisely. Consideration could therefore be given to how workforce monitoring and engagement mechanisms might be strengthened over time, including improved data on ethnicity and clearer routes for engaging with staff. This would support future research and workforce development activity by reducing reliance on one off cascade recruitment approaches and enabling more consistent integration of lived experience into policy and practice.

5.10. Continue to centre lived experience in workforce development and monitoring

Mechanisms for ongoing engagement with workers, volunteers, and trainees from ethnic minority backgrounds should be maintained and strengthened to ensure workforce initiatives remain grounded in lived experience. Continued attention to how policies are experienced in practice will be essential for understanding progress over time and identifying unintended consequences or variation between settings.

References

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Office for National Statistics (2022), 'Census 2021 in Wales - Office for National Statistics', Newport: Office for National Statistics

Welsh Government (2022), 'Childcare, Playwork and Early Years Workforce Plan', Cardiff: Welsh Government

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Annex A

Depth interviews Discussion guide (Remote or face-to-face)

Introduction

- MEL Research has been asked by Welsh Government to explore Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people's views on and experiences of working in the childcare and playwork sector in Wales. Our conversation will last no longer than 45 minutes. As a reminder, there will be a gift voucher as a thank you for all those who complete the interview in full.

- We are talking to people who work in this sector or who are considering roles within this sector, and just want to hear your thoughts. There are no right or wrong answers to any of my questions; we just want to hear what you think.

- We are an independent research agency. Any information and opinions you share with us are confidential and you won't be named personally in any reports. If we use any verbatim quotes from your interview, we will change any personal identifying features so people cannot link what you say directly to you. We will also not share your details or tell Welsh Government, any partner organisations, or your employer who has participated. We hope this means you feel you can be completely honest in our discussion. You can read our privacy notice at https://melresearch.co.uk/privacypolicy.

- We'd like to record this interview for later transcription and analysis. The recording will only be shared with the research team at MEL and is stored on an encrypted and password-protected platform. The recordings will be deleted three months after our work has finished and, again, neither Welsh Government, any partner organisations, nor your employer will be able to access these recordings.

- Do you have any questions at this stage? Are you happy to proceed?

Warm up and career background

Objective: Identify factors that motivate or enable entry and continued employment in the childcare and playwork sector.

- Can you share what initially motivated you to enter the childcare and playwork sector, and a bit of background on your career so far?

  - Are there any role models who have inspired you?

  - Did any cultural or community influences play a role?

- Are there any specific experiences or influences from your life that led you to choose this career path?

- Do you have any personal or professional goals that align with your work in this sector?

- What factors have enabled you to continue working in this sector?

    - How have your colleagues or supervisors contributed to your decision to stay in this sector? Why is that?

    - Can you share with us what motivates or inspires you to continue in this field?

Barriers and challenges

Objective: Identify barriers or challenges faced in entering or continuing employment in the sector.

- Did you face any challenges to entering the childcare and playwork sector?

    - Consider any systemic or institutional barriers, any personal or cultural challenges. Eg. funding, knowing where to apply for roles, completing the necessary training, finding the right advice

- Have you encountered any barriers along the way that made it difficult to continue working in this field?

- How have these challenges impacted your career?

Diversity and inclusion

Objective: Understand views on diversity and inclusion in the sector and how it can be made more welcoming and inclusive.

We are now going to speak about diversity and inclusion in the space you work. By diversity, we mean having a range of people of different backgrounds in the setting, based on things like age, ethnicity, gender etc. By inclusion, we mean creating a space where all individuals feel included and welcomed.

- How would you describe the level of diversity and inclusion in the childcare and playwork sector?

    - Did you feel welcomed and included when you entered this sector? And how about now?

    - In what ways do you think the sector is succeeding in promoting diversity and inclusion?

    - Are there any areas where you feel the sector is lacking in terms of diversity and inclusion?

    - How do your colleagues and supervisors contribute to creating an inclusive environment?

- Can you share any personal experiences that illustrate the current state of diversity and inclusion in your workplace?

- What changes do you think could make the sector more welcoming and inclusive for Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic individuals?

  - What specific policies or practices do you think should be implemented to improve inclusivity?

  - How can leadership and management play a role in fostering a more inclusive environment?

  - What role do you think mentorship and support networks could play in improving inclusivity?

  - Can you suggest any changes to recruitment and hiring practices that would promote greater diversity?

- Have you experienced or witnessed any efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in your workplace?

Support and reporting mechanisms

Objective: Gather views on support measures and reporting mechanisms for addressing prejudice-related bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

- Have you, personally, had any experiences of bullying, harassment, or discrimination in your work environment? Please share as much as you feel comfortable to.

- What support measures are in place in your workplace to address prejudice-related bullying, harassment, and discrimination?

  - Can you describe any specific policies or procedures that your workplace has implemented to address these issues?

  - How are employees informed about these support measures and their rights in the workplace?

- How effective do you think these measures are?

- Have you ever used or known of someone else who has used reporting mechanisms for such issues?

  - Do you feel confident in using these options available to you? Why orwhy not?

Training and qualifications

Objective: Gather experiences and views on training and qualifications, both undertaken and future opportunities.

- Have you completed any training or qualifications for your role in the childcare and playwork sector?

- How was your experience whilst training an studying for these qualifications?

- How have these training and qualifications impacted your work?

- Are there any additional training or qualifications you would like to pursue in the future?

Career progression

Objective: Understand experiences and views on career progression within the sector.

- Are you seeking any career progression within the sector, or is your intention to continue in the role you are in, now?

- Have you had any chances to progress in your career, so far?

    - Reflect on any promotions or advancements you have achieved.

    - Consider any training or development opportunities that have been available to you.

    - Think about any support or mentorship you have received.

- Have opportunities for career progression been options to you in the way that you would like or expect? If not, why?

Close

Thank you for your time, today. Before we close our conversation, do you have any further thoughts or recommendations based on anything we've discussed today?

Annex B

Recruitment emails were sent to the organisations and local authorities listed below.

- Addysg Oedolion Cymru | Adult Learning Wales
- Bridgend College
- Cardiff and Vale College
- Cardiff Metropolitan University.
- Care Forum Wales
- Care Inspectorate Wales
- Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs
- Coleg Cambria (Childcare and Playwork FE courses)
- Coleg Gwent
- Coleg y Cymoedd (Childcare and Playwork FE courses)
- Cwlwm Consortium (Welsh childcare and playwork network)
- Diversity and Anti-Racist Professional Learning (DARPL)
- Early Years Wales
- EYST Wales
- Gower College Swansea
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai - Coleg Llandrillo
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai - Coleg Meirion-Dwyfor
- Grŵp Llandrillo Menai - Coleg Menai
- Mudiad Meithrin (Welsh-medium childcare organisation)
- National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Cymru
- NPTC Group of Colleges
- Pembrokeshire College (Childcare and Playwork FE courses)
- Play Wales
- Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (Pacey)
- Race Council Cymru
- The College Merthyr Tydfil
- The Playwork Foundation

Local authorities

- Blaenau Gwent
- Bridgend
- Caerphilly
- Cardiff
- Carmarthenshire
- Ceredigion
- Conwy
- Denbighshire
- Flintshire
- Gwynedd

- Isle of Anglesey
- Merthyr Tydfil
- Monmouthshire
- Neath Port Talbot
- Newport
- Pembrokeshire
- Powys
- Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Swansea
- Torfaen
- Vale of Glamorgan
- Wrexham