Title of the Thesis:

“Can I play?” An ethnographic study of children’s experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of Liverpool Hope University for the degree of Professional Educational Doctorate.

Mark Simon Dixon

November 2025

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Declaration:

This thesis is an original work composed solely by the undersigned candidate in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Professional Doctorate at Liverpool Hope University and has not been submitted previously in support of any degree qualification or course. All sources of information therein have been specifically acknowledged, and the content of the thesis is legally allowable under copyright legislation.

Signed: *M.S. Dixon*

Name: Mark Simon Dixon

Date: November 2025

Abstract

“Can I play?” An ethnographic study of children’s experiences of leadership and followership in primary school

This thesis investigates how leadership and followership are enacted, experienced, and understood by children within a primary school’s Forest School programme. Drawing on two years of ethnographic fieldwork comprising thirty-nine naturalistic observations and thirty interviews, the study explores how children negotiate influence, collaboration, and belonging in outdoor, play-rich environments. Grounded in an interpretivist and constructivist framework, it challenges adult-centric models that conceptualise leadership as preparation for adulthood, arguing instead that Forest School provides a distinctive context in which children practise leadership and followership as dynamic, relational, and agentic phenomena shaped by social interaction, material engagement, and peer recognition.

Using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis, 139 initial codes were refined into five core themes - identity, relationships, collaboration, social influence, and role fluidity - and subsequently synthesised into three higher-order principles: recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy. These principles reveal how the Forest School environment amplifies children’s agency, supports equitable participation, and enables influence to circulate reciprocally rather than hierarchically, reflecting a heterarchical form of social organisation grounded in fairness, responsiveness, and collective negotiation.

The study contributes to leadership studies by evidencing fairness-driven, distributed forms of influence rarely theorised in adult contexts, and to childhood studies by positioning leadership and followership as integral dimensions of peer culture. It further demonstrates how Forest School legitimises followership, broadens recognition of diverse expressions of influence, and models the equitable design of leader–follower relations. The thesis concludes by advancing child-centred conceptual and pedagogical frameworks of leadership and followership that reimagines influence as a reciprocal, generative process sustaining collaboration, agency, and belonging in children’s everyday social worlds.

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I would also like to thank a very talented friend for sharing his graphic design skills to produce my frameworks.

Finally, I was inspired by William Wordsworth's poem *My Heart Leaps Up*. It expresses a Romantic vision of humanity's relationship with nature and affirms the significance of childhood in shaping the adult self, captured powerfully in the line, "The Child is father of the Man." In that spirit, I am especially thankful for the love and support of my family and friends: to my wife, Nikki, for her patience, her encouragement, her good humour, and especially her proof-reading prowess; to Lizzy and Sam for never taking me too seriously and for their teasing; and to my mum and dad for valuing education. I wish my spell-checker dad could see the completion of this thesis, but I know he will be smiling down on me—the man he helped shape.

Keywords

Children's leadership; Children's followership; Peer culture; Childhood agency; Forest School; Outdoor learning; Primary education; Role fluidity; Relational influence; Childhood studies; Adult-centrism; Heterarchy; Recognition and belonging; Multimodality; Ethnography with children; Thematic analysis; Constructivist research; Interpretivist paradigm; Qualitative education research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

This thesis explores children's lived experiences of leadership and followership within a Forest School setting in a UK primary school. It stems from a long-standing professional and personal interest in the relational dynamics that shape children's interactions, agency, and identities in educational contexts. Although recent years have seen growing attention to pupil voice and child participation in policy and pedagogy (Lundy, 2007; Robinson, 2007; Robinson and Gray, 2019), a substantial gap remains in understanding how children experience, enact, and interpret leadership and followership. These constructs are still predominantly defined through adult-oriented frameworks, with limited exploration of their meaning and application in childhood contexts (Pease, 2021; Kempster and Carroll, 2016; Uhl-Bien *et al*., 2014; Fantinelli *et al.,* 2024).

This study also addresses a deeper concern: that children's understandings of leadership and followership have been largely neglected in educational research, not merely by omission but through epistemic injustice that limits children's credibility and conceptual voice. Drawing on Fricker's (2007) theory and later developments (Kidd, 2017; Elgin and Cohen, 2023), the study focuses on two key forms. Testimonial injustice occurs when children's insights are undervalued because of assumptions about competence or authority. Hermeneutical injustice arises when children lack interpretive tools to articulate experience within adult-defined discourses. These concerns align with the study's central aim: to foreground children's perspectives, actions, and interpretations as legitimate knowledge, while critically examining how adult authority in education and research can obscure or constrain children's experiential understandings of influence and collaboration.

My dual role as headteacher and researcher provided an opportunity to access longitudinal, naturalistic data where leadership and followership could be observed in real time across varied activities and social configurations over two academic years. Forest School, combining structured and unstructured outdoor learning, offered a distinctive setting for examining these dynamics. Although often described as

unstructured, Forest School incorporates routines, risk assessments, group structures, and tool-use protocols within an ethos of child-led inquiry and experiential learning (Knight, 2013; Leather, 2018; Maynard, 2007; Garden and Downes, 2023; Harris, 2025; Dabaja, 2022; Kelly, 2025; Garden, 2024). Recent work presents Forest School as a relational and inclusive model emphasising children's agency, affective engagement, and collaborative learning (VanLone, 2024; Dabaja, 2023). Its balance of guidance and freedom makes it well suited to exploring how leadership and followership emerge through peer negotiation rather than adult direction.

This thesis does not evaluate Forest School as a model but uses it as a dynamic context for examining how children's leadership and followership unfold in situ. In doing so, it contributes a child-informed theoretical and empirical perspective to debates on leadership development in education, challenging dominant narratives and offering alternative ways of conceptualising influence and relationality in childhood settings.

In keeping with a reflexive design, the literature review and empirical analysis informed one another throughout the study. Early adult-centric framings were revised in response to children's practices in Forest School, prompting refinement of the conceptual focus on three key dynamics: recognition (how authority is granted or withheld), multimodality (how influence is expressed beyond speech through humour, gesture, persistence, or quiet modelling), and heterarchy (how roles circulate fairly and fluidly). Two cross-cutting dynamics, visibility and reciprocity, also proved central to how influence was legitimised and sustained. These features are developed conceptually in Chapter 2, examined empirically in Chapter 4, and integrated within the child-centred frameworks presented in Chapter 5.

1.2 Research Aim, Questions, and Objectives

1.2.1 Research Aim

The primary aim of this research is to develop an alternative conceptual model of leadership and followership that reflects children's lived experiences in relational, contextual, and fluid ways. In doing so, the study seeks not only to critique adult-centric assumptions embedded within dominant educational frameworks but also to

generate insights with practical application—supporting pedagogical approaches that align more closely with how children experience and enact leadership and followership in everyday peer interactions. This dual focus underpins the rationale for constructing a child-informed model that challenges reductive or hierarchical paradigms, instead foregrounding agency, collaboration, and meaning-making as they emerge in naturalistic settings such as Forest School.

1.2.2 Research Questions

The study is guided by the following core research questions:

1. How do children experience leadership and followership during Forest School activities?
2. What relational, contextual, and affective factors shape children's roles and responses?
3. To what extent are adult-oriented leadership and followership constructs applicable to children's lived experiences?
4. How might a child-centred conceptual model of leadership and followership be developed from these insights?
5. In what ways might this conceptual model support more responsive and inclusive educational practice across formal and informal learning settings?

1.2.3 Research Objectives

The study's aims are advanced through a series of interrelated objectives designed to illuminate different aspects of children's lived experiences and the pedagogical conditions that shape them:

1. Conduct ethnographic observations in a Forest School setting to examine how child-led leadership and followership behaviours emerge in naturalistic, semi-structured environments.
2. Gather children's perspectives through informal, age-appropriate interviews to understand how they interpret, perform, and reflect on leadership and followership roles.

3. Explore the relational, social, and environmental factors that influence children's participation, agency, and role fluidity.
4. Analyse patterns of interaction to understand how sociocultural context, institutional structures, and peer dynamics shape leadership and followership experiences.
5. Investigate how educators interpret, recognise, and respond to children's leadership and followership in Forest School, including tensions between adult-led and child-led models.
6. Examine how children's understandings of leadership and followership develop over time, using longitudinal engagement to trace evolving peer dynamics and role perceptions.
7. Construct a conceptual model that challenges dominant adult-centric frameworks and offers a relational, child-informed foundation for reconceptualising educational theory and practice.
8. Consider how the emerging model might be applied in practice, generating pedagogical insights and curriculum strategies that better reflect children's lived experiences.

Together, these aims, questions, and objectives provide the foundation for the study's interpretivist exploration of children's leadership and followership. They frame these constructs not as fixed attributes or hierarchical positions but as socially constructed, relational practices that unfold through children's peer interactions and contextual experiences. Anticipating the analytic focus developed in later chapters, the study seeks to identify the underlying principles and dynamics that characterise these practices and to translate them into a coherent conceptual and pedagogical framework, presented in Chapter 5.

1.3 Context of the Study

1.3.1 National and Educational Policy Context

Contemporary educational discourse in England increasingly emphasises developing 'leadership skills' among pupils, framing leadership as both a personal attribute and a transferable competency (DfE, 2023a; DfE, 2023b). Yet policy documents rarely acknowledge followership or the relational dynamics underpinning leadership. When

children's leadership is addressed, it is typically linked to formalised, adult-structured roles—such as school councils or peer mentoring—rather than the informal, play-based roles that characterise early peer interaction (Flutter and Rudduck, 2004; DfE, 2023a, 2023b; Wood and Attfield, 2013).

This framing reflects wider neoliberal logics where leadership is tied to individualism, competition, and accountability (Gunter, 2011; 2016; Oplatka, 2024). Such approaches risk marginalising collaborative or emergent leadership, especially those expressed outside institutional hierarchies. Scholarship shows that leadership discourse in English education continues to privilege measurable outcomes and adult notions of success, often overlooking moral and relational dimensions of learning (Toytok and Kapusuzoglu, 2025; Woods *et al*., 2023).

While leadership discourse has been mainstreamed into schools, several scholars warn that such constructs risk superficiality when mechanisms for enactment are underdeveloped (Kennedy, 2004, 2007; Uvin, 2004; Oplatka, 2024). Policy translation often omits the voices of those most affected - children. Professional experience confirms a gap between policy aspirations and classroom realities: drafting policy is straightforward, but enacting its values through pedagogy that reflects children's lived experience is far more complex.

This study assumes that any attempt to cultivate leadership in schools must begin with children's perspectives, which remain largely absent from policy dialogue. While Uvin (2004) argues that discourse alone cannot drive transformation, more recent work (Fullan, 2021; Priestley and Biesta, 2023) stresses that reform only succeeds when practitioners and learners co-construct its implementation. Ball *et al*. (2012) similarly show that policy gains meaning through practice, while Oplatka (2024) and Woods *et al*. (2023) emphasise the moral and collaborative foundations of authentic leadership policy. Effective reform, therefore, requires both voice and praxis—anchored in the lived realities of teachers, leaders, and children. This study takes seriously the epistemic value of children's perspectives, aiming to inform more inclusive, practice-relevant understandings of leadership and followership in education.

1.3.2 Forest School as Educational Context

Forest School is a pedagogical approach rooted in child-led, experiential outdoor learning, originally developed in Scandinavia and now embedded in UK primary education. Sessions, typically weekly and year-round, blend structured and unstructured activity, exploration, and collaborative problem-solving (Knight, 2013; Maynard, 2007; Leather, 2018; Passy *et al*., 2021). Although often described as unstructured, Forest School operates within carefully constructed frameworks of adult facilitation, safety, and risk assessment (Knight, 2022; Waite, 2024; Atencio *et al*., 2021). This scaffolding ensures safety while allowing high levels of autonomy.

Rather than being unstructured, Forest School represents a form of 'guided openness' (Leather, 2018) balancing freedom and facilitation. This interplay enables agency within relationally responsive environments. Studies show this balance fosters confidence, self-regulation, and collaboration (Fägerstam *et al*., 2024; Malone and Waite, 2024). Such tension between guidance and freedom makes Forest School an ideal context for examining leadership and followership as emergent, co-constructed phenomena.

This combination of structural safety and open play allows leadership and followership to surface organically through shared exploration and negotiation rather than prescriptive role assignment. Forest School activities create space for distributed and fluid influence, reflecting what Waite and Goodenough (2018) describe as 'ecologies of participation' where agency circulates among peers. It thus provides a fertile setting for observing how children construct and interpret these roles in ways that might remain hidden in formal classrooms.

This focus is deliberate: Forest School privileges agency, spontaneity, and peer negotiation over adult-defined outcomes. It offers a rare opportunity to study leadership and followership as situated, relational practices. While the framework developed in this thesis is grounded in this environment, its insights may extend to formal education—if such settings are re-envisioned through a relational, child-centred lens recognising children's capacity for mutual influence and co-constructed meaning.

1.3.3 The Academic and Conceptual Context

The study lies at the intersection of childhood studies, ethnography, and critical leadership theory. It draws from interpretivist and constructivist traditions that view knowledge as socially constructed and relationally produced (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2021; Biesta, 2022; Packer, 2021). These approaches emphasise learning and identity as products of participation and shared meaning-making (Guba and Lincoln, 2020; Koro-Ljungberg, 2022; Ritchie and Rigano, 2023), aligning with the study's commitment to contextual understanding of children's experiences.

Leadership and followership are treated as dynamic, co-constructed processes shaped by power, context, and evolving identity. The thesis critically engages with dominant adult frameworks (Bass, 1985; Northouse, 2022) while adapting relational and distributed models (Uhl-Bien, 2006; DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Raelin, 2011; 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2023) to childhood contexts, questioning whether adult hierarchies adequately capture peer-based collaboration.

Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice is used to examine how children's experiences of leadership and followership have been marginalised. Testimonial injustice occurs when children's insights are discounted due to assumptions about capability; hermeneutical injustice arises when children lack conceptual resources to articulate their experiences (Fricker, 2007; Freeman and Mathison, 2009; Andersson, 2024). These ideas, introduced in Section 1.1 and revisited in Chapter 3, frame ethnography as a way of addressing epistemic injustice through close attention to children's meaning-making.

Aligned with critical traditions seeking to transform how children's worlds are recognised and valued (Spyrou, 2018; Alderson, 2020a; Arndt *et al*., 2022), the study employs recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy as analytic lenses for understanding influence in Forest School. Together they illuminate the visible and reciprocal interactions through which authority, belonging, and collaboration are negotiated—challenging adult-centric assumptions that equate leadership with dominance.

1.3.4 Forest School as Makerspace

The concept of a makerspace describes environments where learners engage in creative, hands-on making—emphasising autonomy, collaboration, and iterative problem-solving (Halverson and Sheridan, 2014; Peppler *et al*., 2016). Recent work conceptualises makerspaces as pedagogical ecologies fostering design, problem-solving, and shared authorship (Nadelson, 2021).

In this study, Forest School functions as both a literal and conceptual makerspace. Literally, sessions involve building, crafting, and material engagement. Conceptually, it is a learner-driven space where children make roles, meanings, and identities with others and materials; making encompasses decisions, alliances, and acts of influence. This aligns with constructivist and sociocultural theories viewing knowledge as created through participation and dialogue (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1978; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Koro-Ljungberg, 2022).

Ingold's (2013) notion of 'making' as correspondence—learning through relational engagement with tools, environments, and others—further frames this view. In Forest School, guided openness enables leadership and followership to surface through collaborative fabrication and problem-solving (Leather, 2018).

Recent makerspace scholarship highlights equity and inclusion as central themes (Freedman *et al*., 2022; Archer *et al*., 2022; Nichols *et al*., 2024). Research shows that design–build cycles foster agency and collaboration, echoing capacities seen in outdoor, tool-mediated learning (Nadelson, 2021). Forest School thus becomes a natural makerspace in which influence is made together—leadership and followership emerging as fluid, negotiated practices around shared materials and ideas.

Positioning Forest School this way complements the thesis's focus on recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy. Influence becomes visible not only in speech but through gesture, spatial organisation, and problem-solving; authority is distributed through making; and reciprocity is sustained by shared endeavour. This framing supports the development of a context-sensitive, child-centred account of leadership and followership transferable to other learning settings.

1.3.5 A Critique of Adult-Centrism

A central contention of this thesis is that much leadership literature remains adult-centric—universalising adult traits and expectations as normative (Pease, 2021; Lee, 2001; Mayall, 2002; Oswell, 2020; Spyrou, 2023). This tendency marginalises children's distinct ways of being and defines effective leadership in adult terms. Adult-centrism privileges rationality, articulation, and productivity, often dismissing play, gesture, and affect as immature rather than as valid forms of influence (James, 2020; Uprichard, 2021).

By privileging assertiveness or positional authority, adult frameworks overlook the relational and distributed qualities of children's interactions and undervalue followership as an agentic, creative stance (Uhl-Bien and Carsten, 2018; Bligh, 2022). This exclusion constitutes epistemic injustice, wherein children's ways of knowing are either devalued or rendered unintelligible (Fricker, 2007). Relatedly, developmentalism (Abebe, 2020) reinforces the view of childhood as incomplete, maintaining adults' interpretive monopoly.

Adult-centrism is thus both conceptual bias and structural constraint, limiting how children can be heard. It assumes leadership criteria are transferable from adult institutions to childhood contexts, neglecting the embodied, relational dynamics of peer influence. As Spyrou (2023) and Gallagher (2021) argue, researchers must move from viewing children as objects of leadership development to recognising them as epistemic partners whose practices can extend leadership theory itself.

Accordingly, this thesis seeks to redress these imbalances by co-constructing a framework that reflects the multimodal, reciprocal, and heterarchical nature of children's peer relations. It contributes to a growing field theorising childhood on its own epistemic terms—not as preparation for adulthood but as a distinct domain of relational meaning-making.

1.3.6 Leadership and Followership as Relational and Fluid

In contrast to hierarchical or trait-based models, this thesis conceptualises childhood leadership and followership as relational, reciprocal, and fluid. Here, 'non-binary'

denotes not the absence of hierarchy but the rejection of fixed oppositions—leader/follower, active/passive—that oversimplify children's interactions. While binary relations assume stability, relational perspectives emphasise permeability and interdependence. In Forest School, children frequently switched roles, co-led tasks, resisted, or collaborated in fluid ways that disrupted static distinctions.

These dynamics illustrate heterarchy rather than hierarchy, where influence circulates horizontally in response to context and affect (Cullen-Lester *et al*., 2021). Children displayed adaptive sensitivity—knowing when to lead, follow, or withdraw—revealing relational intelligence often missed in adult-centred models. Relational leadership theories (Fletcher, 2004; Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011; Raelin, 2020; Cunliffe, 2023; Komives *et al*., 2023; Denis *et al*., 2021) provide scaffolding for interpretation but still require adjustment for childhood contexts where emotion, play, and care are central currencies of influence.

This thesis extends such models by grounding them in children's lived experiences. Leadership and followership are conceived as co-constitutive practices through which identity and belonging are negotiated. Influence arises through joint attention and responsiveness rather than assertion or compliance. Followership is reframed as generative and ethically engaged—a mode of participation equal in agency to leadership. This approach moves beyond binary schemas to present leadership and followership as mutually sustaining processes of shared meaning-making in peer culture.

1.3.7 Researcher Positionality, Reflexivity, and Ethics

My dual role as headteacher and researcher generated both opportunity and ethical complexity. At the time of the research, I had been a headteacher for twenty-three years (fifteen of them at the school in which this study took place) and a teacher for thirty-five years in total. Such professional longevity brought deep familiarity with the community, staff, and pupils, and inevitably shaped the relational field within which this ethnography unfolded. Far from being an abstract backdrop, this context constituted a living web of daily encounters that informed how I was perceived and how knowledge was co-produced.

As headteacher, I was a highly visible presence. Each morning and afternoon I greeted the children at the school gate, supervised playtimes and lunchtimes, and always ate lunch alongside them. I often joined playground games—particularly football—because this was where disputes frequently arose, and my participation tended to diffuse tension. I visited every classroom most days, supported children experiencing learning or personal difficulties, and taught small groups of children with additional needs in different year groups over time helping to prepare them for various assessments through the year. Beyond academic support, I used storytelling and puppetry sessions to help children build language skills and personal confidence. I also managed the school football team and attended sports tournaments. Collectively, these activities made me a familiar, approachable, and trusted figure; the children and staff were accustomed to my steady presence and to a leadership style that balanced authority with relational warmth.

This sustained visibility carried methodological consequences. My established relationships created an atmosphere of trust that enabled rich, longitudinal insight but also risked reinforcing existing hierarchies of power. Following Berger (2015) and Holmes (2020), positionality was not treated as a limitation to be neutralised but as a constitutive element of ethnographic knowledge. My positional status could not be set aside; rather, it demanded sustained reflexive attention to how my prior relationships and contextual history with participants shaped emerging meanings.

The children's ease in my company likely contributed to their comfort in Forest School, where they viewed my presence as a continuation of their everyday experience rather than an intrusion. Yet such familiarity also carried the potential to silence dissent or to invite compliance born of respect. Acknowledging this ambivalence was essential to maintaining ethical awareness.

Ethical reflexivity, therefore, operated as an ongoing practice of accountability rather than a procedural step (Finlay, 2021; Pillow, 2021). I remained attentive to how my interpretations might privilege adult readings or institutional norms. Power, as Pease (2021) notes, cannot be dismantled entirely but can be rendered visible and ethically negotiated. In this study, transparency about my dual role and openness to the children's interpretations functioned as modest attempts to redistribute epistemic authority. Children chose interview formats, settings, and participation modes; these

acts of choice embodied relational ethics, recognising that power is negotiated but never neutral (Renold and Ringrose, 2023). Claims to objectivity would have obscured these relational dynamics; instead, interpretive subjectivity was embraced as a legitimate route to understanding (Fricker, 2007; Gallagher, 2021).

Ultimately, my positionality—as an experienced headteacher embedded within the life of the school—shaped both access and analysis. It demanded vigilance against complacency and reflexive humility about influence. By acknowledging rather than denying these dynamics, the study situates meaning as co-constructed between researcher and participants, consistent with its interpretivist epistemology. The children were not approached as subjects of study but as epistemic contributors whose voices and actions informed the ethical and conceptual direction of the research.

1.3.8 Contribution to Knowledge

Any claim to contribution must be tempered by Pease's (2021) reminder that research into disadvantage by those with privilege is inherently constrained. Reflexivity must, therefore, be accompanied by accountability—recognising positional advantage and redistributing epistemic authority through participatory practice (Gillett-Swan, 2022; Renold and Ringrose, 2023; Spyrou, 2023). With this awareness, the study offers situated insights grounded in the lived experiences of children within a specific educational context. It contributes to knowledge in five interconnected ways:

1. Reframing Constructs: It advances a child-centred reconceptualisation of leadership and followership based on recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy, with visibility and reciprocity as cross-cutting dynamics.
2. Extending Theory: It refines relational leadership theory by evidencing 'fragile recognition' and 'quiet influence' as ethically grounded, socially cohesive practices of agency (Komives *et al*., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2023).
3. Empirical Illumination: It documents children's multimodal repertoires—humour, gesture, persistence, tool use—and shows how material and spatial affordances shape authority (Gallagher, 2021; Hackett, 2021).

4. Epistemic Justice in Method: It models an ethically reflexive, child-informed methodology treating children as epistemic agents, countering testimonial and hermeneutical injustices (Spyrou, 2023; Uprichard, 2021; Alderson, 2020a).
5. Pedagogical Utility: It translates findings into design principles—broadening recognition, legitimising followership, fostering role fluidity, and attending to material and spatial equity—offering a practical heuristic for relational pedagogy.

In synthesis, the thesis positions itself as both critique and invitation: a challenge to adult-centrism and a reimagining of leadership and followership as dynamic, co-constructed processes within children's social worlds.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis comprises seven chapters that progress from conceptual foundations to empirical analysis and interpretive synthesis. Chapter 2 critically reviews adult- and child-focused literatures, identifying the conceptual gap this study addresses and establishing a bridge to the empirical and theoretical work that follows. The review, refined in dialogue with emerging findings, introduces the higher-order principles of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy, with visibility and reciprocity identified as cross-cutting dynamics that recur throughout. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological framework and ethical stance, situating the interpretivist–constructivist design within the study's commitment to epistemic justice and the close observation of multimodal, heterarchical peer practices in Forest School. Chapter 4 presents the thematic findings from ethnographic observations and interviews, showing how recognition, visibility, reciprocity, and role fluidity operate within children's everyday interactions. Chapter 5 advances the interpretive discussion, revisiting these findings through the lenses of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy to develop a child-centred conceptual and pedagogical framework of leadership and followership. Chapter 6 extends this analysis by addressing the research questions directly, synthesising theoretical and empirical insights to clarify the study's contributions to leadership, followership, and childhood studies. Chapter 7 concludes by consolidating contributions to theory, methodology, and practice, acknowledging limitations, and identifying implications for future research, pedagogy, and policy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically reviews scholarship relevant to leadership and followership in childhood, with particular attention to how these constructs are interpreted, enacted, and theorised in educational contexts such as Forest School**.** It directly supports the central aim of this study—to understand how leadership and followership are experienced, negotiated, and made meaningful by children in a Forest School context—and addresses the thesis research questions by situating those lived experiences within existing theoretical and empirical work on children's agency, relational dynamics, and the influence of adult-centric assumptions within educational settings.

While the study gives prominence to children's lived perspectives, it begins by engaging with adult-centric theories of leadership and followership. This starting point is deliberate, since frameworks originating in business, politics, and formal education (Northouse, 2022; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2020) continue to shape educational discourse, curriculum design, and pedagogy—even within early-years and primary settings (DfE, 2021; Ofsted, 2019, 2022; Leithwood *et al*., 2020). Recent evidence shows that these paradigms filter into classroom expectations, reinforcing adult hierarchies and marginalising relational learning (Fantinelli, Ricciardelli and Greco, 2024). Such influence demands critical scrutiny for both conceptual and ethical reasons.

A central proposition of this chapter is that leadership and followership in childhood should not be conceptualised as scaled-down or preparatory versions of adult behaviour. Empirical studies demonstrate that, although both involve relational influence, children's expressions of leadership differ in purpose, temporality, and power configuration (Reunamo *et al*., 2020; Danby and Farrell, 2022b; Ødegård, 2021; Shin *et al*., 2024). Children's leadership and followership are typically playful, situational, and emotionally responsive, emerging through humour, imitation, and shared material engagement rather than through formal role allocation. These

distinctions later inform the higher-order interpretive principles of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy developed in Chapter 5.

The persistence of adult-centric assumptions in research and practice is not only conceptually restrictive but also ethically significant. Such frameworks often fail to acknowledge children's agency and epistemic legitimacy, producing what Fricker (2007) and Alderson (2020a) describe as epistemic injustice. When adult rationality is treated as the normative standard, children's meaning-making risks misinterpretation or erasure. The brief introduction here defines adultism as the systemic privileging of adult perspectives and interpretive frameworks that marginalise children's ways of knowing (Adams, 2022; Kustatscher, 2020; Pease, 2021). Later sections (2.5) expand this argument within debates on epistemic justice and childhood studies.

The review functions as a critical interpretive scaffold: it maps how leadership and followership have been conceptualised, identifies where children's perspectives have been marginalised, and positions the present study as a response to these gaps. In doing so, it builds the conceptual bridge between existing scholarship and the empirical descriptions presented in Chapter 4, ensuring that later analysis remains theoretically grounded while responsive to the relational and multimodal realities of children's lived experiences.

2.2 Conceptualising Leadership and Followership in Childhood

This study conceptualises leadership and followership not as fixed traits or formal roles but as dynamic, relational practices that emerge through children's interactions in context-rich environments such as Forest School. Rather than treating these constructs as universally applicable or developmentally linear, they are understood as socially constructed, contextually enacted, and relationally negotiated. This stance is grounded in a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, both rejecting essentialist or hierarchical assumptions in favour of meaning-making shaped by interaction, spatial–temporal dynamics, and social complexity.

Leadership in childhood refers to the situated processes through which children influence, support, or guide peers in collaborative activity. These processes may be

verbal or non-verbal, explicit or implicit, directive or facilitative, and often involve affective communication, gesture, humour, and negotiated alliances. Followership, correspondingly, is reconceptualised not as passive compliance but as an agentic, responsive practice—a deliberate orientation to align with, sustain, or co-create others' leadership in ways that promote shared purpose and cohesion (Carsten *et al*., 2010; Uhl-Bien *et al*., 2014; Courpasson and Vallas, 2021).

Two clarifications are central to this conceptualisation. First, recognition is central. Authority among peers is legitimised only when others notice, interpret, and validate a contribution. This legitimacy is fragile not negatively but because it depends on continual relational maintenance. Influence must be renewed moment by moment through reciprocity, attentiveness, and responsiveness (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Fantinelli *et al*., 2024). The fragility of recognition is analytically useful: it shows that leadership is sustained by social consent rather than positional permanence and explains how changes in attention or resistance can quickly redistribute authority—a pattern repeatedly observed in the Forest School data.

Second, influence is multimodal. Children use speech, gesture, humour, imitation, material control, and quiet modelling to shape collective trajectories (Kress, 2010; Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018; Fantinelli *et al*., 2023, 2024). These modalities interact fluidly within heterarchical structures (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al*., 2020) where authority circulates without formal assignment. Fairness appeared only intermittently in children's discourse and not as a moral rule; rather, it surfaced through relational strategies such as turn-taking, invitation, and inclusion—practices sustaining participation and belonging (Ødegård, 2021; Danby and Farrell, 2022a).

This approach challenges traditional leadership theories—trait, transactional, and transformational—that prioritise individual authority, control, or goal attainment. Such frameworks, discussed in Section 2.3, obscure the relational subtleties of children's interactions, especially in informal or semi-structured learning environments. In contrast, recent research in early-childhood and sociocultural domains conceptualises leadership and followership as emergent, interactional practices co-produced through spatial, material, and social negotiation (Reunamo *et al.,* 2015; Heikka and Suhonen, 2019; Shin and Kim, 2024; Fantinelli *et al*., 2024).

The study rejects deficit framings that depict children as incomplete leaders or immature followers. Instead, it positions them as epistemic agents capable of enacting distinct, context-sensitive forms of influence that value emotional attunement, collaboration, and social cohesion over directive control (Gallacher, 2023a; Alderson, 2020b).

2.3 Adult-Centric Theories of Leadership and Followership: An Imperfect Critical Foundation

This section critically reviews dominant adult-centric theories of leadership and followership, highlighting their conceptual legacies, pedagogical reach, and limitations when applied to children. While such frameworks offer useful insights into influence, authority, and group dynamics, their underlying assumptions often conflict with the fluid, relational, and co-constructed nature of children's peer interaction. The aim here is not to dismiss adult theories entirely but to interrogate the risks of applying them uncritically in child-centred contexts—particularly in settings such as Forest School, where spontaneous collaboration and affective negotiation are more salient than task-driven hierarchies.

Adult leadership theories have historically clustered around three paradigms:
(1) trait approaches, locating leadership in fixed personal characteristics such as intelligence, confidence, or charisma;
(2) behavioural-style approaches, distinguishing task- from relationship-oriented tendencies; and
(3) situational or contingency models, emphasising the fit between leader, context, and followers (Northouse, 2022).

From the late twentieth century onwards, new paradigms such as transformational and distributed leadership extended this canon. Transformational models emphasise charisma, vision, and emotional inspiration, while distributed leadership decentralises authority by promoting collective responsibility and shared agency (Bolden *et al*., 2019; Spillane, 2006). Yet contemporary analyses show that even these ostensibly progressive frameworks risk rhetorical diffusion when real decision-making power remains unequally distributed (Bolden, 2023; Spillane and Diamond, 2022; Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016). Distributed leadership can become tokenistic

unless daily routines, accountability, and recognition genuinely shift among participants (Harris, 2019). This critique anticipates the child-centred argument advanced later in this thesis for heterarchical and negotiated influence, where authority circulates through shared decision-making rather than being tethered to fixed positional status.

Some educational studies have already experimented with applying these adult models to youth contexts. Research on pupil voice and student leadership programmes, for example, often draws from transformational and distributed traditions (MacBeath, 2020; Fitzgerald and Gunter, 2022). Yet, when transferred uncritically to childhood settings, such paradigms obscure key relational and affective nuances. They typically presume hierarchical relationships, stable roles, and performance-oriented outcomes that misrepresent the improvisational, emotionally textured nature of children's collaborations (Ødegård, 2021). They also tend to equate leadership with efficiency or visibility, marginalising quieter or supportive practices—humour, empathy, inclusion—that underpin social cohesion in childhood (Reunamo *et al*., 2020; Fantinelli *et al.,* 2024). Moreover, followership remains under-theorised, often reduced to obedience or passivity, overlooking how children actively choose to align with, resist, or reinterpret peer influence (Uhl-Bien *et al*., 2014; Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2023).

Nevertheless, adult-derived theories retain heuristic value when adapted. Relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006) has evolved into a dynamic body of work emphasising the social construction of influence within ongoing interaction (Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2023). When recontextualised developmentally, this focus on co-creation resonates strongly with children's moment-to-moment negotiations of agency. Similarly, distributed leadership, despite its institutional origins, offers a useful analogy for peer collaboration when detached from managerialist overtones. Elements of transformational leadership—such as inspiration and shared purpose—can illuminate children's imaginative invitations and humour-mediated alignment, provided that charisma is reconceived as a multimodal, co-recognised process rather than an individual attribute (Kress, 2010; Fantinelli *et al*., 2024).

A recurring theme across these theories is the assumption of stable recognition: that once influence is granted, it endures. In contrast, this thesis advances the concept of the fragility of recognition to describe the continually renegotiated and revocable nature of legitimacy in peer relations. Recognition is fragile because it depends on ongoing validation by others; a lapse in reciprocity or attentiveness can instantly redistribute influence. Designing for such fragility—pedagogically or analytically—requires attention to the micro-processes of noticing, responding, and mutual adjustment that sustain collaboration (Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012; Clarke, 2021). It shows how children's leadership is upheld less by authority than by the collective willingness of peers to keep recognising one another's contributions.

In sum, adult-oriented paradigms provide valuable vocabulary and partial explanatory leverage but must be reworked to acknowledge heterarchy, multimodality, and the fragility of recognition. These frameworks form a necessary but insufficient foundation for understanding leadership and followership in childhood. Their assumptions about hierarchy, stability, and rational control provide the critical backdrop against which child-centred theories emerge. This review thus serves as a conceptual bridge: it critiques adultist tendencies embedded in traditional theories while identifying adaptable insights—particularly relationality, reciprocity, and situational responsiveness—that inform the child-centred framework developed in Chapter 5. The following section, therefore, turns to child-centred and sociocultural perspectives, which shift analytical attention from adult-defined notions of authority to children's own lived experiences of influence, collaboration, and reciprocity.

2.4 Child-Centred Theories of Leadership and Followership: Relationality, Agency, and Situated Practice

Child-centred conceptualisations of leadership and followership draw from education, sociology, and childhood studies, foregrounding children's agency, peer culture, and situated meaning-making. Moving beyond the hierarchical and goal-driven emphases of adult-centric models, these perspectives focus on the relational, emergent, and fluid nature of influence as it unfolds in children's everyday interactions. Leadership and followership are thus treated as co-constructed social practices—interpretive accomplishments arising through dialogue, embodiment, and

joint activity rather than through positional authority or predetermined goals (Corsaro, 2015; Danby *et al*., 2020b; Shin *et al.,* 2024).

Within these frameworks, leadership manifests through a broad repertoire of communicative and affective practices: humour that draws peers together in shared play; emotional attunement that reassures and sustains participation; task competence that invites imitation; and inclusive invitations that redistribute opportunity. Laughter operates here not as frivolity but as a social mechanism that affirms belonging, diffuses tension, and consolidates group cohesion (Danby and Farrell, 2022b; Goodwin and Cekaite, 2018). Followership, correspondingly, is conceptualised as an agentic stance characterised by reciprocity, trust, and willingness to align with others' initiatives in pursuit of shared meaning (Reunamo *et al*., 2020; Ødegård, 2021).

These perspectives reject deficit narratives that portray children as incomplete versions of adults. Instead, they align with contemporary childhood studies that position children as competent social actors embedded within intergenerational and institutional systems (James and Prout, 2015; Spyrou, 2018; Gallacher, 2023a). Leadership and followership thus possess their own developmental logic, expressive modalities, and relational economies of recognition through which legitimacy is granted, withdrawn, or renegotiated among peers (Fantinelli *et al*., 2024).

A growing body of empirical work documents how such ad hoc, peer-sensitive leadership arises in early-years and primary contexts. Ødegård and Bjørnestad (2023) describe preschoolers alternating between directive and supportive stances during shared play; Punch (2023a) shows how spatial coordination, gesture, and collective improvisation underpin collaborative leadership in outdoor learning. Hackett (2021) illustrates how children engage through gesture, materiality and place-based literacies; Danby, Ewing and Thorpe (2020) similarly identify storytelling and shared laughter as mechanisms through which children negotiate roles and sustain participation. Across these studies, researchers highlight non-verbal and affective dimensions—forms of quiet influence achieved through modelling, persistence, or subtle suggestion—that remain largely invisible within frameworks privileging verbal dominance or formal authority.

Evidence from these studies also supports the idea of heterarchical role circulation, where leadership and followership positions shift continuously in response to task demands, emotional cues, and contextual contingencies (Reunamo *et al.,* 2020; Fantinelli *et al*., 2024). This dynamic interchange mirrors patterns identified in the present fieldwork, where influence functions less as an individual attribute than as a relational process sustained through mutual responsiveness. Such findings challenge assumptions that authority must be stable to be effective, instead emphasising the social elasticity of peer relationships. Taken together, the child-centred literature provides more than a critique of adultism: it establishes a constructive conceptual foundation for this thesis. It foregrounds relational agency (Edwards, 2010), legitimises multimodal expressions of influence, and reconceptualises authority as circulating, negotiated, and co-dependent. These insights underpin the interpretive lens applied in later empirical chapters, where children's leadership and followership are analysed as situated practices revealing the complexity and creativity of their social worlds.

In summary, child-centred theories reposition children as active contributors to their social environments rather than as apprentices to adult norms of leadership. They offer the conceptual tools required to recognise peer collaboration, multimodal communication, and fluid authority as legitimate forms of influence. Yet, despite this theoretical progress, significant challenges remain in dismantling the deeper epistemic hierarchies that privilege adult perspectives. The following section, therefore, extends this discussion by examining how contemporary childhood research engages directly with the concepts of adultism and epistemic justice, showing how these debates reshape understandings of children's leadership and followership.

2.5 Contemporary Childhood Research: Situated Knowledge and Epistemic Justice

Building on the child-centred perspectives outlined in Section 2.4, this section deepens the theoretical discussion by integrating debates on adultism and epistemic justice within contemporary childhood research. Adultism, understood as the systemic privileging of adult perspectives and interpretive frameworks, continues

to shape how children's voices and experiences are recognised in education and research (Adams, 2022; Kustatscher, 2020; Pease, 2021). It extends beyond individual bias to a form of epistemic normativity in which adult reasoning and communication styles are treated as the default standard for credible knowledge. Such assumptions, often invisible within pedagogical discourse, restrict what counts as leadership or followership by measuring children's practices against adult-defined norms of authority, confidence, and verbal fluency.

Contemporary interdisciplinary research challenges these hierarchies by foregrounding children's situated meaning-making. Scholars such as Spyrou (2019), Alderson (2020a) and Gallacher (2023b) argue that children's knowledge is both embodied and relational, emerging from the affective and material contexts of their everyday interactions. When adult frameworks equate influence with verbal assertion or charismatic visibility, they risk perpetuating what Fricker (2007) terms *epistemic injustice*—the systematic devaluation of certain forms of knowing. In childhood contexts, this manifests when quieter, gestural, or playful contributions are dismissed as peripheral, even though they may carry significant social influence and collaborative value. Epistemic injustice, therefore, operates as both a moral and methodological concern: it demands that researchers and educators attend to how interpretive authority is distributed and how some meanings are rendered inaudible.

Recent empirical work exemplifies this shift. Danby *et al.* (2020a), Punch (2023b), and Ødegård and Bjørnestad (2023) document how leadership and followership among peers are co-constructed through imitation, humour, spatial coordination, and affective alignment. These studies demonstrate that children's leadership is not rehearsed adulthood but an authentic, situated practice through which belonging, fairness, and reciprocity are negotiated in real time. Reunamo *et al*. (2015) similarly describe alignment as an interpretive accomplishment requiring sensitivity to others' intentions, while Heikka *et al*. (2019) identify distributed, context-sensitive collaboration as a key feature of early-years influence. Collectively, this body of research situates children as competent social actors and legitimate knowledge producers whose contributions illuminate how influence, recognition, and fairness operate within peer cultures.

Integrating epistemic-justice theory with child-centred research reframes leadership and followership as moral as well as social acts. Leadership becomes ethical when it amplifies others' participation rather than silencing it; followership becomes ethical when it represents deliberate, discerning alignment rather than passive acquiescence. This reframing supports the interpretivist stance of the present study, which treats meaning as co-constructed through interaction rather than discovered by the researcher. It also establishes the moral rationale for developing child-centred frameworks of leadership and followership that recognise the multiplicity of children's communicative repertoires.

Finally, this section clarifies the study's epistemological position within these debates. Knowledge is understood as *situated* (Haraway, 1988): produced through relationships, shaped by context, and responsive to power dynamics. The researcher's dual role as headteacher and ethnographer—discussed reflexively in Section 3.7—formed part of this knowledge-production context, influencing how meanings were interpreted and represented. Reflexivity thus functioned as an ethical accountability practice, ensuring transparency about how interpretation and authority were shared between adult and child perspectives.

By drawing these threads together, this section establishes the ethical and theoretical foundation for the themes that follow. It demonstrates that recognising children's leadership and followership requires not only empirical observation but also a critical awareness of the epistemic hierarchies that shape what is seen and valued. The next section builds directly on this foundation by synthesising the conceptual and empirical insights from both adult-centred and child-centred literatures into a set of interrelated themes.

These themes—Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity—capture the social and affective mechanisms through which leadership and followership are enacted among peers. They also provide a bridge between the ethical commitments of epistemic justice and the interpretive principles that underpin the later data analysis.

2.6 Core Themes Underpinning Children's Leadership and Followership

Understanding children's leadership and followership requires attention to the interrelated dimensions through which agency, influence, and participation are enacted in peer contexts. This section synthesises five key themes that underpin both the empirical and theoretical foundations of this thesis—Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity—together with two cross-cutting dynamics: Visibility and Reciprocity. Collectively, these constructs form the conceptual scaffolding for the analysis in Chapter 4 and the higher-order principles (Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy) developed in Chapter 5. The discussion that follows, therefore, moves from ethical concerns to the descriptive and analytic mechanisms through which children's peer interactions express leadership and followership in practice.

2.6.1 Identity

Identity in children's leadership and followership is understood as a negotiated, dynamic, and socially constructed process rather than a fixed trait. Within peer interaction, identity emerges relationally—through how children position themselves and are positioned by others in acts of influence, resistance, or cooperation. Corsaro's (2015) concept of interpretive reproduction remains foundational, describing how children actively reproduce and transform social meanings through interaction, establishing shared understandings of leadership and followership within their peer cultures. Building on this, Danby *et al.* (2020b) demonstrate that children's leader–follower identities are shaped by the social ecology of play, where gestures, humour, and negotiation determine momentary authority.

Recent research highlights the performative and affective dimensions of identity. Thorne (2024) argues that identity is performed through embodied interaction, particularly during play or collaborative tasks where children continually reconstitute themselves in relation to others. Ødegård and Bjørnestad (2023) similarly note that leadership identities are co-constructed through recognition economies: a child's visibility as a leader depends on peers acknowledging their contributions. This emphasis on mutual recognition echoes Pease and Cunningham's (2021) framing of identity as relational achievement, where belonging and legitimacy rely on peer

validation rather than imposed hierarchies. Kim (2023) extends this view by linking identity formation to emotional regulation, showing how confidence, pride, or frustration shape children's self-perceptions during negotiation or exclusion.

Leadership and followership identities are thus fluid, momentary, and context specific, co-produced through processes of becoming rather than being. They shift according to task demands, social dynamics, and environmental affordances, a pattern explored empirically in Chapter 4. In this study, identity is, therefore, not treated as an internal attribute but as a socially recognisable performance continually re-made within the moral and affective economies of peer life.

2.6.2 Relationships and Relationality

Relationality provides the ethical and conceptual foundation for understanding leadership and followership as shared, co-dependent practices rather than discrete roles. Alderson (2020a) and Spyrou (2019) argue that children's social worlds are sustained through relationships characterised by reciprocity, empathy, and negotiation—qualities that challenge hierarchical assumptions within adult-centric models. Relationality is, therefore, both descriptive and normative: it signals an ethic of care and attentiveness to others that shapes how children lead and follow.

Edwards' (2010) notion of relational agency captures this dynamic, emphasising the capacity to align one's actions with others to achieve shared goals. This reframes leadership from individual to relational competence—the ability to coordinate, interpret, and adapt to others' intentions. Esser and Sattarzadeh (2024a) describe such exchanges as micro-ethical negotiations where influence is balanced against belonging, while Tisdall *et al*. (2024) interprets relational responsiveness as both an epistemic and moral act, especially when adults observe rather than direct children's collaboration.

Empirical work reinforces these arguments. Punch (2023a) finds that trust and familiarity underpin distributed leadership, particularly in collaborative outdoor settings. Relationality often manifests through subtle cues—eye contact, gesture, tone—that convey attunement and respect. Within this thesis, relationality frames leadership and followership as acts of co-presence and mutual adjustment,

emphasising empathy, recognition, and shared intentionality as key drivers of children's collective activity. Relationality thus links ethics to practice, highlighting that every act of leading or following carries affective and moral weight in shaping the group's cohesion.

2.6.3 Collaboration

Collaboration extends beyond cooperative task completion to encompass the social and epistemic processes through which knowledge, meaning, and leadership are co-constructed. Danby *et al*. (2023) show how children's collaboration often relies on improvised coordination, where leadership and followership emerge fluidly in response to shifting social and material conditions. Reunamo *et al*. (2020) describe collaboration as interpretive participation, through which children jointly construct goals and negotiate their individual contributions.

Ødegård and Bjørnestad (2023) identify ad hoc leadership in early-years collaboration, where influence circulates according to situational expertise or enthusiasm. Heikka *et al*. (2019) and Fantinelli *et al*. (2024) extend this, showing how distributed and multimodal collaboration—through gesture, humour, and spatial organisation—enables children to coordinate without reliance on verbal instruction. Collaboration, therefore, functions as a relational process through which leadership and followership co-emerge as children test, adapt, and reciprocate influence.

In this study, collaboration is both the medium and outcome of leadership. In Forest School, collaborative engagements—building, exploring, or negotiating resources—reveal leadership and followership as mutually generative practices. These insights provide a foundation for interpreting the teamwork and improvisational dynamics analysed in Chapter 4. Collaboration also illustrates the productive uncertainty of peer interaction: children learn through moments of hesitation, reinterpretation, and repair, rather than linear task progression.

2.6.4 Social Influence

Social influence encompasses how children shape one another's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Classical theories such as Kellerman's (2008)

followership model and DeRue and Ashford's (2010) identity perspective locate influence within formal hierarchies. In contrast, childhood research portrays influence as distributed, embodied, and often unspoken. Pease (2019) argues that children's influence frequently operates through affective channels—laughter, mimicry, reassurance—that sustain cohesion. Reunamo *et al.* (2020) likewise show that children redirect peers' attention through subtle affective cues rather than explicit commands.

Punch (2023a) documents quiet influence, where leadership manifests through modelling, persistence, or technical skill, findings echoed by Shin *et al*. (2022) in studies of gesture and gaze in early play. These forms contrast sharply with adult paradigms equating leadership with charisma or verbal dominance. Influence in childhood is relational and contingent—dependent on peers' willingness to recognise and reciprocate it.

This relational framing underscores why visibility and recognition are central to influence. Authority circulates within heterarchical systems of mutual adjustment rather than descending through hierarchy. The literature thus provides a conceptual bridge to the thesis's focus on multimodality and recognition as higher-order principles of childhood leadership and followership. Social influence, therefore, becomes a shared accomplishment rather than an individual possession—a process of mutual persuasion grounded in attentiveness, responsiveness, and care.

2.6.5 Role Fluidity

Role fluidity captures the oscillation and interchange between leading and following that characterise children's collective activity. Unlike adult models assuming stable hierarchies, children's interactions display continual shifts in initiative and deference. Ødegård and Bjørnestad (2023) describe negotiated leadership as an everyday phenomenon in which children alternate between proposing and deferring based on context or perceived expertise. Reunamo *et al.* (2020) show how alignment and resistance co-exist, producing dynamic exchanges of leadership and followership within play.

Theoretical perspectives on heterarchy (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al*., 2020) illuminate these flexible configurations of authority, where influence circulates horizontally rather than vertically. In such systems, leadership is temporary, distributed, and situational. Lee, Recchia and Shin (2005) provide early evidence of rotational leadership, showing that young children manage fairness and inclusion by sharing turns. Recent multimodal studies (Fantinelli *et al*., 2024) extend this, demonstrating that transitions between roles are often mediated by gesture and affect rather than explicit negotiation.

Role fluidity, therefore, enacts both fairness and adaptability, illustrating children's capacity to sustain cohesion while navigating shifting power relations. It reinforces this thesis's interpretive stance that leadership and followership are not stable identities but reciprocal practices of coordination, care, and contextual sensitivity. Such fluidity is central to the study's later analysis, where children's rapid alternation of roles in Forest School demonstrates leadership as a living process rather than a static designation.

2.6.6 Cross-Cutting Dynamics: Visibility and Reciprocity

This thesis adopts visibility and reciprocity as two cross-cutting conceptual dynamics informing how leadership and followership are recognised, legitimised, and sustained—or withheld—within peer interaction.

Visibility refers to how children's contributions become perceptible and acknowledged by others. While adult literature equates visibility with vocal participation or positional authority (Kellerman, 2008; DeRue and Ashford, 2010), child-centred research recognises it as multimodal—emerging through gesture, spatial presence, artefact manipulation, gaze, and silence as well as speech (Kress, 2010; Karlsson and Nasi, 2023). Yet these contributions are not always recognised. When non-verbal or affective influence goes unnoticed or dismissed, epistemic injustice occurs, devaluing children's experiential knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a; Nikolaidis, 2023).

Reciprocity captures the moral and relational interplay through which leadership and followership are co-constructed. Spyrou (2019) and Tisdall *et al.* (2024) frame

reciprocity as responsive alignment, where attentiveness and mutual recognition create belonging and influence. Yet Esser and Sattarzadeh (2024a) observe that reciprocity is inherently precarious, withdrawn as easily as granted, and shaped by silences, interruptions, or subtle exclusions.

Within this thesis, visibility and reciprocity function as interpretive tools rather than standalone themes. They guide analysis across the five thematic anchors developed in Chapter 4, offering a more textured understanding of how leadership and followership are enacted, ignored, or contested. Their re-emergence in Chapter 5 (Section 5.3.1) signals theoretical progression—from conceptual groundwork to empirical elaboration. Together, these dynamics suggest that power in childhood settings is continually negotiated through recognition, where being seen and responded to forms the basis of meaningful participation.

2.7 Rethinking 'Effective' Leadership and Followership in Child-Centred Terms

The notion of effectiveness in leadership and followership has long been defined through adult-centric paradigms that equate success with productivity, goal attainment, and managerial efficiency (Northouse, 2022; Bolden *et al*., 2019). Such frameworks privilege outcomes over process and hierarchy over reciprocity. When applied to childhood contexts, these criteria become conceptually and ethically inadequate: children's leadership and followership unfold in relational, affective, and fluid environments where objectives are emergent rather than prescribed. Evaluating children's practices through adult metrics risks misreading collaborative negotiation as disorganisation or immaturity (Spyrou, 2019; Alderson, 2020a).

A child-centred reframing begins with recognising leadership and followership among peers as socially situated achievements rather than stable competencies. Research in play-based and outdoor learning shows that influence is distributed through reciprocity rather than delegated through formal roles (Danby *et al.,* 2020b; Reunamo *et al*., 2020). From this perspective, effectiveness concerns the quality of participation—the extent to which children co-construct meaning, sustain engagement, and negotiate difference while maintaining cohesion (Ødegård and Bjørnestad, 2023). Participation thus signals relational robustness: a group's

capacity to accommodate multiple voices without collapsing into dominance or withdrawal.

Shared decision-making similarly functions as a marker of ethical effectiveness. While adult frameworks often view collective deliberation as inefficient, in peer-led contexts it fosters fairness, inclusion, and ownership—qualities that sustain motivation and emotional investment (Fantinelli *et al*., 2024). Empirical studies show that when decision-making is genuinely distributed, children persevere longer in complex tasks and show empathy toward peers who disagree or disengage (Lee, Recchia and Shin, 2005; Punch, 2023b). Effectiveness, therefore, becomes a measure of sustainability: the ability of a group to remain cohesive through moments of tension or conflict.

These insights invite a reframing of effectiveness across three intersecting dimensions—Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy—each capturing a key relational principle underpinning children's leadership and followership.

Recognition concerns whose contributions are legitimised and how legitimacy circulates. A leadership act is effective not merely when it achieves coordination, but when it broadens participation by inviting recognition rather than withholding it. Exclusion or silencing may yield short-term efficiency but erodes epistemic and emotional inclusion (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a). Effective leadership in child-centred terms thus expands recognition to encompass diverse voices and multiple forms of competence.

Multimodality captures the communicative repertoires—verbal, gestural, spatial, and material—through which children coordinate and influence. Studies by Kress (2010) and Fantinelli *et al*. (2024) show that meaning-making is often embodied and distributed across artefacts and spaces. Leadership and followership that value these multimodal exchanges are more effective because they enable influence to circulate beyond verbal or charismatic dominance. A child who models tool use, maintains group focus through humour, or redirects attention by repositioning materials demonstrates coordination invisible to adult-defined criteria (Pease, 2019; Shin *et al*., 2022).

Heterarchy refers to the dynamic circulation of authority within a group (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al*., 2020). In children's peer cultures, heterarchical organisation allows responsiveness: leadership passes fluidly according to expertise, enthusiasm, or situational need. Effectiveness lies in adaptability, not stability. Rotational leadership and negotiated followership distribute influence in ways that preserve fairness and collective agency (Ødegård and Bjørnestad, 2023; Reunamo *et al*., 2020). The capacity to shift smoothly between leading and following—sometimes within the same episode—constitutes a developmental strength rather than inconsistency.

Together, these dimensions redefine effectiveness as an interpretive, relational, and ethical construct. A peer exchange that appears slow, improvised, or emotionally charged may be highly effective in cultivating belonging and mutual understanding, while an interaction that seems orderly and decisive may perpetuate exclusion. Effectiveness, in this view, cannot be separated from the social and epistemic justice of participation. Hence, 'effective' leadership and followership in childhood are re-evaluated as processes that sustain inclusion, reciprocity, and belonging, aligning with the study's interpretivist and constructivist commitments.

2.8 Forest School and Loosely Structured Pedagogical Spaces

The Forest School movement foregrounds child-led, experiential learning within richly resourced outdoor environments and provides a distinctive setting for examining how leadership and followership are co-constructed, negotiated, and reconfigured through spatial freedom, material interaction, and relational autonomy. Within this thesis, Forest School is treated as a paradigmatic example of a loosely structured pedagogical space—one that resists rigid curricular control while maintaining a bounded yet flexible framework for play, exploration, and collaboration (Knight, 2022; Leather, 2018). Such environments are characterised by low adult-to-child ratios, continuity of engagement, and an emphasis on sustained inquiry rather than discrete lesson outcomes.

The term *loosely structured* signals the relative absence of adult-imposed hierarchies, fixed outcomes, or prescriptive behavioural norms. Children select how, when, and with whom to engage, shaping both the tempo and focus of their participation. This pedagogical looseness positions Forest School between formal

classroom instruction and unbounded play (Beames *et al.,* 2022). The balance is delicate: adults retain responsibility for safety and inclusion yet seek to minimise intervention, cultivating what Harwood and Collier (2020) describe as a *pedagogy of presence*—responsive, observant, and dialogic rather than directive. Within such conditions, leadership and followership become distributed, emergent phenomena that arise through shared activity rather than positional authority. This setting, therefore, offers a living context in which the relational and ethical principles of recognition, multimodality, heterarchy, visibility, reciprocity can be observed in practice.

A defining feature of Forest School is material affordance—the perceived and actual possibilities for action provided by the physical environment (Gibson, 1979). Natural elements such as logs, water, mud and trees, together with constructed features like willow tunnels or fire pits, invite improvisation and collective problem-solving. Recent scholarship conceptualises these affordances as relational rather than static: their meaning emerges through the interplay of material, affective and social forces (Harris, 2021). A stick may become a lever, a baton of authority, or a symbol of inclusion depending on how it is taken up in group negotiation. Through such interactions, materiality redistributes authority, tool-access may temporarily centralise influence, while resource-sharing disperses it. Emotional attachment to artefacts also shapes identity and belonging, linking practical competence to recognition and visibility (Ødegård and Bjørnestad, 2023). In this way, the outdoor environment becomes a co-participant in children's leadership and followership dynamics, supporting multimodal communication and heterarchical relations.

The social architecture of Forest School reinforces these heterarchical dynamics. Minimal adult control enables children to negotiate inclusion and legitimacy in real time. Studies in Nordic and UK contexts show that leadership is typically ephemeral, rooted in task-competence, affective connection or collective enthusiasm rather than enduring status (Maynard, 2007; Heikka *et al.,* 2019; Reunamo *et al.,* 2020). Role-switching occurs fluidly as peers respond to environmental and interpersonal cues, exemplifying what Mannion and Adey (2022) term *responsive collectivity*. Such findings resonate with relational theories of leadership that privilege empathy, mutuality and adaptability over control (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Fairhurst *et al.,* 2020).

However, scholars caution against idealising Forest School as inherently egalitarian: Leather (2018) and Riggall and Searle (2023) note that adult facilitators can inadvertently reassert authority through subtle acts of surveillance, approval or correction, thereby reproducing adultist hierarchies. Risk-assessment frameworks and accountability pressures may further constrain autonomy, narrowing the space for authentic negotiation. This critical nuance matters for this thesis, as it highlights how power relations remain embedded even in ostensibly free environments.

Emphasising relational materiality also invites dialogue with post-human perspectives that decentre the human subject. Scholars such as Alaimo (2020), Mackey (2017), and Baker *et al*. (2023) argue that agency in outdoor learning environments is co-constituted by non-human forces—weather, terrain, sound and texture—each participating in the choreography of collaboration. This recognition strengthens the conceptual link between Forest School and the higher-order principle of multimodality: communication, influence and leadership extend beyond speech to include bodily movement, spatial configuration, and environmental responsiveness. These multimodal practices support heterarchical organisation by enabling leadership to circulate through gesture, action and environmental responsiveness rather than through verbal command. In these terms, Forest School offers an empirical site in which the relational, material and emergent aspects of leadership and followership can be explored in their full complexity. Forest School thus provides both the philosophical grounding and the empirical conditions for re-imagining leadership and followership as relationally co-produced, materially mediated and continuously negotiated within the flux of peer culture. Its loosely-structured pedagogy draws attention to the ethical and epistemic value of participation over product, offering a living example of how recognition, visibility and reciprocity can be fostered without reverting to hierarchical control. Yet this potential depends on practitioners' reflexive awareness of their own influence. Leather (2018) argues that the distinctive potential of Forest School lies in adults' ability to relinquish control, allowing the natural environment to become an active partner in guiding children's exploration and learning.

2.9 Bridging Theory and Experience in Childhood Leadership and Followership

This chapter has examined intersecting literatures on leadership and followership in childhood across organisational, sociocultural, and educational fields. Three enduring tensions emerge from this synthesis. First, followership remains conceptually under-developed and is too often portrayed as passive compliance rather than as a skilled, responsive, and interpretive practice. Second, the distortive effects of adult authority are seldom interrogated, allowing adultist assumptions to overshadow children's organic practices and perpetuate epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a; Spyrou, 2023). Third, although research increasingly documents children's collaborative, adaptive, and context-sensitive influence (Lee, Recchia and Shin, 2005; Shin *et al*., 2024), these insights remain only partially integrated into mainstream leadership and pedagogical frameworks.

This section focuses on the conceptual implications of the study's design, while the detailed methodological procedures are outlined in Chapter 3. It highlights how the preceding review informs the conceptual architecture of the thesis. The literature establishes the rationale for reconceptualising leadership and followership as relationally co-constructed, multimodally expressed, and heterarchically organised. These insights guide the interpretive stance applied in the empirical chapters and underpin the development of the three higher-order principles—recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy—together with the cross-cutting dynamics of visibility and reciprocity.

- Recognition must extend beyond overt verbal assertion to include quieter and embodied contributions through which children earn legitimacy within their groups (Corsaro, 2018; Reunamo *et al*., 2020).
- Multimodality captures the diverse communicative repertoires—speech, gesture, spatial movement, and engagement with materials—through which influence circulates (Kress, 2010; Fantinelli *et al.,* 2024).
- Heterarchy describes the fluid redistribution of authority within peer groups, where legitimacy is negotiated rather than fixed (Fairhurst *et al.,* 2020; Mannion and Adey, 2022).

Collectively, these principles highlight the ethical and epistemic stakes of studying leadership and followership through a child-centred lens. Unless educational discourse re-centres children's ways of knowing and participating, misrecognition and adultist bias will continue to distort understanding of their capacities for influence. The literature, therefore, provides both the conceptual rationale and the moral imperative for developing a framework that treats children's collaborative practices as legitimate forms of knowledge production.

Finally, this review underscores that theory and experience are interdependent. Conceptual clarity about recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy arose not only from textual analysis but also from observation of children's lived encounters in Forest School. The relationship between theory and data is, therefore, recursive rather than linear: literature illuminated patterns within the fieldwork, and those empirical insights, in turn, challenged and refined existing theory. The next chapter details the methodological approach through which this interpretive dialogue was operationalised, ensuring that the subsequent analysis remains both empirically grounded and philosophically coherent.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework underpinning the study, which explores children's lived experiences of leadership and followership within a primary school Forest School. The research is grounded in an interpretivist ontology and constructivist epistemology, recognising that knowledge is socially produced and contextually negotiated through participants' interactions. Reality is treated not as fixed but as an ongoing process of co-constructed meaning. These philosophical commitments align with the study's central aim—to understand how children negotiate roles, relationships, and influence in everyday peer interactions—and provide the foundation for examining the five interrelated principles that later emerged: recognition, multimodality, heterarchy, visibility, and reciprocity.

As established in Chapter 2, the study critiques rather than rejects adult leadership and followership theories, which often privilege efficiency, direction, and task completion while obscuring the relational and affective qualities of children's social organisation. By contrast, this research adopts a child-informed, relational, and context-sensitive perspective, investigating how leadership and followership unfold in practice rather than assuming predetermined forms.

The study is also underpinned by a commitment to epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a), recognising children as legitimate knowers whose perspectives carry intrinsic value. This stance demands sustained reflexivity—an ethical and epistemological awareness of how adult presence, institutional role, and interpretive authority shape what can be known (Spyrou, 2019; Tisdall *et al.,* 2024). Reflexivity here operates as ethical accountability as well as interpretive practice, ensuring transparency in how meaning is co-constructed.

Methodologically, the study employs naturalistic ethnography within traditions of childhood and educational ethnography (Christensen and James, 2017; Punch, 2023b). This approach captures the dynamic, embodied, and relational character of

children's interactions in open-ended outdoor settings such as Forest School, attending to both verbal and non-verbal meaning-making.

Data were generated through participant observation and semi-structured interviews across Reception to Year 6, producing 39 observations and 30 interviews. These were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis—a flexible, systematic method suited to inductive interpretation. The analysis was iterative and reflexive, allowing insights to emerge through engagement with children's communicative practices rather than through the imposition of predefined theory.

The Forest School context, characterised by open, affective, and materially rich conditions, provided an ideal environment for this exploration. Its semi-structured pedagogy enabled observation of how leadership and followership are negotiated, resisted, or shared without overt adult direction. In such settings, influence becomes visible through movement, humour, persistence, and reciprocity—forms of interaction often marginalised in conventional leadership discourse. This chapter, therefore, aims to establish a coherent and ethically grounded framework for examining leadership and followership as relational practices co-constructed within children's peer cultures.

3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Foundations

This study is grounded in an interpretivist ontology, which holds that reality is multiple, dynamic, and socially co-constructed through relationships and meaning-making (Schwandt and Gates, 2020). From this standpoint, children's experiences of leadership and followership are not treated as universal or measurable phenomena but as situated and negotiated practices embedded within everyday peer cultures. Interpretivism rejects developmentalist assumptions that portray childhood as preparatory or incomplete, instead recognising children as active meaning-makers who shape and interpret their own social worlds (Christensen and James, 2017; Spyrou, 2019).

Aligned with this ontological stance is a constructivist epistemology, which assumes that knowledge arises through relational and interpretive engagement between

researchers and participants rather than through detached observation. Understanding emerges within the encounter, not apart from it. Accordingly, this study does not seek an objective or generalisable truth about childhood leadership and followership but explores how these ideas acquire meaning through children's lived experiences in the Forest School environment (MacNaughton *et al.,* 2007; Punch, 2023a). It recognises the co-constructed nature of peer interaction, attending to how children collectively negotiate both social relationships and the material affordances of their surroundings.

The research also draws on social constructionism, which highlights the sociocultural and discursive conditions that shape what counts as knowledge (Burr, 2015; Gergen and Gergen, 2020). Children's leadership and followership are understood as formed within—and at times in resistance to—the broader narratives, institutional structures, and adult norms that organise school life (Tisdall *et al.,* 2024). This perspective complements constructivism by making visible the power relations and legitimating processes through which meanings are produced, validated, or suppressed. It demands reflexivity about how adult-centric frameworks—often taken for granted in educational research—can distort or silence children's interpretations (Alderson, 2020a; Spyrou, 2019). Thus, the epistemological orientation of this study is both interpretive and critically reflexive, interrogating whose perspectives are recognised and whose are excluded in the production of educational knowledge.

A central thread linking these assumptions is the commitment to epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a). Originally conceived as a response to the systematic silencing of marginalised knowers, epistemic justice here concerns the recognition of children as credible epistemic agents—individuals capable of generating and validating knowledge about their own social experiences (Esser and Sattarzadeh, 2024b). Applying this concept to leadership and followership research foregrounds how children's interpretations challenge deficit narratives that frame them as dependent or incomplete. It also underpins the methodological stance that children's insights are conceptually generative contributions rather than mere data points.

Together, these ontological and epistemological commitments justify the adoption of an ethnographic approach (see Section 3.3). Ethnography provides the

methodological flexibility required to observe and interpret the subtle, relational, and affective dynamics of peer interaction. It enables exploration of how influence, resistance, and collaboration are enacted in context and how these enactments both reflect and contest adult-derived assumptions.

Ultimately, the interpretivist ontology and constructivist–constructionist epistemology articulated here position the study to understand rather than prescribe how leadership and followership are experienced by children. By viewing knowledge as situated, relational, and ethically charged, this framework ensures alignment between philosophical stance and methodological practice, maintaining attentiveness to the lived, co-constructed realities of the children whose experiences it seeks to represent.

3.3 Methodological Approach: Ethnography with Children

The interpretivist orientation of this study recognises that knowledge is co-constructed and that the researcher's positionality inevitably shapes the research process (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003; Tisdall *et al.,* 2024). Ethnography was adopted as the methodological approach because it offers a means of accessing the situated, relational, and affective dimensions of social life as they unfold in natural contexts. In this study, ethnography provided the opportunity to examine how children's leadership and followership are co-constructed through everyday interactions within the ecological and social affordances of the Forest School environment.

3.3.1 Ethnography and the Study of Children's Social Worlds

Ethnography with children emphasises immersion, attentiveness, and relational sensitivity (Christensen and James, 2017; Punch, 2023b). It acknowledges children as meaning-makers who interpret and negotiate their own realities through play, talk, and embodied action. This study, therefore, positioned children not as subjects of observation but as participants in shared meaning-making. The focus was not solely on what children did, but on how they communicated, interpreted, and adapted to one another within fluid peer cultures. Ethnographic engagement allowed these processes to be documented as they emerged—spontaneous negotiations, affective

exchanges, and leadership shifts that might otherwise be lost in structured research designs.

Geertz's (1973) concept of *thick description* informed the interpretive stance, emphasising the importance of capturing the contextual meanings embedded in children's gestures, speech, and silences. The aim was to interpret these interactions in relation to the broader cultural and institutional context of school life, without translating them into adult-centric categories. Ethnography's openness to ambiguity, contradiction, and emotion made it particularly suited to examining the lived complexities of leadership and followership *in situ*.

3.3.2 Dual Role Context and Methodological Reflexivity

As a headteacher–researcher, I necessarily occupied a type of insider position within the school community. This dual role shaped access, rapport, and interpretation in distinctive ways. Familiarity afforded insight into the unspoken rhythms of school life and enabled observation of peer interactions in their natural form. However, it also required vigilance toward the interpretive biases and assumptions that accompany familiarity.

To mitigate these risks, I employed methodological reflexivity as an integral component of the research process (Pillow, 2003; Berger, 2015). Reflexive practices included maintaining a fieldwork journal, annotating fieldnotes to surface assumptions, and engaging in critical peer discussions to challenge emerging interpretations. Following Finlay (2002) and Holmes (2020), reflexivity was treated as an active, cyclical process of examining how the researcher's positionality, relationships, and emotions shaped meaning-making in context. Rather than treating reflexivity as a licence for bias or assuming that subjectivity itself was a strength, I understood it as a disciplined practice of interrogating how my perspectives and institutional role influenced both observation and interpretation. Reflexivity, therefore, functioned as both a methodological resource—enhancing interpretive awareness—and an ethical safeguard that demanded continual scrutiny of how familiarity could obscure as well as illuminate analysis.

Where my professional identity appeared to shape participants' behaviours or responses, these interactions were documented and analysed as part of the social field rather than treated as methodological contamination. In this sense, reflexivity operated as both a safeguard and a mode of analysis—helping to illuminate how adult–child relations and institutional norms mediated the enactment of leadership and followership in practice.

3.3.3 Analytic Estrangement and Interpretive Depth

While dual role status facilitated contextual understanding, it also risked normalising familiar practices. To sustain analytic distance, I employed strategies of estrangement (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Lareau, 2021), consciously revisiting observational data from alternative vantage points and questioning what might have been taken for granted. This approach ensured that ordinary, everyday behaviours—such as subtle acts of persuasion, withdrawal, or mimicry—were interrogated as potential expressions of leadership or followership rather than dismissed as routine.

Maintaining this balance between familiarity and analytic estrangement was crucial for generating thick, situated interpretations. The ethnographic process was, therefore, iterative: cycles of observation, reflection, and reinterpretation deepened understanding of how influence, agency, and recognition circulated among children within the Forest School. This recursive movement between proximity and distance not only strengthened interpretive credibility but also aligned with the study's broader commitment to reflexive awareness and ethical attentiveness.

3.3.4 The Value of Ethnography in Context

The Forest School setting amplified the methodological value of ethnography. Its semi-structured character—combining open exploration with minimal adult direction—created fertile conditions for observing self-organised peer interactions. The physical and affective qualities of the environment invited collaboration, negotiation, and non-verbal communication, providing a rich lens through which to examine leadership and followership as dynamic, multimodal phenomena. By combining immersion with critical reflexivity, this ethnographic approach sought not to impose theoretical categories but to allow meaning to emerge inductively from the

lived complexity of children's interactions. The resulting data captured leadership and followership as evolving, negotiated accomplishments shaped by social relationships, material affordances, and affective attunement.

The methodological commitments outlined here—immersion, reflexivity, and analytic sensitivity—formed the foundation for the study's design and data-collection procedures. The following section introduces the specific research setting and participant profile, demonstrating how these philosophical and methodological principles were operationalised within the lived realities of Forest School. The ethical and power dimensions regarding issues of dual positionality and authority, are explored further in Section 3.7.5 (*Power, Reflexivity, and Positionality*).

3.4 Research Setting and Participant Profile

3.4.1 Research Setting

The study was conducted in a primary school in the North West of England that had developed a well-established and highly regarded Forest School provision. The Forest School site occupies a triangular, tree-lined field on the edge of the school grounds. A 200-metre perimeter path encloses the area, offering varied terrain and natural features that encourage exploration. Key landmarks include a willow tunnel, a spiral earth mound, a low bridge, and an outdoor classroom constructed from reclaimed materials. The outdoor classroom, located near the centre of the site, features a sheltered canopy with wooden benches that accommodate an entire class, glazed observation panels, and rainwater collection facilities. Around this central structure are several child-defined learning spaces—a mud kitchen, orchard, fire pit, music area, and raised planting beds—which invite autonomy, creativity, and collaboration. The spatial organisation of the site supports a high degree of freedom in movement, interaction, and task engagement, thereby facilitating the spontaneous, peer-led practices central to this research.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the pedagogical philosophy of Forest School is rooted in experiential, play-based learning and sustained outdoor engagement (Knight, 2022; Leather, 2018). It combines minimal adult direction with intentional structuring of materials and spaces, creating what has been described as a semi-structured

pedagogical environment (Waite, 2024; Tisdall *et al.,* 2024). This design enables leadership and followership to emerge relationally and contextually rather than hierarchically. The Forest School setting was, therefore, not merely a backdrop but a generative context for observing how influence, cooperation, and recognition unfold within children's peer cultures.

3.4.2 Participant Profile

Participants included children aged four to eleven, spanning Reception through Year 6. All participants regularly attended weekly Forest School sessions facilitated by qualified Forest School leaders and supported by class teachers. Across two academic years, 39 weekly sessions were observed, generating a substantial ethnographic corpus of fieldnotes and reflexive commentary. In addition, 30 interviews were conducted with individual children, small peer groups, and teachers to capture reflective accounts of leadership and followership as experienced from multiple perspectives. The participant sample was intentionally diverse. It included children with a range of learning, sensory, and physical differences, as well as varying levels of confidence and communicative style. Purposeful selection, informed by consultation with class teachers and Forest School leaders, ensured representation across gender, age, and peer groupings. This purposive strategy reflected an ethical and methodological commitment to inclusivity and multiplicity—recognising that leadership and followership manifest differently depending on social relationships, confidence, and situational affordances (Alderson, 2020b; Punch, 2023d).

3.4.3 Consent and Assent Procedures

Because consent and assent are ethically central to research with children, the procedures are summarised here and discussed in full in Section 3.7 (Ethical Considerations). Written parental consent was obtained for all participants, and children provided verbal or written assent depending on age and ability. Information sheets were adapted for accessibility using simplified language and visual symbols, and children were verbally reminded of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Particular care was taken to ensure comprehension across the age range, and participation was framed as voluntary and independent from school

assessment or teacher authority. The consent process was designed not as a single event but as a continuing dialogue, revisited throughout fieldwork as children's understanding evolved. All data were anonymised: pseudonyms replaced real names, and identifying details were removed from transcripts and observation records to protect confidentiality.

3.4.4 Analytic Rationale for Sampling Diversity

The heterogeneity of the participant sample strengthened the credibility and transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the study's findings. Observing leadership and followership across developmental stages allowed comparative insight into how these practices shift with age, confidence, and social maturity. Younger children's expressions of leadership tended to be imaginative, relational, and affective, while older children displayed more strategic, task-based forms of collaboration and negotiation—findings consistent with recent research on peer learning and agency in naturalistic environments (Danby *et al*., 2020a; Ødegård and Bjørnestad, 2023). By sampling across the full primary cohort, the study captured the continuum of childhood leadership and followership within a single institutional culture, revealing both age-specific patterns and cross-cutting relational dynamics. This breadth of perspective underpins the analytical descriptive synthesis presented in Chapter 4 and contributes to the development of the child-centred conceptual framework advanced later in Chapter 5. Section 3.5 outlines the data-collection methods through which these ethnographic and ethical principles were enacted.

3.5 Data Collection Methods

This section outlines the data collection methods used to explore children's lived experiences of leadership and followership in Forest School. Consistent with the study's interpretivist and ethnographic orientation, data were gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews. These complementary methods enabled both naturalistic insight and reflective depth, capturing the relational and contextual complexity of children's meaning-making processes (See Appendix 1 for a cumulative data record table with all interview and observation data and overall totals).

3.5.1 Naturalistic Observations

Naturalistic observation formed the principal method of data collection. Across the academic year, 39 Forest School sessions were observed, encompassing all year groups from Reception to Year 6. The sessions were led by qualified Forest School practitioners and class teachers, with my presence positioned as a familiar but non-interventionist adult. Fieldnotes documented verbal and non-verbal interactions, material engagement, affective exchanges, and group dynamics, focusing on how leadership and followership emerged, shifted, or overlapped. Detailed descriptive notes were recorded during each session, followed by expanded reflections written immediately afterwards. These secondary reflections captured contextual detail, emerging interpretations, and reflexive commentary on positionality. This iterative process of observing, noting, and reflecting enabled the documentation of leadership and followership as situated social practices rather than fixed traits, aligning with the study's interpretivist ontology and relational epistemology.

3.5.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews provided opportunities for participants to articulate their understandings of leadership and followership in their own words, complementing the observational data. Interviews with children were conducted individually or in small peer groups to ensure comfort and to accommodate differing communication preferences. During the pilot phase of an earlier study, it became clear that offering children a choice of venue was essential to ensuring comfort and autonomy. Accordingly, in the present study, each group of children was invited to select from several familiar and accessible locations within the school, including their own classroom, the adjacent shared learning spaces, the library, or my office. Without exception, the children selected my office as their preferred venue. This consistent choice reflected the positive and trusting relationships that had developed within the school community and indicated that my office was not perceived as an intimidating space.

The timing of interviews was also carefully considered to ensure immediacy and recall accuracy. Wherever possible, interviews took place immediately after the Forest School sessions or—when scheduling prevented this—the following day at

the latest. The Forest School practitioner gave permission for children selected for interview to return directly from the site, allowing discussions to occur before the end of the school day while the sensory and emotional impressions of the session remained vivid. The interviews were intentionally brief, helping children remain engaged and ensuring that participation felt manageable and respectful of their time. Together, these design choices reflected an ethical and practical commitment to enabling children's authentic participation and comfort throughout the interview process.

Interview groupings were determined according to the children's confidence and communicative preferences. Some interviews were conducted individually; however, most were undertaken in pairs or small groups to foster mutual support and conversational flow. No child was interviewed individually if I judged that the situation might cause discomfort or intimidation. This approach was consistent with the study's relational ethics, prioritising emotional safety and agency over procedural uniformity. The interviews were guided by key themes but remained open and responsive to the children's recent experiences. Rather than adhering to a predetermined topic guide, questions often emerged from specific events that had just occurred during the Forest School sessions—particularly moments in which leadership or followership had been evident. These discussions invited children to describe how they felt and what they understood about their own and others' actions, capturing the immediacy of their reflections while the experience was still fresh. As the observations progressed, I began noting potential areas for follow-up during interviews, often linked to specific activities or interactions observed in the field. These prompts were never fixed or scripted but served as reminders of moments where children's decision-making, cooperation, or influence might merit further exploration.

In practice, the children tended to lead the conversation themselves, often recalling and elaborating on recent Forest School events with enthusiasm and detail. Their accounts frequently echoed the collaborative and reciprocal qualities observed in situ, as they took turns speaking, built on one another's comments, and demonstrated mutual respect in narrating shared experiences. The conversational and co-constructed nature of these interviews allowed for the spontaneous

emergence of the same themes evident in the field—such as collaboration, negotiation, and turn-taking—making the interviews an extension of the lived practice they described.

Open-ended prompts encouraged children to elaborate on their ideas in their own terms, focusing on concrete examples rather than abstract notions of leadership or followership. In this way, the interviews functioned as a natural continuation of the observed sessions, allowing children's perspectives to clarify and deepen the researcher's interpretations of field events. Interviews with teachers provided additional contextual insight, helping to situate children's accounts within the pedagogical and institutional dynamics of the school.

3.5.3 Sampling and Ethical Adaptations

Throughout data collection, ethical sensitivity and adaptive sampling were integral to maintaining relational integrity and methodological rigour. Informed consent and child assent were revisited as ongoing, dialogic processes (see Section 3.7). The relational ethics underpinning the study emphasised respect, reciprocity, and transparency. Care was taken to avoid evaluative framing or leading questions that might imply approval or disapproval of particular behaviours. When discussing group dynamics, children were encouraged to focus on collaborative moments rather than individual critique. Sampling remained flexible, responsive to attendance variations, environmental conditions, and the children's willingness to engage. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Fieldnotes and transcripts were anonymised at the point of data entry. Reflexive memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions and emotional responses during and after interviews, supporting analytic transparency and integrity.

3.5.4 Dialogic Integration of Methods

The observational and interview data were treated as dialogically interdependent rather than discrete sources. Observations informed the development of interview prompts, while interview insights deepened the interpretive reading of fieldnotes. This iterative interplay supported a process of 'analytic conversation' between data types, characteristic of ethnographic inquiry. Patterns identified in observations were

revisited through participants' verbal accounts, enabling the researcher to examine how children's perspectives aligned with, complicated, or contradicted observed interactions. Similarly, interview reflections often highlighted contextual or emotional dimensions not immediately visible in situ, prompting a re-examination of earlier fieldnotes. This dialogic integration allowed for richer, more nuanced interpretation of how leadership and followership were enacted and understood within children's peer cultures, consistent with the study's interpretivist orientation and its commitment to epistemic justice.

3.6 Data Analysis Procedures

This study employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis as a flexible yet rigorous framework for interpreting qualitative data generated through ethnographic fieldwork. Thematic analysis was selected for its compatibility with the study's interpretivist–constructivist foundations and its capacity to synthesise rich, contextual insights from observational and interview data (Nowell *et al.,* 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2021). This approach was preferred over grounded theory or phenomenological analysis because it allowed for a flexible, recursive engagement with naturally occurring data, aligning more closely with the exploratory and ethnographic aims of the research rather than the generation of formal theory. NVivo supported the systematic organisation of data from 39 observations and 30 interviews, enabling iterative engagement through nodes, memos, and matrices while preserving interpretive flexibility. The software maintained a transparent audit trail but served only as a digital aid to the researcher's reflexive analysis. The following subsections outline how each phase of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was enacted in this study, demonstrating the iterative and reflexive processes through which themes were constructed and refined (See Appendix 2 for emerging key ideas and a full list of the initial codes; and Appendix 3 for an extended codebook of children's leadership and followership).

3.6.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

The analysis began with immersive engagement in the full dataset, comprising 39 ethnographic observations (Reception–Year 6) and 30 semi-structured interviews with children and teachers. All fieldnotes, transcripts, and reflexive memos were read

and re-read to develop deep familiarity with the material. Attention was given not only to verbal content but also to embodied and contextual features—gesture, tone, spatial positioning, and peer dynamics. Analytic memos were used to capture initial impressions, contradictions, and recurring motifs. NVivo facilitated this stage by allowing observations, memos, and reflections to be interlinked, supporting the transition from raw data to emergent insights. This iterative process aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2021) later emphasis on *active familiarisation*, in which researchers begin to theorise potential meanings during immersion rather than treating it as a purely descriptive phase.

3.6.2 Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

A systematic, line-by-line coding process was conducted in NVivo. This stage produced 139 descriptive codes that captured both verbal and non-verbal aspects of children's participation in Forest School activities, including behavioural acts, relational exchanges, emotional tones, and contextual influences. Coding was primarily inductive—grounded closely in children's lived practices—but informed by the study's conceptual interest in power, agency, and relationality. Following Braun and Clarke's (2023) guidance, codes were treated as analytic handles rather than fixed categories, allowing flexibility and reflexive engagement throughout the process. Each meaningful unit of data was coded inclusively, with attention to both frequent and rare but theoretically illuminating features. NVivo nodes and case classifications enabled systematic organisation and facilitated comparison across groups (e.g., year group, gender). This process yielded a detailed, transparent code structure that supported the move from descriptive coding to interpretive synthesis.

3.6.3 Phase 3: Searching for Candidate Themes

Initial codes were clustered into broader groupings to identify patterns of shared meaning and significance. This involved moving beyond surface-level description toward interpretive abstraction—asking what the patterns represented and how they related to children's leadership and followership practices. NVivo's memoing and node-hierarchy functions supported this process by visually mapping relationships between codes. Subthemes were used as intermediate conceptual bridges between discrete data fragments and higher-order thematic constructs. Manual review

complemented digital organisation to ensure analytic sensitivity to context and language. The aim was to construct a thematic structure grounded in empirical material while conceptually responsive to the study's focus on relationality, agency, and influence.

3.6.4 Phase 4: Reviewing and Refining Themes

Candidate themes and subthemes were reviewed iteratively against both the coded extracts and the full dataset. This stage tested each theme for internal coherence and external distinction (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Extracts were re-contextualised within their original observational and interview narratives to guard against decontextualisation. Themes that lacked analytic clarity or overlapped conceptually were refined, merged, or removed. NVivo's framework matrices supported this process by enabling comparison of coded data across cases and themes. Reflexive memos and supervisory dialogue were used to interrogate interpretive decisions, enhancing analytic transparency and trustworthiness. This iterative movement between data, codes, and candidate themes ensured that the emerging structure reflected the data's complexity while maintaining conceptual precision.

3.6.5 Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Through repeated refinement, subthemes were synthesised into a smaller number of overarching themes—each with distinct boundaries and interpretive coherence. Clear definitions were developed for each theme to capture both semantic and latent meanings within the dataset. Children's own words were used where appropriate in theme labels to preserve voice and authenticity, while adult-centric terminology was critically scrutinised to avoid imposing hierarchical assumptions. Analytic memos and concept maps were used to construct concise thematic summaries, capturing how meanings clustered around key constructs such as Identity, Collaboration, Relationality, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity. Theme development was treated as a reflexive act of interpretation shaped by the researcher's perspective, the relational dynamics of the field, and the contextual realities of children's participation. These finalised themes—presented and evidenced in Chapter 4—form the conceptual foundation for the discussion and framework development in Chapter 5.

3.6.6 Phase 6: Producing the Report

The final phase involved translating the thematic structure into a coherent, interpretive narrative. Each theme and subtheme is illustrated in Chapter 4 with representative extracts from observation and interview data, accompanied by interpretive commentary linking lived experience to the study's theoretical orientation. Following Braun and Clarke's (2021, 2023) emphasis on *storying themes*, the analysis was written to convey not only what patterns existed but how and why they were meaningful in the context of children's Forest School participation. NVivo's retrieval tools maintained clear traceability between codes, themes, and supporting data, ensuring analytic credibility and transparency. Reflexivity underpinned all stages of the analytic process, shaping how meanings were constructed and interpreted. The ethical and epistemological implications of this reflexive stance are discussed further in Section 3.7.5 (*Power, Reflexivity, and Positionality*).

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Conducting ethnographic research with children demands a rigorous, reflexive, and ethically responsive approach, particularly when examining relational constructs such as leadership, followership, and peer influence. The ethical framework for this study was grounded in principles of respect, transparency, and reciprocity, guided by contemporary understandings of relational ethics (Alderson, 2020b; Coyne, 2022; Farrell, 2024). Ethics were treated not as a procedural stage but as a continuous moral dialogue—negotiating trust, care, and accountability throughout the research encounter (Christensen and James, 2017; Spyrou, 2019).

This section outlines the principal procedures:
• institutional approval and oversight;
• informed consent and child assent;
• confidentiality and anonymity;
• data protection and storage; and
• reflexivity, power, and positionality.

Together, these ensured that ethical standards were upheld while remaining sensitive to the lived realities of children's participation in school-based ethnography.

3.7.1 Ethical Approval and Institutional Oversight

Formal ethical approval was obtained from the university's Research Ethics Committee. The application detailed the study's aims, methodological design, participant recruitment, and data management strategies, explicitly addressing the ethical complexity of conducting research within one's own institution. The review followed BERA's (2023) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* and the university's Code of Practice for Research Integrity. Scrutiny centred on issues of power asymmetry, the voluntary nature of participation, and careful management of positionality. The school's senior leadership team and governors also reviewed and endorsed the study. Approval was regarded as iterative, revisited as new relational and situational challenges emerged during fieldwork (Farrell, 2024). This flexibility allowed ethical decisions to remain responsive to the shifting social and emotional contexts of the school (See Appendix 4 for Ethics Form).

3.7.2 Informed Consent and Child Assent

Ethical engagement with children required layered processes of consent and assent that honoured both legal guardianship and children's agency. Parents and carers received detailed information sheets and provided written consent, while teachers and Forest School leaders also signed consent forms to participate or facilitate elements of the study.

Children's assent was treated as an ongoing, dialogic process rather than a one-time agreement (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Coyne, 2022). Information was presented in age-appropriate formats using simple language, visual prompts, and discussion to ensure comprehension. Assent was revisited before each interview or observation, allowing children to reconsider their participation at any stage. They were reminded that taking part was voluntary and that choosing not to participate would not affect their standing within the school. For younger or less confident participants, assent was also interpreted through non-verbal cues such as disengagement or silence—each recognised as legitimate forms of dissent. This attentiveness reflected an

understanding of assent as lived, relational practice rather than procedural compliance (Tisdall *et al.,* 2024). Examples of participant information and consent materials demonstrate how communication was tailored to developmental level and individual preference, reflecting a commitment to accessibility and respect.

3.7.3 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Safeguarding confidentiality was central to ethical integrity and trust. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and potentially identifying details—such as class names, teacher roles, or specific activity descriptions—were generalised. The school's name and location are undisclosed, and contextual identifiers that might allow local recognition were removed. Participants in group interviews were reminded not to share their peers' comments beyond the research context. No video data were collected in accordance with the school's safeguarding policy, and all audio recordings were deleted after transcription. Fieldnotes and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices, with hard copies of consent forms kept securely in locked cabinets. These procedures complied with BERA (2023) and GDPR principles of confidentiality, minimisation, and data security. Confidentiality was also understood as a relational challenge in a close-knit community, where everyday familiarity increased the potential for inadvertent recognition (Gallagher, 2021).

3.7.4 Data Storage and Protection

All data management conformed to GDPR, the UK Data Protection Act (2018), and the university's research data policy. Physical consent forms were stored securely on site, and digital materials—including transcripts, observation notes, and analytic memos—were encrypted and password protected. Backup copies were held on secure institutional servers. Participants and parents were informed about how data would be stored, used, and destroyed. Anonymised transcripts and analytic materials will be retained for ten years, in line with university governance requirements, and then permanently deleted. Data were treated not merely as artefacts but as relational entities carrying ongoing responsibilities of care, privacy, and accountability (Nind *et al*., 2023).

3.7.5 Power, Reflexivity, and Positionality

The researcher's dual role as headteacher and ethnographer created both opportunity and ethical tension. Dual role familiarity facilitated trust and long-term engagement but also risked reinforcing authority or shaping participant responses. These dynamics required ongoing ethical attentiveness and self-scrutiny. In keeping with child-centred and reflexive methodologies (Spyrou, 2019; Alderson, 2020a; Tisdall *et al.,* 2024), positionality was treated as dynamic and situated (Haraway, 1988; Esser and Sattarzadeh, 2024c). Reflexivity informed every phase of the study, shaping observation, interaction, and interpretation by maintaining awareness of how adult visibility and institutional authority could influence children's participation and comfort. A low-profile field stance was deliberately adopted to reduce hierarchical influence. Instructional and evaluative exchanges were avoided, and all participation was framed as voluntary. Children selected interview venues and timings, reinforcing autonomy. Their consistent choice of the headteacher's office reflected trust and familiarity rather than deference (Punch, 2023d).

Reflexivity was enacted through reflective journaling, analytic memoing, and supervisory dialogue, documenting tensions, moments of silence, and emotional or power-related nuances. These practices fostered awareness of how meaning was co-produced within asymmetrical yet negotiated relationships. During analysis (Section 3.6), reflexive memoing illuminated how prior assumptions and positional authority shaped interpretation. As Braun and Clarke (2019) note, reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges and embraces the researcher's interpretive influence when it is critically and transparently articulated. Positioning within these relationships required epistemic humility: power differentials could not be erased but were rendered visible and analytically generative (Danby *et al*., 2020b; Alderson, 2020b). Through this stance, my dual role institutional knowledge became a methodological resource for understanding how leadership and followership were enacted and perceived across both adult–child and peer relationships.

Ultimately, reflexivity was not a discrete ethical exercise but a foundational interpretive stance that ensured children's leadership and followership were understood as relationally situated and contextually negotiated. This approach aligns

with the study's broader philosophical commitment to epistemic justice and situated knowledge (Sections 1.3.7 and 2.5).

3.7.6 Ethical Integrity and Epistemic Justice

Beyond procedural compliance, the study was underpinned by a commitment to epistemic justice—the recognition that children are credible knowers whose perspectives constitute legitimate forms of knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2021). Within educational ethnography, epistemic justice requires attentiveness to how power and language determine whose voices are validated and whose meanings are marginalised (Spyrou, 2019; Pease, 2023).

Epistemic justice and reflexive integrity together framed both the design and analysis of the study, ensuring that children's meaning-making was engaged on its own terms. Verbal, gestural, and playful communication were each treated as legitimate knowledge forms, avoiding the adultist bias that privileges speech or rational explanation. The analytic process sought to interpret rather than translate children's expressions, preserving their interpretive agency and avoiding developmentalist framing.

Maintaining ethical integrity required integrating three interrelated dimensions of practice:

1. Procedural rigour: ensuring consent, anonymity, and data protection in line with institutional and legal frameworks;
2. Reflexive vigilance: interrogating how power, positionality, and interpretation interact within the research encounter; and
3. Philosophical commitment: affirming children's agency and epistemic credibility as central to co-constructed knowledge.

Taken together, these principles ensured that the study was both ethically compliant and ethically meaningful—attentive to the relational, affective, and power-laden dynamics of working with children in a familiar educational setting. This orientation transforms ethics from procedural compliance into a relational practice of

recognition, accountability, and care, ensuring that children's voices are engaged with on their own epistemic terms.

The ethical considerations outlined above formed not only the procedural foundation of the study but also its interpretive and analytical core. By treating ethics as a relational and reflexive practice—rather than as compliance alone—the research remained attuned to the moral and epistemic dimensions of knowledge co-construction with children. These principles of care, recognition, and accountability informed every methodological decision, from data collection to interpretation, ensuring that the study's integrity was sustained through its ethical conduct as well as its analytic rigour. The following section (3.8) builds upon these foundations by reflecting critically on the methodological limitations, constraints, and tensions encountered in practice, and by examining how these shaped both the scope and credibility of the study's findings.

3.8 Methodological Limitations and Reflections

No methodology is without limitation, and this study—while grounded in a theoretically robust and ethically responsive framework—faced several practical and conceptual challenges. This section critically reflects on those limitations and discusses how they were recognised, managed, or mitigated, with specific attention to the study's interpretivist, constructivist, and child-informed orientation.

3.8.1 Scope and Representation

Although the dataset comprises 39 observations and 30 interviews spanning Reception to Year 6, the processes of selection and interpretation were necessarily selective. Ethnographic research does not seek exhaustive coverage but prioritises situated understanding and analytic depth. Not all interactions or voices could be equally represented, and thematic analysis required interpretive judgements about which patterns were most conceptually illuminating in relation to the research questions. The excerpts and case studies presented in this thesis were, therefore, chosen for their analytic salience and for the ways they exemplify variation across age groups and peer contexts. Selection decisions were also informed by pragmatic considerations of coherence, narrative balance, and institutional word limits,

recognising that every act of inclusion also implies omission. While triangulation across interviews and fieldnotes enhanced interpretive credibility, some data were inevitably accentuated over others. Consequently, the findings are offered as situated interpretations rather than as generalisable claims, consistent with the interpretivist principles underpinning the study.

3.8.2 Ethnographic Saturation and Temporal Constraints

Spanning two academic years, the study offered extensive longitudinal engagement; however, the richness and unpredictability of school life always exceed what any researcher can document. Seasonal variation, curriculum pressures, and pupil absence all influenced the continuity of peer dynamics.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted fieldwork, necessitating pauses and adaptations that reframed what could count as saturation. Some group interactions were necessarily transient or unrepeatable due to attendance patterns and public-health restrictions. The resulting dataset, therefore, reflects what could be meaningfully observed, interpreted, and revisited within these constraints. Rather than treating such gaps as methodological weakness, the analysis approached them as contextual features that reveal the temporal and contingent nature of social life in schools.

3.8.3 Translation of Embodied and Non-Verbal Meaning

Children's leadership and followership were often expressed through gesture, movement, spatial positioning, and affective intensity. These embodied dimensions posed challenges of representation, particularly in the absence of video data, which were excluded for ethical and safeguarding reasons. Detailed fieldnotes and reflective memos were employed to capture non-verbal exchanges and preserve the sensory and emotional qualities of these moments, while acknowledging that such reconstructions involve interpretive abstraction. The approach foregrounded multimodality—recognising that meaning is distributed across physical, verbal, and material actions (see Section 5.4.2). Integrating children's verbal reflections during interviews helped connect embodied action with subjective interpretation, producing

a more holistic account of how leadership and followership were enacted within peer relations.

3.8.4 Interpretive Framework and Theoretical Integration

Building on the reflexive stance articulated in Section 3.7.5, the interpretive process required sustained awareness of how the researcher's perspective shaped theme construction, theoretical synthesis, and meaning-making. Reflexivity did not end with fieldwork but extended throughout data analysis, influencing coding, clustering, and representation.

The interpretive framework operated as an evolving dialogue between data, theory, and researcher standpoint rather than a neutral analytic instrument (Nowell *et al.,* 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2019; Pease, 2023). Interpretation followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis, chosen for its balance of rigour and flexibility. The process was iterative and recursive: line-by-line coding of 39 observations and 30 interviews generated 139 descriptive codes, progressively refined into thematic clusters.

Theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and reflexive memo-writing directed attention to affective tone, spatial dynamics, and multimodal communication, ensuring the analysis remained grounded in children's lived realities. Peer debriefing and supervisory dialogue provided critical distance and helped guard against adultist projection or over-interpretation.

Maintaining theoretical coherence required continual negotiation between empirical fidelity and conceptual abstraction. The integration of constructs such as relational agency, role fluidity, and epistemic justice was not imposed upon the data but emerged through repeated engagement with empirical patterns. This reflexive approach aligns with calls in contemporary childhood ethnography to theorise with children's practices rather than about them (Danby *et al*., 2020b; Ødegaard and Becher, 2023). The interpretive synthesis sought to preserve contextual richness while generating insights transferable to wider debates on leadership and followership in education. By moving fluidly between description and abstraction, the analysis maintained a dynamic interplay between lived experience

and theoretical innovation. Subsequent theoretical development in Chapter 5 consolidates five thematic anchors—Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity—and articulates three integrative principles—Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy—first introduced in the literature review. The interpretive framework thus operated as both method and bridge: a mechanism for generating meaning from data and a conduit linking empirical observation to theoretical advancement.

3.8.5 Final Reflection

The naturalistic ethnographic design, informed by interpretivist and constructivist principles, was well aligned with the study's epistemological and ethical commitments. It enabled sustained engagement with children's lived social worlds while maintaining sensitivity to adult–child power relations and the situated nature of meaning-making. The methodological constraints identified above are understood not as deficiencies but as productive tensions inherent in qualitative inquiry with children. These tensions demanded continuous reflexivity, transparency, and ethical attentiveness, each becoming integral to the study's interpretive integrity.

The study's dual focus on leadership and followership within peer cultures required a nuanced analytic stance—one capable of recognising influence, reciprocity, resistance, and silence without reverting to adult-centric taxonomies. Within this interpretive lens, children's interactions were treated not as data to be extracted but as socially and emotionally meaningful acts through which agency and recognition were negotiated in everyday play and learning. The longitudinal design provided temporal depth, enabling the analysis to trace developmental continuity and relational transformation over time.

Methodological integrity was reinforced by a sustained commitment to epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Pease, 2023), ensuring that children's interpretations were not subordinated to adult frameworks. Reflexive practice—through analytic journaling, memoing, and supervisory dialogue—helped to expose and recalibrate the researcher's interpretive stance. This reflexivity rendered the study not only ethically compliant but ethically generative, producing knowledge that honours children's epistemic credibility while acknowledging the interpretive partiality inherent in adult-

led analysis (Spyrou, 2019; Alderson, 2020a; Ødegaard and Becher, 2023). From this perspective, the limitations identified—of scope, representation, and subjectivity—do not weaken but define the epistemic boundaries of the research. They mark the conditions under which meaning can be responsibly constructed in a relational, child-centred context. The interpretivist stance adopted here embraces complexity and contradiction as sites of understanding rather than error: meaning is provisional, negotiated, and co-constructed. Such reflexive humility constitutes a methodological strength, reinforcing the philosophical coherence and ethical integrity of the study.

3.9 Summary

This chapter has established the methodological and ethical foundations of the research. It has outlined a coherent, theoretically grounded, and ethically responsive framework for investigating children's lived experiences of leadership and followership in a Forest School context. Anchored in an interpretivist ontology and constructivist epistemology—and informed by social constructionism and epistemic justice—the study employed a naturalistic ethnographic design that foregrounded children's agency, multimodality, and voice.

Through sustained discussion of ontological and epistemological assumptions, fieldwork design, analytic procedures, and ethical protocols, the chapter has demonstrated how each methodological decision was shaped by broader conceptual commitments to relationality, reflexivity, and resistance to adult-centrism. By embedding reflexivity as both ethical stance and analytic method, coherence was maintained across all phases of inquiry—from data generation to interpretation.

Acknowledging its limitations while affirming its contributions, the chapter concludes that the chosen methodology was well suited to the study's aims. It provided a robust interpretive platform for exploring the relational, heterarchical, and co-constructed nature of children's leadership and followership. The next chapter builds directly on this foundation, presenting the thematic findings derived from the data analysis—organised around five core thematic anchors: Identity, Relationality, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity—before integrating these in Chapter 5 through the higher-order principles of Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy.

Chapter 4: A Descriptive Synthesis of Ethnographic Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, based on children's lived experiences of leadership and followership within a primary school Forest School context. The dataset comprises thirty-nine observations (Reception to Year 6) and thirty semi-structured interviews with children and teachers. All data were transcribed, anonymised, and coded in NVivo, generating 139 initial codes which were then clustered into subthemes and synthesised into five overarching themes.

The chapter adopts a descriptive rather than interpretive orientation, giving prominence to children's voices and agentic presence. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) distinction between analysis and interpretation, it offers a thematic synthesis that organises children's actions and narratives into a coherent structure. Theoretical interpretation and engagement with adult-oriented leadership and followership constructs are reserved for Chapter 5, establishing a clear empirical foundation for the conceptual analysis that follows. This descriptive stance reflects an emic orientation, privileging children's categories of meaning over externally imposed theoretical constructs (Church, 2009; Iliescu *et al.,* 2024). The aim is to represent children's agency while avoiding distortion through premature adult-centric framing. Themes were generated inductively from the children's words and actions, consistent with Thomas and Harden's (2008) approach to thematic synthesis.

Citations are intentionally light to preserve the immediacy of children's accounts, reflecting a commitment to epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a; Pease, 2023; Kim and Shin, 2024) and recognising children as credible knowers in the research process. Aligned with the study's interpretivist ontology and constructivist epistemology (Schwandt, 1994; Guba and Lincoln, 1998), analysis proceeded inductively from children's accounts rather than being constrained by pre-existing leadership models. Whereas later chapters engage with adult frameworks and critical theory (Darling, 2016; Beals *et al.,* 2020), this chapter foregrounds children's

experiential authorship, following Fetterman's (2010) emphasis on producing an account that is credible, rigorous, and authentic to the field experience.

Thematic development revealed five interconnected dimensions—Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity—each comprising subthemes that illuminate distinct aspects of children's leadership and followership. Table 4.1 provides a structural overview of these dimensions and their correspondence to the research questions.

Table 4.1 Roadmap of Overarching Themes and Subthemes

Overarching Themes	*Subthemes*	*Descriptors*
Identity	4.3.1 Confidence and Voice	How children projected confidence, asserted themselves, and claimed space in group interactions.
	4.3.2 Popularity and Visibility	How peer status and adult attention shaped opportunities to lead or follow.
	4.3.3 Task-Based Competence	How practical skill or knowledge granted temporary authority in activities.
Relationships	4.4.1 Trust and Dependability	How reliability and familiarity supported children's willingness to follow peers.
	4.4.2 Peer Recognition and Validation	How affirmation or acknowledgment from peers legitimised leadership roles.
	4.4.3 Conflict and Resistance	How challenges, opposition, or contestation of roles emerged.
	4.4.4 Inclusion and Exclusion	How group boundaries were drawn, and how some children were welcomed or marginalised.
Collaboration	4.5.1 Shared Problem-Solving	How children pooled knowledge and skills to address collective challenges.

	4.5.2 Task Engagement	How commitment and active participation facilitated collaborative work.
	4.5.3 Collective Decision-Making	How groups negotiated choices and agreed on actions together.
Social Influence	4.6.1 Persuasion and Negotiation	How children used argument, suggestion, or bargaining to shape group direction.
	4.6.2 Attention-Seeking and Dominance	How individuals sought visibility or asserted control to influence others.
	4.6.3 Quiet Influence	How subtle, understated behaviours guided peers without overt assertion.
Role Fluidity	4.7.1 Situational Shifts	How children moved flexibly between leading and following depending on context.
	4.7.2 Negotiated Authority	How leadership was explicitly contested, bargained for, or distributed in interaction.
	4.7.3 Rotational Leadership	How leadership was deliberately or implicitly shared across time and tasks.

To demonstrate transparency and trustworthiness, Table 4.2 provides a condensed illustration of the analytic process, mapping a sample of initial codes to subthemes and overarching themes. It offers an analytic audit trail that traces the progression from raw data extracts to the final thematic structure. Illustrative examples drawn directly from observations and interviews were first coded descriptively, then clustered into subthemes, and subsequently synthesised into the five overarching themes. In doing so, the table demonstrates how raw data fragments were progressively abstracted and synthesised, ensuring that the thematic framework remained firmly grounded in the lived detail of children's voices and actions. This clear line of sight from initial codes to higher-order themes enhances the rigour and trustworthiness of the analysis, consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for credibility and dependability.

Table 4.2 Audit trail from Data Extracts to Initial Codes, Subthemes, and Overarching Themes

Illustrative Examples (Data Extracts)	*Initial Codes*	*Subthemes*	*Overarching Themes*
Putting hand up to answer first.	Seeking teacher / peer attention	Confidence and voice	Identity
Others follow because she knows what to do.	Task competence recognised	Task-based competence	
“He always gets picked first.”	Peer visibility / popularity	Popularity and visibility	
She was proud when her idea worked.	Expressing pride in achievement	Task-based competence	
“I’m not shy today. I can tell you what to do.”	Overcoming hesitancy	Confidence and voice	
“They always share with each other.”	Mutual support	Trust and reciprocity	Relationships
“We only let our friends in.”	Peer group boundaries	Peer validation / inclusion	
“I don’t want to play if she’s the boss.”	Refusing participation	Conflict and resistance	
He said sorry and they carried on.	Conflict resolution	Trust and reciprocity	
She saved a seat for him.	Acts of loyalty	Peer validation / inclusion	
“Let’s do it this way together.”	Co-construction of ideas	Shared problem-solving	Collaboration
“We all took turns with the hammer.”	Turn-taking	Task engagement	

“We voted on what to build.”	Group decision-making	Collective decision-making	
He reminded others of the plan.	Task coordination	Shared problem-solving	
She checked if everyone agreed first.	Seeking consensus	Collective decision-making	
“Come on, follow me!”	Directing peers verbally	Persuasion and negotiation	Social Influence
“I’ll do it because I’m loudest.”	Dominance / attention-seeking	Attention-seeking and dominance	
“She didn’t say much but we all copied her.”	Modelling behaviour	Quiet influence	
He told jokes so they stayed with him.	Humour as influence	Attention-seeking and dominance	
She persuaded them by saying it would be fun.	Encouraging participation	Persuasion and negotiation	
“I was the leader but then he took over.”	Shifts in role	Situational shifts	Role Fluidity
“We swapped jobs halfway through.”	Role switching	Negotiated authority	
“Everyone had a turn being in charge.”	Rotation of responsibility	Rotational leadership	
“She followed first, then led later.”	Sequential role-taking	Situational shifts	
They let him lead for the hard bit, then took over again.	Contextual expertise	Negotiated authority	

Together, Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide both a conceptual roadmap and an analytic audit trail. The former outlines the overarching thematic architecture, while transparency in the analytic process from raw data to thematic synthesis is evidenced in the latter. The following section (4.2) details how Braun and Clarke’s framework was enacted to generate these themes.

4.2 Analytic Process and Theme Development

This section outlines the analytic process used to derive the thematic structure presented in this chapter. Consistent with the study's interpretivist ontology and constructivist epistemology, data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase model of reflexive thematic analysis. This method was chosen for its emphasis on inductive, data-led analysis and its compatibility with the study's commitment to privileging children's lived experiences.

4.2.1 Data Preparation and Familiarisation

The analytic process began with the transcription and anonymisation of thirty-nine ethnographic observations and thirty semi-structured interviews with children and teachers across Reception to Year 6. These transcripts, supplemented by researcher fieldnotes, were uploaded to NVivo for systematic analysis. Familiarisation involved multiple readings of each transcript and observation record, with close attention to children's language, gestures, expressions, and interpersonal interactions. No deductive codes were applied at this stage; the aim was immersion in the data to allow patterns to emerge organically.

4.2.2 Initial Coding and Subtheme Generation

Inductive coding was undertaken at both semantic and latent levels, resulting in the generation of 139 initial codes. These captured a wide range of observable and narrated phenomena, including task-related behaviours, group dynamics, interpersonal responses, and role negotiation. Each code derived directly from children's language or researcher descriptions of situated interactions—for example, "he always gets picked first" and "we all took turns with the hammer" were coded under early categories of peer status and shared coordination. Codes were then clustered into subthemes based on conceptual similarity and observed recurrence across year groups and session types. Subthemes retained a close relationship to children's own language and experiences and were refined over multiple analytic cycles to ensure internal coherence and empirical validity.

4.2.3 Development of Overarching Themes

Subthemes were subsequently grouped into five overarching themes, each capturing a core dimension of children's leadership and followership practices: *Identity*, which encompasses how children understood and expressed their sense of self within group contexts; *Relationships*, reflecting the interpersonal dynamics and mutual dependencies shaping interaction; *Collaboration*, representing the cooperative processes through which tasks and decisions were negotiated; *Social Influence*, showing the ways in which power, persuasion, and peer validation operated; and *Role Fluidity*, illustrating the flexible and interchangeable nature of leadership and followership roles as children moved between guiding and supporting positions.

Each overarching theme integrates multiple subthemes while maintaining descriptive granularity. For example, *Confidence and Voice*, *Popularity and Visibility*, and *Task-Based Competence* together constitute the broader theme of *Identity*. This process allowed for a layered representation of the data, in which the richness of individual behaviour was preserved while enabling cross-case comparison and thematic organisation. Theme development was guided by a continuous and transparent process of memo-writing, reflexive journaling, and recursive review of data extracts. Coding decisions were revisited and revised as further patterns emerged, ensuring that the final structure reflected the full diversity and complexity of the dataset.

4.2.4 Audit Trail and Transparency

An audit trail documented analytic decisions made during coding and theme development. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 (in Section 4.1) provide a visual summary of the thematic structure and examples of how initial data extracts were abstracted into subthemes and overarching themes. This process supports methodological rigour and enables readers to trace the empirical grounding of the chapter's structure.

4.2.5 Descriptive Integrity and Epistemic Restraint

Crucially, no adult leadership or followership theories were imposed at any stage of coding. Adult-centric constructs and language were deliberately withheld to minimise distortion and maximise epistemic justice (Fricker, 2007; Alderson, 2020a; Kim and

Shin, 2024). Instead, children's own meanings, expressions, and relational enactments were privileged throughout the analytic process.

The final themes represent a descriptive synthesis grounded in children's own actions, words, and interactions across Reception to Year 6. While certain thematic anchors—such as social influence or role fluidity—may align loosely with adult-derived constructs, they were not pre-imposed but inductively surfaced from the empirical material.

Interpretive implications—including potential overlaps or divergences from adult-oriented leadership theories—are reserved for Chapter 5. What follows is a structured presentation of the five thematic anchors, each supported by descriptive excerpts that highlight children's agentic engagement with leadership and followership practices in a Forest School setting.

4.3 Thematic Anchors of a Child-Centred Reconceptualisation of Leadership and Followership

The following sections present the thematic structure developed from the analytic process described above. The five overarching themes, introduced in Section 4.2, are now formally presented as thematic anchors—each representing a key dimension of how leadership and followership were enacted, experienced, and recognised within the children's Forest School interactions. The term thematic anchor denotes the function of these themes as stable organising devices that bring coherence to a complex and varied dataset. They are not mutually exclusive or rigidly bounded; rather, they allow for a descriptive mapping of the multiple, overlapping phenomena observed in children's leadership and followership behaviours.

4.3.1 Identity

The first thematic anchor, *Identity*, examines how children's confidence, visibility, and task-based abilities shaped their emergence and reception as leaders or followers. It highlights how self-assurance and perceived competence influenced participation

and peer perception. Sub-anchors include Confidence and Voice, Popularity and Visibility, and Task-Based Competence.

4.3.2 Relationships

The second thematic anchor, *Relationships*, focuses on the interpersonal contexts mediating leadership and followership. It captures both positive and challenging dynamics such as trust, recognition, and social tension. Sub-anchors include Trust and Dependability, Peer Recognition and Validation, Conflict and Resistance, and Inclusion and Exclusion.

4.3.3 Collaboration

The third thematic anchor, *Collaboration*, reflects the co-constructed and collective nature of children's task engagement. It shows how cooperation, negotiation, and shared decision-making supported group achievement. Sub-anchors include Shared Problem-Solving, Task Engagement, and Collective Decision-Making.

4.3.4 Social Influence

The fourth thematic anchor, *Social Influence*, addresses how children shaped peer behaviour through explicit and implicit strategies. Sub-anchors include Persuasion and Negotiation, Attention-Seeking and Dominance, and Quiet Influence, illustrating the varied ways influence operated in group interactions.

4.3.5 Role Fluidity

The fifth thematic anchor, *Role Fluidity*, illustrates the dynamic and interchangeable nature of leadership and followership roles. Sub-anchors include Situational Shifts, Negotiated Authority, and Rotational Leadership, reflecting how children moved flexibly between leading and following in response to changing group needs.

These five thematic anchors serve as the organising framework for the remainder of the chapter. In Sections 4.4 to 4.8, each theme is explored in depth through its subthemes, supported by descriptive excerpts from observations and interviews.

This approach ensures fidelity to children's experiences and provides a transparent foundation for the interpretive analysis that follows in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.4 Constituent Components of Childhood *Identity* within a Leadership and Followership Context

The first overarching theme, *Identity*, encapsulates how children's participation in leadership and followership was closely tied to their evolving sense of self and the ways in which that self was recognised, contested, or affirmed within the social context of Forest School. Identity, as it appeared across the data, was not a stable or intrinsic personal trait, but a dynamic and situated construct—something performed, observed, and acknowledged within peer interactions. Children's experiences of being listened to, noticed, or praised contributed to their willingness to lead or follow, while moments of exclusion, invisibility, or self-doubt frequently disrupted such roles. These moments suggested that identity was not merely a psychological quality residing within individual children, but a socially mediated process, continuously shaped by interaction, task context, and group dynamics.

Rather than functioning as a singular or monolithic phenomenon, identity was expressed through three distinct but interconnected dimensions: *Confidence and Voice, Popularity and Visibility*, and *Task-Based Competence*. Each dimension represents a pattern observed repeatedly across the ethnographic dataset and serves as a lens through which children positioned themselves—and were positioned by others—in relation to influence, participation, and social standing. While these subthemes are analytically distinct, they frequently overlapped in children's lived experiences. For example, task-based competence often enhanced confidence, and popularity could amplify visibility while also exposing vulnerability. The interplay of these dimensions reflects the fluidity and contingency of identity formation in childhood contexts.

The subtheme of *Confidence and Voice* captures moments when children either asserted themselves vocally and behaviourally or withheld participation due to uncertainty or fear of rejection. These moments were not only individual acts but also social performances that invited response, validation, or resistance from others. *Popularity and Visibility*, in contrast, relates to how social attention, peer approval,

and friendship networks shaped children's ability to claim or be assigned a leadership or followership role. In many cases, a child's perceived popularity influenced whether their ideas were taken up or ignored, even when their suggestions were comparable in quality to those of less popular peers. Finally, *Task-Based Competence* encompasses the influence of demonstrated skill, effort, or initiative during Forest School activities. Children who were seen to possess relevant know-how often became temporary focal points of attention, gaining influence or respect based on capability rather than social dominance.

These three subthemes collectively present identity as an emergent and relational construct. Importantly, none of these identity dimensions existed in isolation from others. Children's leadership and followership were enacted through a complex choreography of confidence, visibility, and task-relevant competence. A child might speak up assertively but still be ignored due to a lack of peer recognition, or a highly skilled child might remain in a follower role if they were socially marginalised. Inversely, those with high visibility often shaped group direction even when they lacked confidence or task expertise, pointing to the entangled nature of social and individual dimensions of identity in group life.

Consistent with the descriptive and epistemically cautious orientation of this chapter, no adult identity theories or pre-existing psychological constructs were imposed during coding. Instead, the subthemes described here emerged inductively from the data through repeated observation of children's interactions and close attention to their language, body language, and peer responses. The framing offered in this section aims to signal how identity operated as a pragmatic and social reality within the unfolding of group tasks, without imposing abstract theoretical lenses. This reflects the commitment to epistemic justice articulated earlier (Fricker, 2007; Kim and Shin, 2024), whereby children's own modes of expression, self-understanding, and relational positioning are treated as legitimate sources of meaning.

To illustrate the performative and relational character of identity, brief examples from the data are included here in anticipation of the fuller exploration that follows in Sections 4.4.1 to 4.4.3. For instance, during a Reception session, a child named Jess confidently declared, "I can tell you what to do today," signalling a moment of self-assertion that invited both recognition and response from her peers. In a Year 5

interview, a child reflected, “Sometimes I just say it loud so they listen. If I whisper, no one hears me,” pointing to the strategic negotiation of voice as a mechanism for being heard. These instances, while anecdotal, underscore the core claim of this theme: that identity is enacted in practice and is shaped by the social conditions in which children attempt to lead, follow, belong, or contribute.

The sections that follow examine each subtheme in detail. They offer a grounded account of how identity was enacted in the context of Forest School, drawing on field observations and interview excerpts to maintain a descriptive focus. Each subtheme is supported by representative data, and no one form of identity enactment is treated as inherently more authentic or effective than another. Rather, the emphasis is placed on recognising the diverse ways children came to inhabit and perform roles of leadership and followership in interaction with others.

4.4.1 Confidence and Voice

Confidence and Voice emerged as a pivotal subtheme within the broader theme of Identity, directly shaping how children enacted leadership and followership in Forest School. While some children asserted their ideas through volume, clarity, or physical gestures, others conveyed a quieter form of self-assurance. These quieter expressions were not signs of passivity but intentional and contextually responsive behaviours, often indicating strategic decision-making about when and how to contribute. Leadership and followership were both shaped by children’s ability to articulate their perspectives—verbally or non-verbally—and by their sensitivity to peer dynamics and adult presence.

Across the fieldwork, confidence was revealed not as a fixed trait, but as relational, situational, and responsive to peer validation, task familiarity, and group composition. Children who felt recognised or affirmed—whether through peers’ attention, task success, or subtle invitations to speak—often gained the confidence to lead or to follow with purposeful engagement. Equally, children who were overlooked or interrupted sometimes withdrew or adopted roles of quiet observation. In this way, confidence was not only expressed through voice but also negotiated through silence, body language, timing, and relational cues. Whether leading or following,

children demonstrated that confidence could be fluid, context-sensitive, and expressed through a range of modalities.

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: Jess put her hand up before anyone else and said, “I can tell you what to do today.”
- Year 1 Observation: Charlie declared, “I know how to do this!” before showing others how to balance the branch.
- Year 2 Interview: “I wasn’t shy today; I could tell them what I wanted.”
- Year 3 Observation: Nikki leaned forward and tapped the list, saying, “We’ll do mine first.” The others looked at her before nodding.
- Year 5 Interview: “Sometimes I just say it loud so they listen. If I whisper, no one hears me.”
- Year 6 Observation: Leah began to read the instructions slowly but firmly: “First we need to measure it.” The others paused and watched her.
- Year 6 Interview: “I don’t really lead; I just watch until someone asks me.”

Mini vignette 1: Year 3 scavenger hunt

During a Year 3 scavenger hunt, Nikki repeatedly positioned herself at the forefront of group action. Early in the activity, she confidently raised her hand and called out, “We need the red leaf!” prompting her peers to begin searching in the direction she indicated. Her consistent use of clear verbal instructions, combined with hand-raising and direct eye contact, allowed her to gain and sustain attention. When the group paused for the next decision, Nikki again initiated the discussion, guiding the group’s focus with conviction. Her leadership was not assigned but earned through visible self-assurance, strategic communication, and persistent contribution.

Mini vignette 2: Year 4 bird hide construction

Terry’s experience highlighted how confidence and voice could emerge relationally. Initially quiet and standing at the edge of the group, he suggested a suitable location for the bird hide. His voice, soft and hesitant, went unheard until a peer said, “Listen to Terry! He can be the leader.” This validation shifted the group’s attention and

encouraged Terry to speak with greater clarity and purpose. His plan was adopted without question, and the group quickly constructed the hide in the spot he had indicated. When the teacher asked, “Whose idea was it?”, Terry answered modestly, “Mine,” and smiled as his peers acknowledged his role. In his interview, he reflected, “I’ve never been a leader before … but my group started to do the things that I told them to do.” His case illustrates that confidence can be latent, nurtured by social affirmation, and emerge unexpectedly in response to group dynamics.

Descriptive Synthesis

The data revealed that confidence and voice operated not only as catalysts for leadership but also as important features of followership. Children like Nikki exemplified confident leadership through verbal clarity, assertiveness, and visible decision-making. Others, like Terry, demonstrated how peer recognition could elicit confidence, transforming tentative suggestions into group direction. Confidence was, therefore, not an innate quality possessed by a few, but a dynamic and responsive element of group participation. Its expression varied by context, task, and social configuration, and its absence was often a response to environmental cues rather than a sign of incapacity.

Moreover, voice was multifaceted—sometimes loud and directive, at other times soft but purposeful. Some children chose to wait until invited to speak, exercising restraint rather than reticence. Others alternated between assertiveness and quiet observation, depending on how their contributions were received. These behaviours suggest that confidence and voice should be understood as situationally enacted resources rather than fixed individual traits. Their presence or absence shaped children’s ability to influence peers, assume responsibility, and engage meaningfully with leadership or followership roles.

By presenting the interplay between confidence, expression, and social recognition, this subtheme illustrates that leadership and followership were not about dominating or deferring, but about relationally navigating the opportunity to act, speak, or support others. Confidence, in this sense, was both personal and co-constructed, arising from within but contingent on how others listened, responded, and recognised value in what was said or done.

4.4.2 Popularity and Visibility

The subtheme of Popularity and Visibility demonstrates how social recognition, peer attention, and relational standing shaped children's opportunities to lead or follow within Forest School contexts. In this study, visibility extended beyond mere volume or assertiveness; it encompassed a child's capacity to be seen, heard, remembered, or taken seriously by others. This aligns with sociocultural perspectives that understand visibility as a relational and performative phenomenon, produced and sustained through interaction (Thorne, 2024; Goodwin, 2006; Danby and Farrell, 2004; Evaldsson and Corsaro, 1998). It also resonates with research into peer cultures where visibility functions as a form of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), enabling influence through recognition rather than formal authority.

Children attained visibility in different ways. Some drew attention through charisma, humour, or expressive energy, while others gained recognition through steady contribution or alignment with more dominant peers. However, visibility did not exist in binary opposition to quietness. Children who were softly spoken or hesitant still shaped peer direction if their ideas were picked up and validated, even indirectly. Conversely, those who were overtly dominant sometimes failed to secure lasting influence, particularly when their actions overlooked others' contributions or generated peer resistance. In this way, visibility and popularity were not inherent traits but negotiated, contingent outcomes of relational dynamics within the group.

In Forest School sessions, visibility was often established through verbal assertion, physical positioning, or social alignment. Standing at the centre of the group, issuing confident suggestions, or prompting laughter were all ways children made themselves known. Yet the crux of influence lay not simply in being noticed, but in being acknowledged. Children's leadership and followership potential hinged on whether their contributions were taken up, repeated, endorsed, or ignored by others—peers and adults alike (Evaldsson, 2020; Swann and Mayall, 2022).

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: Several children followed Jess when she ran to the log circle, laughing as they copied her movements.

- Year 3 Observation: Nikki waved both arms and called out, “We’re going this way,” with most of the group following her direction.
- Year 3 Interview: “Everyone knows Julian, so people listen to him even when he’s not in charge.”
- Year 4 Interview: “Everyone listens to Marie because she’s the loudest and people notice her straight away.”
- Year 4 Observation: The children looked to Marie first, who stood in the middle holding a branch, before moving into position.
- Year 6 Interview: “If Cassie starts it, people go with her. She’s always at the front.”
- Year 6 Observation: During a decoration task, Philly repeatedly offered suggestions— “What if we put it here instead?”—but was ignored as dominant peers talked over her. Eventually, the group adopted her idea, but without acknowledging her contribution.

Mini vignette 1: Reception leaf collecting

Jess, aged five, exemplified how relational charm could generate leadership through popularity. During a leaf-collecting activity, she danced and twirled in front of her peers, exclaiming, “Look, mine’s the prettiest!” Her open gestures and laughter drew attention, and several children mimicked her movements, reorienting their play around her. Teachers later observed that Jess “always has followers,” not because of instructional leadership but because her expressiveness and warmth made her a magnetic presence. Her visibility, and the followership it evoked, emerged from shared enjoyment and affective connection.

Mini vignette 2: Year 4 clay nest construction

Marie began this activity by loudly issuing instructions—“No, not like that; do it this way!”—which initially prompted Kitty and others to comply. However, Kitty soon diverged quietly, constructing her own nest away from Marie’s influence. While Marie’s visibility garnered initial attention and adult affirmation, Kitty’s persistence later won peer admiration. “Kitty’s one looks best,” one child commented. The contrast reveals how visibility can generate both compliance and challenge, and how leadership can be reconfigured by quieter forms of persistence.

Descriptive Synthesis

Popularity and Visibility were central to the social architecture of leadership and followership among children. Jess and Marie's cases show how expressive energy or verbal dominance attracted attention and shaped behaviour. Yet influence was not always straightforward or sustained. Philly's ignored suggestions and Kitty's quiet resistance demonstrate that visibility alone did not guarantee legitimacy or authority. Children who lacked recognition often contributed meaningfully in subtle or deferred ways.

Across the dataset, visibility emerged as both a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion. Some children's contributions were spotlighted; others were sidelined. Crucially, being visible was less about being seen and more about being recognised—with social validation acting as the currency that enabled or constrained leadership and followership roles. This challenges adult-centric assumptions that equate confidence or popularity with leadership potential, showing instead that children's influence is fragile, relational, and co-constructed through patterns of peer recognition and response.

4.4.3 Task-Based Competence

The subtheme of Task-Based Competence explores how children's practical skills and hands-on expertise served as sources of influence within Forest School. In contrast to adult contexts, where leadership and technical proficiency are often viewed as separate domains (Gronn, 2002), this study found that competence was leadership—enacted not through command or status, but through doing. Children who demonstrated particular knowledge, such as rope-tying, construction, or measurement, often became focal points in their groups. Peers watched, copied, deferred, or offered praise, positioning competence as both instrumental and relational.

Competence provided children with a pathway to influence that was not reliant on popularity, verbal dominance, or visibility. In many instances, quieter children gained recognition through action rather than through speech. In this way, competence operated as a form of participatory legitimacy, especially within the ethos of Forest

School, which values embodied learning, collaboration, and co-construction of knowledge (Knight, 2013; Reunamo and Ødegård, 2022). It also aligns with sociocultural theories of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where learning and leadership emerge from engagement in shared practices, often in the absence of formal roles.

Crucially, competence was not solely about knowing how but about showing how—with task-based ability functioning as a visible, recognisable contribution to the group. This competence often elicited expressions of followership that were voluntary, respectful, and collaborative. Children followed because they trusted the demonstrated capability of their peers, not because they were told to do so.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 1 Observation: Jamie showed the others how to balance the log so it would not roll; the group copied his method and the log stayed steady.
- Year 2 Observation: Marc quickly tied the rope between two trees. Others waited and then followed his example before starting their own knots.
- Year 3 Interview: “We listened to Ella because she knew how to make the roof strong—she had done it before.”
- Year 5 Observation: Oscar positioned the stump carefully before hammering, and others copied his stance.
- Year 6 Observation: Leah carefully measured the bat box pieces, holding them in place while others fixed the nails.
- Year 6 Interview: “Leah was best at screwing in, so we let her do most of it.”

Mini vignette 1: Year 2 low ropes task

During a challenge involving low ropes, Marc, aged seven, demonstrated how to tie an effective knot between two trees. His method held firm, and peers began to approach him with requests—“Can you do mine next?” Several children imitated his technique, and the group’s progress accelerated. Marc’s technical skill earned him visible status as a leader—not through instruction or demand, but through trusted action. His influence exemplifies how practical competence could organically generate followership in collaborative settings.

Mini vignette 2: Year 6 bat box construction

In this group task, Harry assumed an assertive role, giving verbal instructions about panel placement. However, it was Leah who corrected errors and ensured the structural soundness of the box. Her contributions were quiet but precise. Without drawing attention to herself, she adjusted panels, guided tool use, and checked alignments. A peer later remarked, “Leah doesn’t talk much, but she’s the best at doing it properly.” Leah’s case challenges dominant understandings of leadership as directive; her authority emerged from skill, not volume.

Descriptive Synthesis

Task-Based Competence offered children a meaningful route to influence that circumvented social dominance or verbal assertiveness. Marc and Leah illustrate how embodied skill could inspire confidence and deference from others, producing leadership through respect and emulation. The impact of competence was often situational and ephemeral—recognised in the moment but not necessarily sustained beyond the task. Nevertheless, its effects were formative: enabling quieter children to be seen, enabling collaborative success, and providing an alternative model of peer-led influence.

The findings affirm that in Forest School, competence was performative and relational. It signalled capability, earned recognition, and enabled leadership through demonstration. Unlike adult contexts where expertise may be abstracted from group dynamics, here it was integral to children’s social positioning. Leadership and followership were enacted through shared doing, and competence served as both bridge and currency—connecting agency, recognition, and the collective momentum of the group.

4.4.4 Synthesis of Findings Related to Childhood Leader and Follower Identity

The theme of Identity captured how children navigated leadership and followership through expressions of selfhood that were recognisable to both peers and adults. Here, identity was not treated as a fixed psychological trait but as something enacted and interpreted through social interaction. The subthemes—Confidence and Voice,

Popularity and Visibility, and Task-Based Competence—together show how children's self-perceptions and others' responses shaped their capacity to lead or follow within Forest School.

Children's leadership and followership were fluid, co-constructed, and contingent on interactional context. Many coded episodes contained overlapping signals of both leading and following: a child's tentative suggestion became leadership only when others responded. Equally, confident self-positioning could be ignored, resulting in an experience of marginalised followership. Recognition—by peers or adults—was, therefore, as influential as any internal motivation.

The table below provides an audit trail illustrating how initial codes were clustered into subthemes and how these informed the overarching theme of Identity.

Table 4.3 Code-to-Theme Audit Trail for Identity

Illustrative Examples (Initial Codes)	*Subtheme*	*Overarching Theme*
Jess put her hand up before anyone else and said, "I can tell you what to do today."	Confidence and Voice	Identity
Nikki leaned forward and tapped the list, saying, "We'll do mine first."		
Several children followed Jess when she ran to the log circle.	Popularity and Visibility	
Everyone knows Dave, so people listen to him even when he's not in charge.		
Children looked first to Katie, who stood in the middle holding a branch.		

Marc quickly tied the rope between two trees. Others waited and then followed his example.	Task-Based Competence	
Leah carefully measured the bat box pieces and held them in place while others fixed the nails.		

The consolidation of these codes into subthemes clarifies how identity was performed through relational interaction rather than derived from personality traits. *Confidence and Voice* captured how children asserted presence—verbally or non-verbally—and how such expressions shaped participation. Confidence could be quiet or persistent as much as loud or directive, highlighting that followership, too, required active engagement and self-regulation.

Popularity and Visibility revealed that visibility was not synonymous with dominance but depended on being socially recognised and responded to. Some children attracted attention through humour or expressiveness, while others were overlooked despite offering meaningful contributions. Visibility thus functioned as both a form of social capital and a filter determining whose voices were amplified or muted.

Task-Based Competence provided an alternative route to influence, grounded in practical expertise. Children who demonstrated technical skill or reliability often inspired deference and cooperation, even without verbal assertion. Leadership here was enacted through doing, illustrating how embodied capability could generate trust and shared direction.

Taken together, these subthemes show that identity in childhood was a negotiated process—performed through relational encounters and sustained through mutual recognition. Followership emerged as an agentic stance: a strategic alignment with trusted or skilled peers to promote task success or social belonging. Similarly, leadership was not always deliberate; it could be conferred by others based on perceived competence or visibility rather than self-ascription.

This analysis responds directly to Research Question 1, by illustrating how children's experiences of leadership and followership were shaped by identity-related factors

such as confidence, competence, and recognition. It also informs Research Question 2, showing that leadership and followership only acquired meaning through social validation—through others noticing, endorsing, or reciprocating a child's actions.

In sum, identity within leadership and followership contexts was dynamic, performative, and relational, emerging through the ways children acted, were seen, and were acknowledged in group life. The following section (4.5) builds on this foundation by examining how identity was sustained, challenged, or reshaped through peer relationships, which provided the relational scaffolding for the co-production and negotiation of leadership and followership.

4.5 Features of *Relationships* that Emerge within Childhood Leader and Follower Contexts

The second overarching theme, *Relationships*, captures how children's leadership and followership were shaped through interpersonal connection, trust, and mutual recognition. Within the Forest School setting, leadership was rarely exercised in isolation but was deeply embedded in the social and emotional fabric of peer relations. These relationships determined whose voices were heard, supported, or resisted, and how influence circulated across the group. Echoing sociocultural and dialogic perspectives (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003; Danby and Farrell, 2022b), children's interactions revealed that meaning and agency were co-constructed through participation with others rather than internally possessed.

Across the ethnographic data, leadership and followership unfolded through relational acts—trusting, supporting, challenging, including, or excluding—that either enabled or constrained participation. Some children asserted influence visibly through direction and dominance, while others sustained their presence more quietly through persistence, modelling, or adaptive resistance. The contrasting dynamics of figures such as Marie, whose visible leadership structured group activity, and peers like Kitty and Philly, who negotiated power through quieter resilience, exemplify how relationships both facilitated and limited opportunities to lead and follow.

These dynamics were observed consistently across year groups. In a Year 2 session, Max waited until Colin had finished tying his knot before adding his own,

saying, “Yours is good—I’ll copy it,” demonstrating how trust and imitation reinforced mutual dependence. In another, a Year 6 pupil reflected, “You can rely on Leah—she never leaves you stuck,” foregrounding the emotional reliability that underpinned group cohesion. Yet not all exchanges were harmonious. In a Year 4 den-building task, Sean shouted, “No, not like that!” but Trev refused to move his stick, capturing how disagreement became a form of negotiated agency. Similarly, moments of exclusion—such as when Philly’s suggestions were repeatedly ignored until a peer later conceded, “That’s not bad”—showed how recognition could be withheld and later conditionally restored.

Together, these examples reveal that leadership and followership were relationally enacted rather than individually possessed, sustained through dynamic cycles of trust, validation, resistance, and repair. Four interrelated subthemes capture these processes. *Trust and Dependability* formed the relational foundations that enabled collective effort and mutual reliance within peer interactions. *Peer Recognition and Validation* represented the social mechanisms through which influence was conferred and sustained, reinforcing belonging and shared purpose. *Conflict and Resistance* illustrated how children negotiated disagreement, challenged authority, and asserted agency in ways that rebalanced influence within the group. Finally, *Inclusion and Exclusion* defined the relational boundaries that determined access to participation, revealing both the fragility and resilience of peer relationships as children navigated acceptance, marginalisation, and re-engagement in their collaborative endeavours.

Collectively, these subthemes demonstrate that children’s leadership and followership were sustained through relational negotiation rather than individual authority. Relationships acted as the medium through which influence, belonging, and legitimacy were distributed within peer cultures. This theme speaks most directly to Research Question 2, evidencing how interpersonal dynamics structured opportunities to lead or follow, and to Research Question 3, by showing how adult-oriented constructs such as legitimacy, credibility, and authority were reconfigured within children’s relational contexts.

4.5.1 Trust and Dependability

Trust and Dependability formed the relational foundations of children's leadership and followership. In the Forest School setting, influence was often secured not through assertiveness or technical expertise alone, but through reliability, persistence, and the willingness to sustain collective effort. Children were more inclined to follow or support those who could be counted on to remain engaged, to help others, and to persist through difficulty. This finding aligns with relational conceptions of leadership that locate influence within reciprocal trust and shared commitment rather than formal authority (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Fletcher, 2004).

Dependability referred less to the predictable completion of tasks than to relational consistency—being present, attentive, and committed to shared endeavour. Reliability, by contrast, was narrower, denoting task fidelity or procedural accuracy. The two qualities were intertwined but not identical: children often trusted a peer's solidarity even when they doubted their technical proficiency. Dependability thus functioned as a social rather than purely instrumental quality—an ethic of persistence and mutual support that sustained group cohesion and confidence.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 1 Observation: Jasper helped Jonny mix his materials and he did not stop until his mud face was complete.
- Year 2 Observation: Max waited until Colin had finished tying his knot before adding his own, saying, "Yours is good—I'll copy it."
- Year 3 Observation: Gail passed each stone carefully to her partner, waiting until she was ready before giving the next one.
- Year 3 Interview: "I like following Amira because she doesn't mess around—she helps me."
- Year 5 Observation: Issy held the frame so the others could complete their sections.
- Year 6 Observation: Philly gave the screwdriver to Rose and stayed beside her while she tried it.
- Year 6 Interview: "You can rely on Leah—she never leaves you stuck."

- Year 6 Interview: “You know who won’t let you down—some people always finish it with you.”

Mini vignette: Y1 stump removal

Iain remained with a tree stump long after others had given up. His persistence drew Mick back, who joined him with a stick and helped dislodge the stump. Their effort rekindled wider group engagement, eventually leading to shared success. This moment illustrates how dependability fosters trust, which in turn encourages collaboration and collective perseverance.

Descriptive Synthesis

Trust and Dependability provided the scaffolding that allowed children’s leadership and followership to develop organically. Dependable peers acted as relational anchors, sustaining momentum and offering emotional steadiness that enabled others to re-engage after setbacks. Dependability emerged as both a moral and practical resource: it stabilised interaction, encouraged mutual investment, and enabled influence to circulate through cooperation rather than dominance.

Children’s capacity to lead or follow was, therefore, not simply a matter of skill or confidence, but of trustworthiness—of being seen as reliable, fair, and present in the shared task. In this way, Trust and Dependability reveal how leadership and followership were not oppositional positions but relational exchanges, grounded in care, reciprocity, and sustained commitment to the group’s collective purpose.

4.5.2 Peer Recognition and Validation

Peer Recognition and Validation reinforced both leadership and followership roles by affirming children’s contributions and signalling collective endorsement. In the Forest School context, recognition functioned as a form of social currency—an expression of belonging and approval that motivated continued participation. Through these reciprocal exchanges, influence gained legitimacy and social meaning (Vygotsky, 1978; Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Validation also imbued followership with purpose. By aligning with ideas or behaviours that had been collectively affirmed, followers reinforced their own membership within the group (DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Recognition thus sustained a relational feedback loop in which both leaders and followers were co-constituted through mutual affirmation. Influence did not originate from a single individual but was continually renewed through cycles of validation and response.

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: Several children clapped when Amilie managed to balance on the log.
- Year 1 Observation: Iain smiled as the others copied how he held the stick.
- Year 2 Observation: Hayden shouted, “Good one, Stu!” when he suggested a shortcut.
- Year 3 Interview: “We all said, ‘Yes!’ so she would keep saying more things.”
- Year 4 Observation: Jeff repeated Ade’s idea and others followed along.
- Year 4 Interview: “We said, ‘Good idea,’ to Ade so he wouldn’t stop.”

Mini vignette: Y5 bridge building

Lee’s playful leadership, expressed through humour and enthusiasm, drew group validation in the form of laughter, imitation, and sustained engagement. His influence rested not on authority or direction but on peer recognition. The group’s collective laughter and mimicry reinforced Lee’s role, illustrating how validation can transform expressive energy into informal leadership.

Descriptive Synthesis

Peer Recognition and Validation enabled leadership and followership to emerge as co-dependent expressions of social approval rather than hierarchical command. Recognition operated as both affirmation and invitation—transforming individual acts into shared momentum. The clapping, repetition, and verbal encouragement observed across sessions exemplified how influence circulated through acknowledgement rather than instruction.

Importantly, recognition also protected participation by legitimising quieter or less confident contributions. When peers echoed, encouraged, or repeated another child's idea, they signalled that contribution was valued, thereby reinforcing relational inclusion. In this way, validation blurred the distinction between leading and following, sustaining a shared culture of influence grounded in reciprocity and belonging.

4.5.3 Conflict and Resistance

Conflict and Resistance were meaningful aspects of children's interactions, often signalling the assertion of autonomy rather than dysfunction. Disagreement and refusal were not simply disruptive; they represented acts of agency and participation in the co-production of group decisions (Uhl-Bien, 2006; DeRue and Ashford, 2010). Through contesting ideas or resisting direction, children demonstrated awareness of power, fairness, and collaboration within their peer networks.

Unlike inclusion or exclusion, which determined access to participation, resistance occurred within the group and served as a mechanism for negotiating direction and authority. Challenges, refusals, and counterproposals reflected children's capacity to evaluate and reshape emerging group norms. In this sense, conflict functioned as a constructive force—an expression of relational negotiation rather than breakdown.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 3 Observation: Sophie told Henry to stop but he kept pulling the rope.
- Year 4 Observation: Sean shouted, 'No, not like that!' but Trev refused to move his stick.
- Year 4 Observation: Sean shook his head when the others didn't accept his idea.
- Year 5 Interview: "Sometimes I don't listen to Lindy because she always wants it her way."
- Year 5 Observation: Two boys argued over who should hammer first; neither backed down.
- Year 6 Observation: Harry argued with Mandy until Rose suggested a compromise.

Mini vignette: Y4 den-building

A disagreement between Sean and Trev over branch placement led to a temporary standoff until another peer proposed testing both options. The group adopted this compromise, and the structure quickly took shape. The conflict, while momentarily tense, became a turning point that prompted creative problem-solving and rebalanced authority within the group.

Descriptive Synthesis

Conflict and Resistance revealed the active, agentic dimensions of children's leadership and followership. These behaviours signalled critical engagement rather than passive compliance, underscoring that children's participation involved negotiation, dissent, and redefinition of roles. Acts of resistance were rarely oppositional in intent; instead, they functioned as dialogue—testing ideas, expressing fairness, and ensuring shared ownership of outcomes.

Leadership among children was, therefore, never absolute but continually renegotiated through the dynamics of challenge and accommodation. Resistance served as a form of relational regulation, preventing dominance and maintaining a sense of mutual accountability within the group. In this way, disagreement became a productive feature of collaborative learning rather than a failure of social harmony, highlighting how children actively co-created the social conditions of their collective work.

4.5.4 Inclusion and Exclusion

Inclusion and Exclusion determined whether children could participate in leadership and followership at all. These dynamics were shaped by peer preferences, social hierarchies, and subtle acts of relational negotiation (Corsaro, 2018; Ødegård, 2019). Inclusion granted access to shared decision-making and influence, while exclusion curtailed visibility and opportunity. Yet exclusion did not always lead to withdrawal. Some children resisted marginalisation through persistence, parallel participation, or quiet acts of re-entry into the group's activity.

Across the dataset, invitations such as “You can play” or gestures of acceptance often carried more power than formal designations of leadership. These small acknowledgements enacted belonging, enabling children to claim space in ongoing tasks. Conversely, exclusion could be overt—through verbal refusal or silence—or implicit, manifesting as neglect, interruption, or non-recognition. Inclusion and exclusion were, therefore, not static states but dynamic relational processes through which power, belonging, and legitimacy were distributed and contested.

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: “Follow me,” said Carina—but another boy was told, “No, not you!”
- Year 1 Observation: When a child said, “You can play,” another immediately joined the digging group.
- Year 2 Observation: Hayden told Stu, “You can help,” and moved aside to make space.
- Year 3 Interview: “Sometimes they just don’t pick you. Then you have to play by yourself.”
- Year 4 Observation: Kitty began her own nest quietly after Marie dismissed her idea.
- Year 5 Interview: “They didn’t listen to me... I just helped a little bit.”
- Year 6 Observation: Philly kept suggesting decorations, but Cassie talked over her.
- Y6 Observation: Rose beckoned Philly over after noticing she was standing apart.

Mini vignette: Y6 festive decoration

During a festive decoration task, Philly’s suggestions were repeatedly ignored by her group, yet she continued to contribute quietly alongside them. Later, one of her ideas was adopted without attribution. Her persistence demonstrated how agency and influence could endure even when inclusion was initially denied. When Rose eventually beckoned her back into the group, the gesture reconstituted social belonging and reaffirmed the fluid boundaries of participation.

Descriptive Synthesis

Inclusion acted as a gateway to leadership and followership, while exclusion restricted the ability to contribute meaningfully. However, exclusion was not final; children often negotiated their way back into visibility through perseverance, quiet contribution, or alliance with more receptive peers. These acts reveal that leadership and followership were embedded in relational fields defined as much by social permission as by individual initiative.

Inclusion and Exclusion thus operated as mechanisms of social regulation within peer cultures—governing who could lead, who could follow, and under what conditions. Children like Philly and Kitty illustrate that even when excluded, participation could continue in altered or parallel forms, affirming the persistence of agency despite marginalisation. These dynamics underscore the contingent and negotiated nature of belonging, showing that leadership and followership were continuously shaped by evolving boundaries of recognition, access, and reciprocity.

4.5.5 Synthesis of Findings Related to Relational Features

The overarching theme of Relationships reveals that children's leadership and followership were not defined by fixed attributes or hierarchical structures but by relational negotiations—acts of invitation, affirmation, resistance, and exclusion—embedded in the everyday fabric of peer interaction. Across the Forest School data, these dynamics were shaped less by adult-like status markers and more by emotional reliability, mutual responsiveness, and shifting social affiliations. The subthemes—*Trust and Dependability, Peer Recognition and Validation, Conflict and Resistance, and Inclusion and Exclusion*—demonstrated how interpersonal processes enabled or constrained opportunities to lead and follow.

Before elaborating on the synthesis, Table 4.4 presents a thematic audit trail linking key illustrative examples (initial codes) with their corresponding subthemes and the overarching theme of Relationships.

Table 4.4 Code-to-Theme Audit Trail for Relationships

Illustrative Examples (Initial Codes)	*Subtheme*	*Overarching Theme*
He held the rope steady for a peer until the knot was tied.	Trust and Dependability	Relationships
"He always helps when someone's stuck."		
Clapped when Amilie balanced on the log.	Peer Recognition and Validation	
"She copied me but I didn't mind 'cause it was nice."		
Sean shouted, "No, not like that!" but Trev refused to change.	Conflict and Resistance	
"He always says it's wrong, but I like mine better."		
Rose invited Philly to help by moving aside to make space.	Inclusion and Exclusion	
"They didn't pick me, so I made my own group."		

These examples illustrate how leadership and followership were sustained through moment-by-moment acts of trust, validation, disagreement, and belonging—processes that made social connection the central medium of influence.

Trust and Dependability provided the interpersonal foundation for participation. Children turned to those they could rely on emotionally and practically—peers who would hold a structure steady, offer encouragement, or stay committed to completion. Dependable peers acted as relational anchors, providing continuity and enabling shared risk-taking, particularly during tasks requiring collective regulation and sustained effort.

Peer Recognition and Validation functioned as a subtle but powerful relational force. Through gestures such as clapping, imitation, or verbal affirmation, children bestowed legitimacy on one another's actions. This reciprocal exchange transformed tentative acts into valued contributions, fostering a shared sense of authorship and sustaining fluid, reciprocal shifts between leadership and followership. Recognition thus operated not merely as approval but as a mechanism through which influence circulated and participation was reinforced.

Conversely, Conflict and Resistance disrupted assumed hierarchies and revealed that followership was not passive. Disagreement and refusal were active expressions of agency, through which children rebalanced influence and renegotiated authority. These moments showed that children's collaboration was sustained not through consensus alone but through cycles of contestation and resolution that recalibrated group dynamics.

Finally, Inclusion and Exclusion defined the social boundaries of participation. Being invited in—or left out—determined access to leadership and followership roles. Yet exclusion did not always result in withdrawal. Some children asserted agency from the margins, continuing to contribute or forming parallel groups. These responses demonstrated both resilience and adaptability, showing how participation was continually renegotiated within shifting peer landscapes.

Taken together, these subthemes reveal that leadership and followership were inherently relational phenomena—co-constructed through reciprocity, trust, disagreement, and belonging. Influence was rarely imposed; it was invited, negotiated, or withdrawn through emotionally textured exchanges. Leadership often appeared as relational stewardship rather than directive control, while followership emerged as an active, thoughtful practice of alignment, contribution, and sometimes quiet resistance.

This analysis addresses Research Question 1 by demonstrating that leadership and followership were relationally produced through trust, affirmation, and negotiation rather than individual attributes alone. It contributes to Research Question 2 by showing that these roles were sustained or reconfigured through interpersonal responses that validated, challenged, or constrained children's initiatives. In relation

to Research Question 3, the findings challenge adult-centric models of influence by showing that children constructed their own relational hierarchies grounded in dependability, reciprocity, and inclusion rather than authority or dominance.

In sum, children's leadership and followership were deeply social, emotionally intelligent, and contextually responsive acts. The next theme—*Collaboration*—extends these insights by exploring how trust and mutual recognition underpin coordinated group activity and shared ownership of decision-making and task execution.

4.6 The Role of *Collaboration* within Childhood Leader–Follower Relations

The third overarching theme, *Collaboration*, captures how children collectively enacted leadership and followership through shared practices in Forest School. Whereas *Relationships* emphasised the interpersonal bonds and tensions—trust, validation, conflict, and inclusion—that structured participation, Collaboration focuses on the practical and interactional processes through which those relational dynamics were realised. In essence, relationships provided the scaffolding, while collaboration represented the enactment—the moment-to-moment ways in which children problem-solved together, sustained effort, and reached collective decisions to move tasks forward.

Collaboration was rarely an optional extension of activity; it was the primary mode through which most Forest School tasks were accomplished. Children combined ideas, adapted to one another's efforts, and coordinated actions toward shared goals. Leadership and followership were, therefore, expressed not only through verbal direction but also through persistence, cooperation, and mutual adjustment. Collaborative influence was typically fluid, distributed, and situational emerging through participation rather than positional authority.

This interpretation aligns with theories of distributed and relational leadership (Gronn, 2002; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Bolden *et al.,* 2019) and resonates with sociocultural accounts of shared intentionality and collective agency (Tomasello, 2019; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Reunamo, 2020). Within these frameworks, leadership and

followership are understood not as personal traits but as emergent properties of coordinated social action. In the Forest School context, collaboration thus became the medium through which influence was both generated and sustained.

Three interrelated subthemes capture how collaboration operated in practice. *Shared Problem-Solving* describes how peers pooled insights, experimented with ideas, and adapted strategies to overcome emerging challenges. *Sustained Collective Effort* highlights the ways persistence, encouragement, and mutual engagement allowed group momentum to be maintained and it fostered a sense of shared accomplishment. Finally, *Collective Decision-Making* reveals how choices were negotiated and consensus achieved through dialogue, compromise, and adaptive responses to differing perspectives, illustrating collaboration as a fluid and co-constructed process.

Together, these subthemes show that collaboration was not an alternative to leadership and followership but the process through which these roles were enacted collectively. Collaboration was both a product of existing relationships and a generator of new ones—making it central to how influence, agency, and shared accomplishment unfolded within Forest School.

4.6.1 Shared Problem-Solving

Shared Problem-Solving captured how children combined ideas, gestures, and practical skills to address challenges collectively. These moments were characterised by trial and error, adaptive coordination, and the pooling of contributions to sustain progress. Leadership and followership were not fixed positions but dynamic roles that shifted fluidly as different children proposed, tested, or refined solutions. Collaboration functioned as the medium through which leadership and followership were enacted in real time.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 1 Observation: When the stick wouldn’t balance, two children each held one end while a third placed a stone underneath.

- Year 2 Observation: Stu said, “It’s stuck,” and Hayden replied, “You push from that side and I’ll pull this way.” They freed the branch together.
- Year 2 Observation: The group experimented with adding stones and digging deeper to make the water run—each trying a different idea until it worked.
- Year 3 Observation: Ella tried tying the knot but it slipped; another child suggested looping it twice, and together they made it hold.
- Year 3 Interview: “If it doesn’t work, we all say different things and then try one until it does.”
- Year 4 Observation: Daisy couldn’t reach the top so Dani bent down and let her climb on her back.
- Year 5 Observation: The group tried several ways to move the log before agreeing on Rose’s suggestion.

Mini vignette 1: Y1 Den Decoration

Mel and Zoe co-constructed a fairy den, each adding to and adjusting the other’s suggestions. Their collaboration was characterised by moment-by-moment responsiveness, with leadership and followership enacted fluidly through co-construction.

Mini vignette 2: Y2 Natural 3-D Art

Natalie and Tash built a collaborative sculpture by switching roles, validating each other’s ideas, and allowing ownership to shift. Leadership was enacted through affirmation and delegation, not assertion.

Descriptive Synthesis

Shared Problem-Solving demonstrated that collaboration itself constituted leadership and followership, rather than these being pre-established roles. Influence was situational and often defined by whose idea worked or who enabled progress. Across the dataset, children responded to setbacks and suggestions through mutual adaptation, enacting leadership through practical contribution and followership through attentive support.

Problem-solving was not a competitive process but a dialogic one: ideas were tested, refined, and often hybridised. Success was achieved not through dominance but through the capacity to listen, modify, and integrate others' input. These findings show that children's collaborative practices blurred distinctions between leading and following, replacing them with a more collective, process-oriented mode of agency rooted in responsiveness and shared intent.

4.6.2 The Impact of Sustained Collective Effort

This subtheme captures how persistence, effort, and task commitment became influential forms of leadership. Children who kept working—often quietly—drew others back in, modelling determination that reinvigorated collective focus. Leadership was performed through doing, while followership involved recognising and aligning with that ongoing commitment.

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: Jess kept returning to the pile of leaves even when others wandered off, eventually drawing two more children back to help.
- Year 1 Observation: Iain worked steadily at digging, and his persistence meant others joined in the group project.
- Year 2 Observation: Jay continued placing stones in the trench long after others had paused, and his focus encouraged others to rejoin him.
- Year 3 Observation: When the willow resisted bending, the group stopped, but Janet kept trying until the others followed her lead.
- Year 5 Observation: Amy said, "Let's keep going till it's finished," and the group nodded and carried on working together.
- Year 6 Interview: "We didn't give up because everyone wanted it to work."

Mini vignette: Y3 Willow Weaving

Janet persisted with a difficult willow structure after others gave up. Her quiet tenacity became a catalyst for re-engagement. Gradually, others returned to help, and the project was completed—her effort led, without direction.

Descriptive Synthesis

Persistence functioned as a moral and social anchor. Children like Janet, Iain, and Jess did not lead verbally or assertively, but through sustained action. In doing so, they inspired followership, proving that agency could be exercised through determination rather than dominance. Leadership in this sense emerged not from persuasion but from visible, enduring effort that gave purpose and momentum to the group.

Sustained collective effort reflected the emotional and ethical dimensions of collaboration. The willingness to continue working, even in the absence of recognition, signalled commitment to shared outcomes and a collective ethic of care. These behaviours challenged adult-centric assumptions that leadership requires overt control, suggesting instead that influence may arise from quiet perseverance, reliability, and the moral force of example.

4.6.3 Collective Decision-Making

Whereas Shared Problem-Solving concerned resolving practical obstacles, this subtheme focuses on how children made choices together—selecting ideas, deciding direction, and negotiating preferences. These decisions were typically informal, made through signals, brief discussion, or compromise. Leadership and followership were co-constructed through group validation, not imposition.

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: The group paused and looked at each other before agreeing to follow Molly's suggestion to collect sticks instead of stones.
- Year 2 Observation: Gail asked, "Shall we make it longer or wider?" and Adele and the others responded with a show of hands.
- Year 3 Observation: They decided to do both options side by side.
- Year 4 Observation: Children argued about which branch should be the roof, then settled on the option most could lift together.
- Year 6 Observation: Philly said quietly, "We could move it here," and after a moment of silence, the group shifted the box to her suggested spot.

- Year 6 Interview: “We usually asked everyone, and if most said yes, then we did it that way.”

Mini vignette 1: Y3 Design Task

Amira and Sophie each suggested different designs. Instead of one dominating, they compromised: “Do both – side by side?” They then built them cooperatively. Leadership was exercised through facilitating inclusion, and followership through flexibility.

Table 4.5 Coding-to-Theme Micro-trail – Amira and Sophie

Initial Codes	*Subtheme*	*Theme*
Proposal A	Collective Decision-Making	Collaboration
Proposal B		
Compromise		
Parallel build		

Mini vignette 2: Y2 Construction Task

Gail’s question – “Shall we make it longer or wider?” – was affirmed by Adele through a show of hands, and the group responded. Here, authority emerged through validation, not force. Children co-constructed decisions with minimal verbal negotiation.

Table 4.6 Coding-to-Theme Micro-trail – Gail and Adele

Initial Codes	*Subtheme*	*Theme*
Prompt question	Collective Decision-Making	Collaboration
Show of hands		
Shared placement		
Confirm agreement		

Descriptive Synthesis

Across the age range, collective decision-making reflected children's capacity to negotiate direction collaboratively rather than assert dominance. Decisions were rarely imposed; instead, they emerged through subtle cues, shared glances, gestures, or brief exchanges that conveyed mutual recognition. Leadership and followership operated as reciprocal orientations within these interactions, each sustained by attentiveness and validation. Moments of compromise—such as combining ideas or voting by raised hands—revealed that influence depended less on authority than on social consent and the willingness to adapt. These small acts of coordination exemplified heterarchical organisation: leadership was distributed, and decision-making remained provisional, continually adjusted through participation. Within Forest School, this pattern illustrated how collaboration was maintained through relational attunement and inclusion, demonstrating that children's shared agency rests on negotiated belonging rather than fixed hierarchy.

4.6.4 Synthesis of Findings Related to Collaborative Features of Childhood Leader-Follower Relations

Building on the preceding analyses, collaboration emerged across the dataset as the defining mechanism through which children enacted leadership and followership in Forest School. *Shared Problem-Solving* revealed how influence circulated fluidly as peers tested alternatives together and pooled insights to generate workable solutions. *The Impact of Sustained Collective Effort* showed how persistence and quiet commitment could inspire group momentum, functioning as a socially validated form of leadership grounded not in charisma but in doing. *Collective Decision-Making* illustrated how leadership and followership were relationally negotiated through subtle forms of consensus, such as prompt questions, shows of hands, or shared placement of materials. Crucially, these collaborative processes were not merely the backdrop to leadership and followership; they were the very means by which influence was enacted, recognised, and sustained among peers. Leadership often took the form of responsive action, practical perseverance, or facilitating agreement, while followership involved attentive engagement, alignment with group direction, and support for peer-led initiatives. These findings reinforce a vision of children's peer cultures as reciprocal, adaptive, and situational—where leadership

and followership were produced through participation rather than pre-existing authority.

This analysis also demonstrates that collaboration was not a passive act of working alongside others but an active negotiation of agency that reshaped social dynamics in real time. Moments of joint construction, compromise, and perseverance were not only practical strategies but also expressions of relational trust and distributed influence. Children collectively defined and redefined their tasks, often without overt hierarchy, and in doing so challenged conventional models of leadership that rely on dominance or fixed roles.

Table 4.7 Code-to-Theme Audit Trail for Collaboration

Illustrative Examples (Initial Codes)	*Subtheme*	*Overarching Theme*
"You push from that side and I'll pull this way."	Shared Problem-Solving	Collaboration
"We tried both ways and saw which worked best."		
"She suggested we could all look under the big tree, and we agreed."		
He continued placing stones in the trench long after others had paused, and his focus encouraged others to rejoin him.	Task Engagement	
"We didn't give up because everyone wanted it to work."		
He kept hammering while the others held it still.		
Amira suggested a sun, Sophie a rainbow – they agreed to include both.	Collective Decision-Making	
"That worked better than arguing."		

These findings respond directly to Research Question 1, evidencing how children experienced leadership and followership not as imposed roles but as collaboratively enacted and situationally distributed practices. In relation to Research Question 2, the analysis underscores how contextual factors—such as the nature of the task, relational history, and group dynamics—shaped the way collaborative influence unfolded. In challenging adult-centric conceptions of leadership, this theme affirms that children's collaborative cultures prioritised responsiveness, meritocratic contribution, and shared problem-solving over directive control. Collaboration thus represents a democratised form of influence—one that privileges co-construction, mutual adjustment, and emergent authority.

The thematic section—*Social Influence*—now shifts focus from the shared execution of tasks to the ways in which children actively sought, gained, and managed attention and legitimacy in leader-follower interactions.

4.7 The Manifestation of *Social Influence* within the Childhood Leader–Follower Dynamic

This section explores how *Social Influence* functioned as a core mechanism through which children enacted, challenged, and negotiated leadership and followership within their peer communities. In contrast to the previous theme of *Collaboration*, which focussed on shared effort and joint purpose, Social Influence examines how children shaped the behaviour, attention, and decisions of others through a spectrum of expressive and strategic actions. Leadership and followership, in this context, were not static roles but dynamic performances—emerging through attempts to persuade, command, guide, or subtly influence others. Throughout the dataset, children employed a wide array of influence strategies. These ranged from explicit verbal persuasion and directive control—as seen in Chloe's vocal leadership during a bat-box construction task or Sean's assertive guidance during den building—to subtler forms of influence such as humour, peer modelling, sustained participation, or quiet competence. The enactment of influence was rarely consistent; it shifted fluidly as children transitioned between leading, following, resisting, or reasserting agency, depending on context and peer response. This thematic strand revealed how influence was shaped by a confluence of factors including personality traits,

social confidence, positional authority, emotional sensitivity, and task-related skill. Some children instinctively attracted attention and guided others, while others influenced through reliability, quiet demonstration, or interpersonal warmth. What united these approaches was their relational contingency: influence was only sustained when peers recognised, reciprocated, or responded to it.

Three interrelated subthemes are explored in this section to illustrate the ways in which influence was expressed and received. *Persuasion and Negotiation* encompass the discursive, inclusive, and often imaginative methods children used to guide peer action and shape collective direction. *Attention-Seeking and Dominance* describe the more assertive or performative strategies through which some children sought to secure visibility, resources, or control within the group. In contrast, *Quiet Influence* captures the understated yet effective relational techniques enacted through competence, gentle modelling, or emotional attunement, demonstrating how influence could be exercised subtly through responsiveness and relational awareness rather than overt assertion.

Taken together, these subthemes reveal that influence operated as a social currency, deeply embedded in peer dynamics. It was legitimised not through formal status or hierarchy, but through children's willingness to engage, adapt, or resist. As such, influence was not a fixed asset but a situationally negotiated phenomenon, shaped by ongoing interactions and relational responsiveness. This theme contributes directly to Research Questions 1 and 2, by illustrating how children both enacted and responded to peer influence within a range of Forest School activities. It also addresses Research Question 3 by demonstrating the limitations of adult-centric leadership models that assume linear or hierarchical influence. Instead, this analysis foregrounds a relational and reciprocal understanding of leadership and followership—one in which children's actions were continuously shaped and reshaped through the social ecology of their peer group.

4.7.1 Persuasion and Negotiation

This subtheme captures the interactive and dialogic strategies children used to guide others, often inviting rather than commanding participation. Children's leadership moves became effective only when validated by others, underscoring followership as

an active, co-constructive process. Persuasion involved imaginative suggestions, reciprocal offers, or emotionally attuned requests, while negotiation reflected mutual adjustment in response to competing ideas.

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: Jess said, “It might be a magic bean… it might grow into a unicorn!”
- Year 1 Observation: Andy said, “Let’s do it my way first,” and the group nodded.
- Year 3 Interview: “We tried Janet’s idea because she said it nicely, and it made sense.”
- Year 4 Observation: Jeff persuaded Ade by saying, “If we try mine, then we’ll try yours after.”
- Year 6: Observation: Leah suggested, “Shall we move it here?” After a pause, the group shifted the box.

Mini vignette: Reception Leaf and Mud Play

Jess invited peers into an imaginative world by declaring that a muddy pebble was a magic bean. Her inclusive and playful suggestion, combined with confident movement and selective eye contact, positioned her as a leader without needing to assert authority. Peers followed her lead with enthusiasm, illustrating persuasion as a relational and creative form of leadership.

Descriptive Synthesis

Persuasion and negotiation functioned as social currencies that conferred influence not through control but through resonance. Children responded positively to fairness, emotional tone, and humour, accepting proposals when they felt respected and included. Persuasive leadership thus depended on responsiveness and relational reciprocity rather than dominance. These findings present followership as a discerning, emotionally intelligent process—one that required evaluation, consent, and trust. Leadership, in turn, was sustained through sensitivity to others’ reactions and the willingness to adapt. In Forest School contexts, persuasion and negotiation

were among the most powerful mechanisms through which influence was co-created rather than imposed.

4.7.2 Attention-Seeking and Dominance

Some children attempted to lead by securing visibility or monopolising valued resources. These moments included loud assertions, repeated instructions, and performative behaviours designed to capture peer attention. While sometimes successful, dominance often triggered contestation, avoidance, or resistance from peers, revealing its inherently fragile status.

Illustrative Extracts

- Reception Observation: Jess waved her arms, shouting, “Come here!”
- Year 2 Observation: Luke repeatedly banged sticks, saying, “Listen to me!”
- Year 4 Observation: Jeff said, “I’m the hammer guy!” and refused to share.
- Year 5 Observation: Rose clapped her hands loudly to draw attention before giving instructions.
- Year 6 Interview: “Sometimes the bossy ones just kept talking until we did it.”

Mini vignette: Year 4 Den Building

Jeff secured the hammer and declared himself ‘the hammer guy,’ excluding others with the justification of safety. His refusal to share created tension, ultimately prompting Lizzy to challenge him directly. Jeff’s authority, while temporarily effective, was quickly undermined by social withdrawal and peer resistance, demonstrating the conditional nature of dominant leadership.

Descriptive Synthesis

While dominant behaviour occasionally enabled short-term control, it often resulted in partial disengagement or subtle defiance. Leadership rooted in visibility, volume, or possession of materials endured only so long as peers consented to it. Children’s followership in these contexts was strategic—sometimes compliance for expedience, other times resistance as a form of agency. These interactions revealed that dominance was performative and precarious: it required constant reinforcement and

peer recognition to remain effective. When peers withdrew attention, dominance dissolved, exposing its dependence on collective validation. Thus, even assertive leadership among children remained socially negotiated rather than absolute—its authority contingent on reciprocity, not command.

4.7.3 Quiet Influence

This subtheme spotlights subtle leadership enacted through quiet persistence, competence, and modelling. These children guided others not through direction but through action—by doing, demonstrating, or simply getting on with the task. Influence here was relational and often recognised through imitation or tacit alignment rather than explicit acknowledgment.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 1 Observation: Iain adjusted the log quietly… the group used his placement without comment.
- Year 3 Observation: Ella tied the rope securely… they copied her knot.
- Year 5 Interview: “Lee doesn’t talk much, but he’s the one who makes it work.”
- Year 6 Observation: Leah repositioned the panels. Harry said, “That’s better,” then continued.

Mini Vignette 1: Year 4 Clay Nest

Sienna, calm and focused, modelled task persistence while her peer Reggie joked and disengaged. Without issuing any instruction, Sienna’s quiet modelling prompted Reggie to shift his behaviour, imitate her actions, and rejoin the task—an instance of followership emerging through observation and respect rather than compliance.

Mini Vignette 2: Year 6 Bat Box

Harry adopted a vocal leadership style, while Leah influenced silently through technical precision. Though Leah said little, her careful adjustments were immediately incorporated by the group. This complementary pattern of action and

articulation illustrates how different forms of leadership can coexist and reinforce one another within the same interactional space.

Descriptive Synthesis

Quiet Influence demonstrated that leadership could be enacted through capability, composure, and consistency rather than verbal control. Recognition, imitation, and mutual trust enabled influence to flow from skill and reliability. Children's followership in these contexts was voluntary and grounded in respect, not obligation. Across the dataset, these quieter leaders contributed to the emotional stability and productivity of their groups, showing that leadership effectiveness was less about visibility and more about attunement to task and peers. In contrast to dominant or persuasive styles, quiet influence fostered equilibrium—anchoring the group through calm participation and understated authority.

4.7.4 Synthesis of Findings Related to the Impact of Social Influence on Childhood Leader–Follower Relations

The theme of Social Influence revealed how leadership and followership were co-constructed through dynamic, relational strategies. Influence was not imposed but performed, shifting fluidly across verbal, performative, and subtle registers. Each subtheme contributes a distinct yet complementary perspective on how agency was enacted and recognised among peers:

- *Persuasion and Negotiation* demonstrated how inclusive reasoning and imaginative framing facilitated cooperative alignment.
- *Attention-Seeking and Dominance* showed that visibility could grant temporary authority, though it often provoked resistance when perceived as unfair or exclusionary.
- *Quiet Influence* highlighted the relational power of modelling, subtle guidance, and task-based competence.

Across these modes, followership emerged as active rather than passive. Children continually evaluated, adapted to, or resisted the influence of others, exercising discernment in when and how to align. Recognition—rather than position—was the

true currency of influence. Instances such as Reggie's shift toward Sienna's model or Harry's acceptance of Leah's quiet adjustments illustrate how leadership was legitimised through selective endorsement and relational reciprocity.

The following table presents an analytic audit trail, showing how initial descriptive codes were clustered into the subthemes underpinning the overarching theme of Social Influence.

Table 4.8 Code-to-Theme Audit Trail for Social Influence

Illustrative Examples (Initial Codes)	*Subtheme*	*Overarching Theme*
Jess said, "It might be a magic bean … it might grow into a unicorn!"	Persuasion and Negotiation	Social Influence
"We argued until one way worked."		
"She kept shouting until we listened."	Attention-Seeking and Dominance	
Jeff said, "I'm the hammer guy," and he refused to share.		
He kept moving stones even when no one noticed.	Quiet Influence	
Leah repositioned the panels quietly.		

4.8 *Role Fluidity* as a Distinctive Feature of Childhood Leadership and Followership

The final core theme identified through the analysis—*Role Fluidity*—emerged as a defining feature of how leadership and followership were enacted, co-constructed, and navigated within the Forest School context. Rather than being assigned, fixed, or stable roles, children fluidly transitioned between leading and following depending

on situational context, interpersonal dynamics, material affordances, and task requirements. This relational responsiveness reflects a *heterarchical*, rather than hierarchical, pattern of interaction, characterised by adaptability, reciprocity, and shared purpose.

Adult-oriented leadership theories have traditionally conceived of leadership and followership as static, role-bound phenomena, emphasising individual attributes or linear developmental trajectories (Kellerman, 2008; Uhl-Bien *et al.,* 2014). More recent relational and processual perspectives, however, reconceptualise leadership as emergent, distributed, and interactional (Raelin, 2018; Kempster, Parry and Jackson, 2018; Collinson, 2023). The findings of this study extend these contemporary perspectives into childhood contexts, where fluidity is not merely an adaptive behaviour but an intrinsic mode of relational engagement.

Children in Forest School did not adhere to prescribed roles but instead demonstrated the ability to switch, share, or relinquish influence responsively—often multiple times within a single interaction. Across year groups and activities, they displayed a dynamic interplay between individual agency and collective attunement: leading in one moment through initiative, suggestion, or demonstration, and following in the next through support, validation, or deferral. This movement was rarely competitive or status-driven; rather, it reflected sensitivity to the needs of the task and the emotions of peers. Leadership was performed as contribution rather than command, and followership was equally agentic—an act of endorsement, collaboration, or strategic resistance.

The theme of Role Fluidity builds on the preceding analysis of *Social Influence*, in which children's attempts to guide or persuade were shown to depend on peer recognition and interactional responsiveness. Here, the focus shifts to the temporal and relational dynamics of how leadership and followership evolved over time—how roles were enacted, relinquished, and reconstituted within the rhythm of shared activity. Role Fluidity reveals leadership and followership not as opposite poles, but as mutually constitutive modes of participation that gained meaning only in relation to one another.

Three subthemes were identified to capture the varied manifestations of this dynamic interplay. *Situational Shifts* illustrate how leadership was initiated, accepted, or declined in response to emerging needs, task complexity, or material opportunities, revealing the contextual nature of influence. *Negotiated Authority* examines how children tested, accepted, or redistributed influence through subtle forms of peer dialogue, challenge, and consensus, highlighting the relational negotiation underpinning shared action. Finally, *Rotational Leadership* underscores how leadership was consciously or tacitly shared among peers over the course of a task, reflecting an underlying ethos of fairness, inclusion, and collective responsibility.

Together, these subthemes challenge adultist assumptions that equate leadership with control, permanence, or elevated status. In contrast, children's interactions demonstrated that leadership and followership were shared, transient, and fundamentally relational, anchored in collective adaptability rather than positional power. The analysis that follows illustrates how role fluidity both enabled and was enabled by the Forest School environment, offering insight into how children co-produced influence and agency through flexible, context-sensitive collaboration.

This theme contributes most directly to Research Question 3, which explores how children's enactments of leadership and followership diverge from dominant adult-centric models. However, it also extends Research Questions 1 and 2, revealing that fluidity was central both to children's lived experience of these constructs (RQ1) and to how they negotiated and responded to peer influence (RQ2). As such, this theme serves as a conceptual bridge into Chapter 5, where the implications of heterarchical, relational leader–follower dynamics are examined in developing a child-centred theoretical framework.

4.8.1 Situational Shifts

Situational Shifts describe the fluid movement of children between leadership and followership roles as circumstances evolved. Unlike adult-centric models that conceptualise leadership as a stable identity or formal position, the data revealed that children's enactments of leadership and followership were temporary, contingent, and responsive to immediate needs. Leadership often emerged when a child possessed a relevant idea, skill, or resource, yet influence typically subsided

once conditions changed and another peer's contribution became more pertinent. These shifts occurred both within single tasks and across extended activities, underscoring the transient, situational, and relational nature of authority in children's peer interactions.

These observations align closely with recent scholarship on processual and relational leadership (Raelin, 2018; Crevani, 2018; Collinson, 2023; Uhl-Bien and Ospina, 2020), which conceptualises leadership as an emergent property of social interaction rather than a fixed role. Within the Forest School environment, this fluidity was especially pronounced. Leadership was continually passed, shared, or relinquished as group needs evolved, reflecting a collaborative responsiveness that contrasts sharply with the hierarchies implicit in many adult-oriented frameworks.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 1 Observation: Iain started digging with a stick, then handed it to Mick when he found a stone in the way. Mick carried on while Iain fetched more sticks.
- Year 2 Observation: Jim led the way to the stream, but when they saw Arnold knew how to build a bank, the others copied him instead.
- Year 3 Observation: Natalie began telling the group where to put the leaves, but when her idea collapsed, Ella took over with a different suggestion.
- Year 4 Observation: Marie called out instructions, then stopped to watch when another child demonstrated a different way to balance the branch.
- Year 5 Observation: Andy hammered in the first peg, then passed the hammer to Jen who finished the rest while he held the tarp steady.
- Year 6 Observation: Leah started the sawing, but once the line was cut, Harry took over to complete it.

Mini vignette: Year 2 Water Diversion Task

During a Forest School session, two pairs of children—Jim and Arnold, and Melvin and Tony—worked separately but in parallel on diverting water using mud, bark, sticks, and leaves. Jim initially took the lead, directing the placement of bark ("We need more bark here!"), while Arnold followed. When progress stalled, Arnold

proposed an alternative approach: “Maybe dig a bit on this side?” Jim immediately handed him the tool, saying, “You try it then.” Arnold reshaped the bank while Jim fetched water, marking a seamless exchange of roles.

Meanwhile, Melvin and Tony demonstrated similar adaptability. Melvin quietly tested materials at the stream while Tony suggested, “What if we put the leaves here to stop it going that way?” Melvin incorporated the idea at once. When their structure collapsed, Tony exclaimed, “Oh no, it broke again!” to which Melvin replied calmly, “Let’s build it higher.” Leadership passed repeatedly between them as each child alternated between initiating, supporting, and adapting according to the immediate problem. Both pairs exemplified situational responsiveness, showing how influence was transferred fluidly in line with emerging expertise and contextual demand.

Descriptive Synthesis

The theme of Situational Shifts revealed that children’s leadership and followership were rarely static or hierarchical. Instead, they operated as dynamic, interdependent practices enacted in response to changing environmental and interpersonal conditions. Children alternated between initiating and supporting—often multiple times within a single episode—guided by what the moment required rather than by fixed role expectations. This flexibility contests adult models that equate leadership with continuity, control, or possession of authority. In the children’s interactions, influence was contingent, legitimised by practical relevance, recognised competence, or peer endorsement, and relinquished when those conditions changed. The result was a heterarchical network of influence in which power was continuously redistributed through collaborative action and mutual recognition rather than positional status.

As explored further in Chapter 5, these findings extend the conceptualisation of leadership and followership as relational, context-dependent, and co-constituted. Children’s situational adaptability exemplifies a fluid form of agency in which the boundaries between leading and following dissolve, revealing both as intertwined and socially negotiated modes of participation.

4.8.2 Negotiated Authority

Negotiated Authority captured moments when children explicitly contested, bargained, or justified their right to lead. Whereas Situational Shifts unfolded organically in response to evolving tasks, Negotiated Authority was marked by verbal or non-verbal exchanges in which influence was claimed, resisted, or reallocated. Authority was neither assumed as an entitlement nor imposed unilaterally; rather, it was worked out through interaction. Disagreements over who should take charge, subtle challenges to directives, and compromise-driven settlements revealed the micro-politics of legitimacy through which leadership and followership were co-constructed.

These episodes resonate with contemporary relational and dialogic perspectives on leadership (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2022; Kempster, Parry and Jackson, 2018; Collinson, 2023), which conceive authority as a negotiated and socially recognised phenomenon rather than as positional power. Within children's peer cultures, influence was actively negotiated through reciprocity, turn-taking, humour, and subtle acts of resistance—processes that reveal how power, agency, and social validation intersected in everyday collaboration.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 2 Observation: Colin said, "Let me do it now," and Max replied, "After me, then you."
- Year 3 Observation: Two children both tried to pull the rope; after arguing briefly, one let go and said, "Okay, your turn first."
- Year 4 Observation: Marie told Jeff to move the branch, but Jeff shook his head. They stood still until another child suggested swapping roles.
- Year 5 Observation: Lindy said, "I'm in charge," but another girl replied, "We'll both take turns then," and they alternated.
- Year 5 Interview: "Sometimes you have to wait for your turn, even if you don't want to."
- Year 6 Observation: When Harry took the hammer, Rose insisted, "I need to hold it too," and they ended up holding it together.

Mini vignette: Year 5 Log Slice Craft Task

During a log-slice decoration activity, Lindy asserted control from the outset, collecting the drill and announcing, “Let’s do mine first.” Mave, seated beside her, initially complied, helping to position the clamp. When she reached for her own log, Lindy interjected, “Wait, I’ll just thread mine first, then we’ll do yours.” Mave accepted the delay, smiling as she continued assisting. Lindy maintained authority through a combination of assertiveness and relational tact—praising Mave (“You’re good at helping”) and implying reciprocity by promising her turn later. Although Lindy dominated much of the task, Mave’s acceptance meant that leadership was sustained not through coercion but through negotiated legitimacy, where compliance was secured via flattery, reassurance, and the deferred promise of participation. The interaction reflected a relational bargain, in which influence was accepted because it was justified, softened, and balanced by mutual benefit.

Descriptive Synthesis

Negotiated Authority revealed that leadership among children was never automatic or uncontested but had to be continually earned, justified, and sustained through interaction. Authority was provisional—dependent on peers’ recognition and always open to challenge. Children bargained, alternated turns, or appealed to fairness to justify their influence; others used relational strategies such as humour, reciprocity, or affirmation to preserve it. Followership in these exchanges was equally active. Peers decided whether to endorse, defer, resist, or renegotiate claims, thereby shaping the evolving structure of authority. This perspective challenges the notion of followership as passive compliance and instead presents it as a vital, constitutive process in the co-production of leadership. These findings demonstrate that power in children’s peer groups was relational and negotiated, not hierarchical or static. The ability to influence was contingent upon mutual validation and situational recognition, echoing heterarchical and distributed conceptions of leadership found in contemporary scholarship (Crevani, 2018; Raelin, 2018; Collinson, 2023). In addressing Research Question 3, this subtheme demonstrates how authority was co-produced through interactional negotiation rather than through positional entitlement, and how followership functioned as an active, meaning-making practice that legitimised leadership.

The implications of these dynamics are developed further in Chapter 5**,** where Negotiated Authority is revisited in relation to relational leadership theory, peer agency, and the heterarchical organisation of influence within childhood contexts.

4.8.3 Rotational Leadership

Rotational Leadership described instances where children deliberately or implicitly shared leadership roles across time, allowing influence to circulate equitably within groups. Whereas Situational Shifts occurred spontaneously in response to changing conditions, and Negotiated Authority involved contestation and bargaining, Rotational Leadership reflected a more intentional and cooperative distribution of influence. Children demonstrated an emerging awareness that leadership could operate as a shared resource—manifested through turn-taking, modest self-withdrawal, or proactive role-swapping to ensure fairness and inclusivity.

Such enactments frequently took the form of explicit verbal invitations (“Your turn now”), unspoken pauses or gestures inviting others to contribute, or the quiet relinquishing of tools and responsibilities. Leadership and followership were thus not conceived as oppositional roles but as complementary, reciprocal practices grounded in mutual trust and relational awareness. These behaviours align with contemporary theories of collective, shared, and distributed leadership (Raelin, 2018; Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2021; Denis, Langley and Sergi, 2021; Kempster, Parry and Jackson, 2018; Collinson, 2023), all of which emphasise the socially embedded, fluid, and co-produced nature of leadership practice.

Illustrative Extracts

- Year 2 Observation: After Jim gave his idea, he said, “You try it now,” and stepped back while Arnold took the lead.
- Year 3 Observation: Ella held the willow steady, then swapped places so Sophie could weave.
- Year 4 Observation: Kitty handed the rope to Ade, saying, “Your turn to tie it now.”
- Year 5 Observation: Lindy drilled the first hole, then passed the drill to Mave without being asked.

- Year 6 Observation: Lisa asked, “Shall we swap jobs?” and Sam nodded, giving her the screwdriver.
- Year 6 Interview: “We usually all had a go — that was the fair way.”

Mini vignette: Year 6 Bat Box Construction Task

During a Year 6 Forest School activity focused on building bat boxes, Sam and Lisa modelled a dynamic form of Rotational Leadership. Sam, animated and humorous, often initiated actions, encouraging others with practical advice like “Lefty loosey, righty tighty!” His performative energy was balanced by Lisa’s quieter, facilitative style. Lisa regularly checked in with peers, offering inclusive prompts such as “Should we…?” or “What if we…?”, and often self-deprecatingly said, “I’ve no clue how to…,” which encouraged others to take initiative. Their collaboration was not governed by rigid turn-taking but by fluid alternation based on skills, preferences, and social attunement. When Lisa encountered difficulty using the screwdriver, Sam reassured her: “Put a bit of pressure on it—keep on!” Meanwhile, Lisa’s gentle prompts steered group decisions subtly but effectively. Their mutual responsiveness and willingness to alternate roles, rather than dominate, exemplified how leadership could be distributed organically and equitably within peer interactions. Peer recognition of both styles affirmed the legitimacy of their differing approaches.

Descriptive Synthesis

Rotational Leadership illuminated how children managed equity and inclusion by intentionally circulating opportunities for influence. While some acts were overt (e.g., verbal invitations to take over), others were understated, involving gestural cues, deliberate pauses, or quietly yielding tools to peers. These exchanges allowed multiple children to contribute meaningfully to shared goals, reinforcing a collective ethic of fairness and reciprocity. Rather than accumulating authority, children shared it—enacting what Raelin (2020) refers to as ‘leaderful practice,’ where leadership is enacted simultaneously and collaboratively. The Bat Box vignette, in particular, showed how humour, encouragement, and modesty functioned as tools for sustaining positive group dynamics and distributed responsibility.

This subtheme contributes directly to Research Question 3, challenging dominant adult-oriented models that associate leadership with positional authority or fixed identity. Instead, Rotational Leadership offered a model of participation grounded in mutual respect, task-based legitimacy, and relational equity. As developed further in Chapter 5, this finding reinforces the heterarchical nature of children's leadership and followership practices, while foregrounding followership not as passive compliance but as a proactive, enabling force within equitable peer structures.

4.8.4 Synthesis of Findings Related to the Impact of Role Fluidity on Childhood Leader–Follower Relations

Role Fluidity emerged as one of the most distinctive and unifying features of children's leadership and followership in this study. Across the three subthemes—*Situational Shifts*, *Negotiated Authority*, and *Rotational Leadership*—children consistently demonstrated that leadership and followership were not static roles but fluid, negotiated, and shared practices, grounded in peer responsiveness and contextual adaptation.

Situational Shifts illustrated how leadership often arose from contextual demands and was relinquished once a peer's skill, knowledge, or contribution became more relevant. These shifts were neither dramatic nor formally acknowledged; rather, they occurred smoothly, reflecting a collective commitment to group success rather than personal control. In contrast, *Negotiated Authority* revealed the micro-politics of leadership: children asserted, challenged, and justified their roles through reciprocal dialogue, fairness appeals, and subtle resistance. This form of authority was always provisional—its legitimacy shaped by peer recognition rather than pre-existing status. Meanwhile, *Rotational Leadership* demonstrated more deliberate attempts to ensure that influence was shared fairly. Children employed strategies such as turn-taking, modesty, humour, and invitation to ensure everyone had an opportunity to contribute, reinforcing inclusivity and mutual respect. Together, these subthemes provide compelling evidence that children's leadership and followership practices were heterarchical, transient, and co-produced—standing in contrast to adult-centric leadership frameworks that emphasise positional authority, stability, and control (Kellerman, 2008; Uhl-Bien *et al.,* 2014). The findings align more closely with contemporary relational and distributed theories of leadership (Raelin, 2018;

Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2022; Collinson, 2023), where leadership is conceptualised as a momentary, negotiated achievement embedded in social interaction.

This theme advances all three research questions. In response to Research Question 1, the analysis reveals that children enacted leadership and followership through moment-to-moment decisions and gestures rather than through static roles. In relation to Research Question 2, the data show how these roles were shaped by environmental changes, group dynamics, and a shared commitment to fairness and cooperation. Most directly, Research Question 3 is addressed by challenging the relevance of dominant adult frameworks: children's enactments demand a rethinking of leadership as a relational, reciprocal, and flexible construct.

This conceptual shift is further developed in Chapter 5, where Role Fluidity becomes a central pillar of the proposed child-centred framework for understanding leadership and followership. There, the implications of these findings for theory, pedagogy, and policy are considered in depth, as part of a broader move towards recognising and valuing the complexity and competence inherent in children's peer relationships.

Table 4.9 Code-to-Theme Audit Trail for Role Fluidity

Illustrative Examples (Initial Codes)	*Subtheme*	*Overarching Theme*
Jim said, "You try it then," and he let Arnold take over.	Situational Shifts	Role Fluidity
He started, then copied her idea.		
"We'll both take turns then."	Negotiated Authority	
"I need to hold it too."		
"We usually all had a go."	Rotational Leadership	
"Your turn to tie it now."		

The clustering of initial codes into the three subthemes—*Situational Shifts*, *Negotiated Authority*, and *Rotational Leadership*—demonstrates how leadership and followership were continually exchanged in response to shifting contexts, group

dynamics, and task demands. These practices reflect an adaptive, socially attuned understanding of influence that privileges responsiveness over rank and collaboration over control, challenging adultist assumptions about the nature of leadership and affirming the epistemic value of children's lived experiences.

4.9 Overarching Synthesis of Child-Centred Thematic Findings

This final synthesis draws together the five overarching themes—Identity*,* Relationships*,* Collaboration*,* Social Influence*, and* Role Fluidity—to present a coherent narrative of how leadership and followership were enacted, recognised, and negotiated by children in the Forest School setting. Rather than re-summarising previous sections, this synthesis highlights the interdependence of the themes and their collective contribution to a child-centred understanding of leadership and followership.

Across the dataset, children's influence emerged not as an individual trait or hierarchical position, but as a dynamic, co-constructed process grounded in relational recognition, task engagement, and peer validation. *Identity* was revealed as performative and contingent—children's confidence or skill mattered only insofar as it was acknowledged by others. *Relationships* functioned as a central medium of influence: trust enabled leadership, validation reinforced followership, and conflict or exclusion constrained both. *Collaboration* added a temporal dimension to leadership, showing how persistence, shared decision-making, and problem-solving gave rise to evolving role configurations. *Social Influence* demonstrated the diverse modalities children used to lead and follow—from humour and negotiation to modelling and control of resources—each dependent on situational legitimacy. *Role Fluidity*, finally, unified these insights by exposing the non-static, heterarchical nature of children's roles, as they shifted fluidly between leading and following in ways that resisted adult-centric assumptions.

To make this interpretive development transparent, Table 4.10 below provides a consolidated audit trail linking illustrative codes to subthemes and overarching themes. This serves not only as an analytical bridge to Chapter 5, but also as a

methodological statement of rigour and coherence, tracing the layered process through which thematic meaning was constructed.

Table 4.10 Consolidated Audit Trail of Codes, Subthemes and Themes

Illustrative Examples	*Subthemes*	*Overarching Themes*
"I wasn't shy today. I could tell them what I wanted." Leah carefully measured the bat box pieces.	Confidence and Voice Task-Based Competence Popularity and Visibility	Identity
"We can trust Leah to keep it straight." "We said, 'Good idea' to Ade so he wouldn't stop."	Trust and Dependability Peer Recognition and Validation Conflict and Resistance Inclusion and Exclusion	Relationships
"You push from that side and I'll pull this way." "We voted on whose idea to follow."	Shared Problem-Solving Task Engagement Collective Decision-Making	Collaboration
"If Cassie starts it, people go with her." "He wouldn't let anyone help – it's like he thought he was the boss."	Persuasion and Negotiation Attention-Seeking and Dominance Quiet Influence	Social Influence
"You try it then." "We usually take turns."	Situational Shifts Negotiated Authority Rotational Leadership	Role Fluidity

A more interpretive synthesis of these interrelationships is provided at the start of Chapter 5, where each thematic anchor is reconsidered in light of its critical contribution to the emerging conceptual framework. There, the discussion moves beyond description toward interpretation—examining how these empirical findings collectively inform a reconceptualisation of leadership and followership that centres relationality, reciprocity, and contextual responsiveness within children's peer cultures.

4.10 Alignment of Themes with Research Questions

This section clarifies how each of the five overarching themes aligns with the study's research aims, particularly Research Questions 1 and 2. These questions focus on children's lived experiences of leadership and followership (Research Question 1), and the relational, contextual, and affective dynamics shaping those experiences (Research Question 2). While Research Question 3—the critical appraisal of adult-centric constructs—and Research Questions 4/5—framework development and pedagogical application—are explored more fully in Chapter 5, the findings presented here already prefigure those theoretical and practical developments.

Table 4.11 Alignment of Themes with Research Questions

Overarching Theme *(*Subthemes*)*	*Contribution to Research Questions*
Identity (Confidence and Voice, Popularity and Visibility, Task-Based Competence)	Illuminates RQ1 by showing how children experienced leadership/followership through confidence, visibility, and competence. Contributes to RQ2 by evidencing how identity was relationally recognised and negotiated.

Relationships (Trust and Dependability, Peer Recognition and Validation, Conflict and Resistance, Inclusion and Exclusion)	Speaks directly to RQ2, highlighting relational and affective factors shaping roles. Informs RQ3 by illustrating how peer processes complicate adult-oriented constructs of leadership/followership.
Collaboration (Shared Problem-Solving, Task Engagement, Collective Decision-Making)	Addresses RQ1 by capturing collaborative enactments of leadership/followership. Extends RQ2 by showing how situational and contextual supports sustained children's influence.
Social Influence (Persuasion and Negotiation, Attention-Seeking and Dominance, Quiet Influence)	Advances RQ1 and RQ2 by revealing strategies children used to secure attention, persuade peers, and gain legitimacy. Contributes to RQ3 by contrasting these practices with hierarchical models of influence.
Role Fluidity (Situational Shifts, Negotiated Authority, Rotational Leadership)	Speaks most directly to RQ3, evidencing the dynamic, heterarchical, and situational character of children's roles, challenging adult-centric models. Provides the empirical foundation for RQ4 (developing a child-centred conceptual model).

The alignment of themes with the research questions reinforces the study's central argument: that leadership and followership in childhood are not reducible to fixed roles, linear hierarchies, or individual traits. Instead, they must be understood as fluid, relational, and co-constituted practices, grounded in context, interaction, and recognition. This reframing disrupts adult-centric assumptions and draws attention to the epistemic validity of children's lived experiences.

These findings provide the empirical and conceptual foundation for Chapter 5, which develops the discussion from interpretation to theorisation. The next chapter reconceptualises leadership and followership through a child-centred framework**,** considering the implications for theory, pedagogy, and educational practice.

4.11 Concluding Reflections on the Thematic Yield of the Fieldwork

The thematic findings presented in this chapter provide a richly layered account of how children enacted leadership and followership within the Forest School context. In direct response to the study's aims, the analysis demonstrated that these roles were experienced in diverse, context-dependent forms—shaped by task, emotion, relationship, and situational opportunity. Children led by persevering, persuading, helping, resisting, or simply being noticed. They followed when others inspired, modelled, included, or made sense of a shared goal. In all instances, it was the recognition of influence, rather than its mere performance, that determined whether leadership or followership was realised.

Crucially, the findings reveal that adult-oriented constructs of leadership—often premised on positional authority, stability, and control—do not adequately capture the subtleties of children's peer interactions. Across the data, heterarchy rather than hierarchy characterised children's relational structures; influence was negotiated, not imposed. Leadership and followership emerged as reciprocal, co-constituted processes, continually shaped by peer validation, shared activity, and adaptive role exchange. These findings not only problematise traditional models but also affirm the theoretical and pedagogical value of recognising leadership and followership as situated, shared, and agentic practices.

Throughout this chapter, a deliberately descriptive orientation was adopted to spotlight children's voices and highlight the patterns that emerged inductively from the field data. By minimising theoretical imposition, the analysis has established a strong empirical foundation upon which deeper interpretation can be built.

Chapter 5 extends this analytical trajectory in three critical ways:

1. It reconceptualises the five overarching themes as thematic anchors that support interpretive abstraction;
2. It develops a child-centred conceptual framework of leadership and followership, grounded in the relational and contextual dynamics identified in this chapter; and
3. It explores the implications for curriculum, pedagogy, and educational policy, translating the empirical insights into actionable educational significance.

Together, Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that children's leadership and followership are not derivative or preparatory versions of adult roles. Rather, they constitute distinct, complex, and relationally intelligent phenomena, deserving of their own conceptual and pedagogical recognition within educational theory and practice.

Chapter 5: Towards a Recalibration of Adult-Oriented Conceptual Frameworks

5.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4 by synthesising key empirical insights into a set of conceptual and pedagogical frameworks. These frameworks aim to honour the complexity of children's leadership and followership while challenging adult-centric assumptions that shape traditional understandings of power, influence, and authority in childhood. The task here is both analytical and translational: to bridge rich ethnographic observation with the development of theoretical and practical tools that reflect children's lived social realities.

Five thematic anchors—*Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity*—provide conceptual footholds derived from inductive analysis. These anchors are distilled into three higher-order principles—*Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy*—which underpin the proposed child-centred frameworks. Four theoretical constructs—*Relational Agency, Heterarchy, Epistemic Injustice,* and *Multimodality*—are mobilised as analytical lenses to interpret the data. This layered structure enables the thesis to move from descriptive analysis toward theoretical innovation and pedagogical reflection.

A note on *heterarchy* is warranted. It plays a dual role in this chapter—functioning both as a conceptual lens and as a higher-order principle. This recursion is not contradictory but analytically productive and empirically grounded. As a lens, heterarchy enables the recognition of influence as non-linear, negotiated, and shared. As a principle, it crystallises from the data—particularly within the theme of role fluidity—as a defining feature of children's peer leadership. This dual positioning strengthens the coherence of the framework by showing how interpretation and evidence converge.

Role fluidity similarly operates at two levels: as an inductive theme and as a thematic anchor underpinning the broader conceptual synthesis. Its recurrence across ages and contexts justifies its inclusion as both an empirical finding and a foundational construct for higher-order abstraction. Rather than duplication, this layered presence

reinforces the significance of flexibility, reversibility, and shared agency in how children inhabit leadership and followership roles.

The frameworks developed here are not fixed models but dynamic representations of the varied ways children enact influence, receive recognition, and navigate shared tasks. The goal is not to universalise these experiences but to offer conceptual grammars through which educators, researchers, and policymakers can more justly describe and respond to children's relational worlds.

To signal the shift from descriptive analysis to theoretical interpretation, Table 5.1 synthesises the five thematic anchors and their contributions to understanding children's leadership and followership. Building on the analytic framework from Chapter 4, this synthesis shows how each thematic anchor extends, challenges, or reframes adult-oriented conceptualisations. It traces the interpretive progression from what was observed to what is theorised, demonstrating how children's practices of influence, collaboration, and negotiation reconfigure assumptions about power, agency, and hierarchy. The table thus functions as a conceptual bridge between empirical findings and the theoretical recalibration that follows in this chapter.

A summary of the analytic progression from initial codes to subthemes and five overarching thematic anchors—Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity is presented in Table 5.1 below. Each contribution illustrates how children's expressions of agency and influence challenge adult-centric understandings of leadership and followership.

Table 5.1 Interpretive Synthesis of Thematic Anchors and Their Critical Contributions

Illustrative Examples *(Initial Codes)*	*Subtheme*	*Overarching Anchors*	*Critical Contribution*
"She kept shouting until we listened!" He continued placing stones in the trench long after others had paused.	Confidence and Voice	Identity	Shows identity as situational and relationally recognised, challenging adult models that treat confidence as a stable trait.
Everyone followed her because she was always the one with ideas. He was noticed straight away.	Popularity and Visibility		Demonstrates how visibility and popularity amplified recognition but also risked reinforcing hierarchies absent from quieter peers.
He knew exactly where to place the log. She corrected the angle and the group agreed.	Task-Based Competence		Reveals competence as a leadership route, highlighting meritocratic dynamics often missing in adult accounts.
"We always knew who would help." "She said, 'That looks great!' and then everyone copied."	Trust and Dependability		Demonstrates that leadership and followership were co-constructed through reliability and reassurance.

“He listened to me and then the others joined in.” “She wouldn’t listen to my idea and no one else did either.”	Peer Recognition and Validation	Relationships	Shows how validation or dismissal structured influence, echoing recognition theory while foregrounding peer dynamics.
They refused to follow. He wouldn’t give up even when others resisted.	Conflict and Resistance		Demonstrates resistance as an active peer practice, complicating adult models that assume compliance as default.
“She let me join in.” “They told me to go away.”	Inclusion and Exclusion		Highlights how inclusionary/exclusionary practices shaped who could influence, linking leadership/followership to peer belonging.
“You push from that side and I’ll pull this way.” “We tried both ways and saw which worked best.”	Shared Problem-Solving	Collaboration	Shows that leadership emerged collectively through joint testing and adjustment, resisting adult framings of directive leadership.
“Let’s keep going till it’s finished.” Janet kept trying until the others followed her lead.	The Impact of Sustained Effort		Reveals persistence as a form of influence that sustained group engagement, often invisible in adult frameworks.

Amira suggested a sun, Sophie a rainbow – they agreed to include both.	Collective Decision-Making		Demonstrates how integrative decision-making redistributed influence, challenging adult leader-centric models.
"It might be a magic bean … it might grow into a unicorn!" Leah suggested to move it'	Persuasion and Negotiation	Social Influence	Highlights persuasion as imaginative and collaborative rather than hierarchical, showing peer-specific forms of influence.
Jeff refused to share. He kept the hammer and wouldn't let go.	Attention-Seeking and Dominance		Shows how dominance provoked both compliance and resistance, complicating adult theories of assertiveness.
Leah repositioned the panels quietly and Harry said that was better.	Quiet Influence		Demonstrates understated influence through modelling, where followership validated subtle contributions.
Jim led the way … then handed over when Arnold knew how to build.	Situational Shifts	Role Fluidity	Challenges adult models of fixed roles by showing fluid exchanges of influence.
Lindy said she was in charge but Mave said to take turns.	Negotiated Authority		Reveals authority as relationally bargained, resisting assumptions of unilateral control.
Lindy drilled the first hole, then passed the drill to Mave.	Rotational Leadership		Shows deliberate circulation of leadership as fairness practice, underscoring heterarchical dynamics absent in adult theories.

The critical contributions summarised in Table 5.1 form the foundation for the interpretive structure that follows. Section 5.1.1 explains the conceptual architecture through which these descriptive findings are translated into theoretical insight, demonstrating how the five thematic anchors are elevated into higher-order principles and frameworks. This progression maintains analytic transparency while marking the transition from empirical synthesis to theoretical interpretation, setting the stage for the detailed examination of recognition, visibility, and influence in Section 5.2.

5.1.1 Conceptual Lenses and Analytic Structure

The transition from empirical findings to theoretical insight unfolds through five interconnected interpretive layers. This structure ensures that the analysis remains grounded in data while progressively advancing toward theoretical and pedagogical innovation.

As outlined in Section 3.7.5, my interpretive stance is guided by reflexive awareness of my dual positionality as headteacher-researcher and by the relational ethics underpinning this study. This stance continues to inform interpretation through four cross-cutting constructs: relational agency, heterarchy, epistemic justice, and multimodality. Together, these frame children's leadership and followership as situated, embodied, and co-constructed practices.

1. *Subthemes and themes:* Inductively derived from 39 observations and 30 interviews across Reception to Year 6, these include constructs such as visibility, reciprocity, and role fluidity. They reflect recurring patterns in children's interactions and provide the empirical foundation for later abstraction.
2. *Thematic anchors:* At this intermediate level, recurring patterns are consolidated while retaining contextual nuance. These anchors act as conceptual footholds for interpreting broader social processes. Role fluidity also functions as a scaffolding construct linking multiple expressions of child-led influence.
3. *Higher-order principles*: Through sustained dialogue between the thematic anchors and the four analytic lenses, the analysis generates three

overarching propositions—recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy—which frame children's leadership and followership as emergent, negotiated, and relational.

4. *Conceptual framework*: Synthesising these insights, the resulting theoretical model challenges adult-normative assumptions and advances a heterarchical, relational, and multimodal understanding of peer influence in childhood.
5. *Pedagogical framework*: The final layer translates conceptual insights into practical guidance for educators, offering strategies to recognise, value, and support children's dynamic participation and influence across classroom and outdoor learning contexts.

This layered structure strengthens the coherence and originality of the thesis by ensuring that theoretical development remains anchored in empirical evidence while enabling interpretive and pedagogical innovation. It responds to calls within contemporary childhood studies and educational research for models that are empirically grounded, context-sensitive, and justice-oriented (Blackham *et al.,* 2023; Brooker, 2024; Danby and Keegan, 2024; Patel, 2024).

5.2 Degrees of Visibility of Childhood Influence

Building on this interpretive scaffolding, Section 5.2 explores one of the most pervasive dynamics within the dataset: the degrees of visibility through which children's influence was enacted, perceived, and legitimised. Visibility is treated here as a relational and context-dependent construct, shaped as much by non-verbal, affective, and spatial cues as by overt assertion or speech. By reconceptualising visibility in this way, the analysis challenges adult-centric models of leadership that equate influence with charisma, volume, or positional authority (Kellerman, 2008; DeRue and Ashford, 2010).

Drawing on recent child-centred scholarship, visibility is framed as a fluid, co-constructed, and multimodal phenomenon (Kim, 2023; Danby and Farrell, 2024). Further, building on Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, the analysis considers how misrecognition, silencing, or inattention to children's contributions can act as structural barriers to influence (Nikolaidis, 2023). Visibility is examined not

only in terms of leadership but also followership, which was often rendered invisible or undervalued despite its vital contribution to group cohesion and task progress.

This section is organised into three key insights:

1. the fragility and fluctuation of peer recognition;
2. the multimodal and non-verbal expression of influence; and
3. the risks of epistemic exclusion in childhood interactions.

5.2.1 The Fragility and Fluctuation of Peer Recognition

One of the clearest findings of the study is that children's influence was rarely stable or predictable. A child who led confidently in one task could be ignored or undermined in the next. Influence depended not on static traits such as confidence or popularity, but on how peers responded to one's suggestions or actions in a given moment. In this sense, visibility was relationally bestowed, not automatically earned through initiative alone (Spyrou, 2022; Højholt and Kousholt, 2022).

This dynamic is exemplified by Leah in the Year 6 Bat Box Construction task. Despite limited verbal contribution, her subtle adjustments to the box's structure—often in silence or with brief interjections—proved pivotal to the group's progress. Yet these contributions went largely unrecognised by peers, who instead attributed success to more vocal children. Leah's influence was real but ephemerally acknowledged, revealing how peer visibility is not always tied to task competence but can pivot on the performative framing of action. This fragility of recognition aligns with Corsaro's (2015) notion that children's peer cultures involve continuous negotiation of legitimacy, in which visibility is never fully secure. Equally, cases such as Evie (Reception) and Marie (Year 4) showed how visibility might be gained through relational charm, humour, or assertiveness, but could also backfire if perceived as domineering or attention-seeking. Children continually recalibrated their positioning, suggesting that leadership was not an allocated role but a precarious status, reliant on emotional resonance and peer receptivity.

Recent literature supports this conceptualisation of fluid recognition. Roponen, Fonsén and Ukkonen Mikkola (2025) describe leadership in early childhood settings

as emergent rather than embedded, while Fisher *et al*. (2025) posit the invisibility of contributions from neurodivergent children as a form of 'neuro-normative epistemic injustice'. These works underscore that recognition is influenced by both relational dynamics and structural affordances.

5.2.2 Multimodal and Non-Verbal Expressions of Influence

A second insight is that influence among children was often expressed through non-verbal and affective means—gestures, touch, eye contact, humour, silence, and embodied presence. This multimodality complicates conventional theories of leadership that prioritise verbal persuasion or directive speech (Northouse, 2022; Uhl Bien *et al.,* 2014). Children in this study often led through modelling or initiating action rather than verbal command, while followers responded with affective alignment—smiles, imitation, or shared gaze—rather than explicit deference.

For example, Tash (Year 1) was observed leading through quiet demonstration during the Stump Removal task. She repositioned tools and encouraged others wordlessly, prompting cooperative engagement without asserting herself verbally. Her influence was both visible and subtle, depending on the attentiveness of peers. Similarly, Jim's followership in Year 2, characterised by nods, quick compliance, and affirming gestures, helped sustain leadership dynamics while receiving little overt recognition.

These forms of silent alignment are rarely captured in traditional leadership rubrics but were central to group functioning in the Forest School context. The concept of multimodality (Kress, 2010; Danby and Farrell, 2024) offers a useful lens for interpreting these expressions of influence. A recent review by Lee *et al.* (2024) highlights how children use diverse communicative modes in STEM and play contexts, emphasising the role of non-verbal repertoires in peer learning. Similarly, Nikkola, Reunamo and Ruokonen (2022) demonstrate that quiet modelling and embodied gesture are central to children's informal leadership processes.

We must, therefore, broaden our perceptual field to include micro-movements, peer proximity, and emotional cues as legitimate vehicles of influence—not just speech or

overt command. Recognising multimodality as a core pathway into influence aligns with the higher-order principle of Multimodality discussed in Section 5.4.

5.2.3 Epistemic Injustice and the Politics of Peer Recognition

A third and critical insight concerns the epistemic politics of visibility: the ways in which some children's contributions were systematically ignored, downgraded, or misrecognised, echoing Fricker's (2007) account of testimonial injustice. Even when children contributed practically or conceptually, their ideas could be sidelined or revoiced by another peer before being accepted. This was not simply omission but a structural pattern of invisibility, exacerbated by factors such as popularity, gender, or perceived competence.

Phoebe's experience in the Year 6 Advent Decoration task illustrates this clearly. Her repeated suggestions were talked over by louder peers and only taken up when rephrased by another child. The delayed recognition of her input reveals a structural vulnerability to epistemic erasure—especially for quieter children in peer-led contexts. These episodes demonstrate the ethical dimension of visibility: recognition is not merely social courtesy but a form of epistemic validation that determines whose knowledge counts (Nikolaidis, 2023; Omodan, 2023).

The concept of structural epistemic injustice (Nikolaidis, 2023) suggests that invisibility may stem from institutional and peer-cultural practices, not just individual prejudice. The interplay between recognition, silence, and peer validation also reflects dominant heterarchical dynamics (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al.,* 2020), where authority circulates horizontally yet remains vulnerable to exclusion. A child's lack of recognition thus involves not only absence of visibility but the privileging of particular communicative modes or social repertoires.

Recognising epistemic injustice within peer cultures implies that visibility must be intentionally designed for: tasks, reflections, and routines should allow children to become visible in diverse ways, not merely through vocal assertion. In doing so, we align with equity-oriented frameworks that treat all children as legitimate knowers (Walker, 2019).

5.2.4 Concluding Reflections on Visibility as a Conceptual Bridge

This section has argued that visibility in childhood influence is best understood as a multimodal, relational, and ethically charged phenomenon. It is co-produced through peers' attentiveness or disregard and cannot be reduced to loudness, assertiveness, or formal roles. Recognition was not a guarantee of influence, nor was silence a marker of disengagement. Leadership and followership instead emerged as contingent performances, continually recalibrated through relational interplay and task context.

These insights provide a conceptual bridge between the empirical data and the theoretical principles developed later in this chapter. Visibility, as examined here, links directly to the principles of Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy introduced in Section 5.4. By examining the mechanics of peer recognition and misrecognition, this section establishes the foundation for a child-centred framework that values silent leadership, quiet followership, and the subtleties of peer influence too often overlooked in adult-derived models.

5.3 Agentic Reciprocities in Childhood Leadership and Followership

This section explores reciprocity as a dynamic process central to the negotiation of leadership and followership among peers. In this study, reciprocity was neither automatic nor symmetrical; rather, it was a fragile, agentic, and contingent process, shaped by recognition, withdrawal, resistance, and affirmation in real time. In adult relational leadership theory, reciprocity is often conceptualised as a stabilising force—a mutual process through which leaders and followers construct shared meaning, trust, and direction (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012). However, such formulations typically presuppose institutional scaffolding—roles, routines, and hierarchies—that render reciprocity durable and predictable. The Forest School data challenge this assumption. Among children, reciprocity was frequently fragile and fleeting, reliant not on formal structures but on moment-to-moment negotiations of attention, emotion, and influence. In the Year 1 Stump Removal task, for example, Mick's repeated attempts to direct group effort were intermittently acknowledged, ignored, or contested. His persistence sustained group momentum, yet peer validation remained inconsistent and unpredictable. Similar

fluctuations occurred in the Year 3 Water Channel construction, where quiet leadership was at times recognised through imitation and at other times overshadowed by louder peers. These episodes reveal that reciprocity functioned as a micro-temporal, co-constructed practice rather than a durable trait of relationships. Echoing Ødegård and Hognestad (2023), children's leadership efforts often depended on the momentary attentiveness of their peers, not on fixed hierarchies. This underscores the significance of relational agency (Edwards, 2010), where influence is enabled through others' actions and reactions, and where followership itself becomes a site of active negotiation.

This framing also extends Uhl-Bien's (2021) reconceptualisation of followership as agentic rather than reactive. Followers were not passive recipients of leadership but active arbiters of legitimacy, capable of amplifying, withholding, or withdrawing recognition based on their own evaluations. Recent studies by Fantinelli *et al*. (2024) and Kim (2023) reinforce this view, showing how children selectively engage with leadership cues in collaborative tasks, particularly within informal learning contexts. The data further showed that reciprocity was signalled multimodally—through gestures, humour, imitation, silence, and touch—extending beyond verbal exchanges. As Ekström and Cekaite (2024) suggest, children's social communication in peer contexts is deeply multimodal, making non-verbal signalling central to how influence is asserted and negotiated. Reciprocity, therefore, is not merely behavioural feedback but an embodied, interpretive act within peer cultures. Instances of epistemic injustice also emerged when children's leadership attempts were ignored or dismissed—not due to their quality but because of social status, gender, or perceived competence. In Year 6, for example, Philly's ideas were repeatedly overlooked until echoed by a more popular peer. As Danby and Farrell (2023) observe, children's contributions are often subject to credibility assessments filtered through peer hierarchies, rendering recognition a political act. Such dismissals exemplify testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), with direct implications for how followership is distributed and enacted. Finally, the volatility of reciprocity within peer cultures illustrates the logic of heterarchy (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al*., 2020), where influence flows horizontally and is continuously renegotiated. No single child maintained uncontested leadership; instead, authority was provisional and always open to re-evaluation. This has clear pedagogical implications: adult attempts to

designate leaders risk freezing what, among peers, is a fundamentally fluid and negotiated process. In sum, this study reveals reciprocity as a fragile, agentic, and multimodal phenomenon, dependent on recognition, co-action, and shared legitimacy. It complicates adult-centric models by showing that:

• Followership is not passive but actively shapes leadership trajectories (Uhl-Bien, 2021; Fantinelli *et al.,* 2024).
• Reciprocity must be earned and sustained through shared attention and emotional attunement (Kim, 2023).
• Misrecognition constitutes epistemic harm, especially in child-led environments (Danby and Farrell, 2023; Spyrou, 2024).
• Fluidity and heterarchy more accurately capture peer influence than traditional hierarchies (Ødegård and Hognestad, 2023).

These insights underpin the later articulation of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy as higher-order principles within the proposed framework.

5.3.1 Cross-Cutting Dynamics: Visibility and Reciprocity

While the five thematic anchors—Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity—offer distinct entry points into children's leadership and followership, two interpretive dynamics emerged as transversal and structurally significant: visibility and reciprocity. These dynamics did not function as discrete themes; rather, they conditioned the legibility, legitimacy, and durability of leadership and followership within peer groups. Their influence was ambient yet consequential, weaving across thematic boundaries as mediating forces shaping how leadership was enacted, received, and interpreted.

5.3.2 Visibility as Conditional Legibility

Across the dataset, visibility emerged as a contingent precondition for recognition—necessary for social traction but never a guarantee of it. Children's contributions became influential only when rendered legible to others through expressive modes such as speech, gesture, humour, artefact manipulation, and spatial positioning. In some contexts, leadership gained resonance through performative charisma or

group alignment; in others, acts of influence went unnoticed, highlighting the precariousness of recognition even in collaborative environments. *Visibility* played a particularly central role in moments of role fluidity, where leadership and followership shifted rapidly. These transitions often depended on whether role changes were noticed—a form of contingent recognition shaping participation. Moreover, influence frequently hinged on being observed, echoed, or affectively acknowledged by peers. This empirical pattern supports Kress's (2010) notion of visibility as multimodal and aligns with Fricker's (2007) and Nikolaidis's (2023) accounts of epistemic injustice, where children's contributions are overlooked not due to absence but illegibility within dominant modes of recognition.

5.3.3 Reciprocity as Ethical Grammar

Reciprocity, by contrast, functioned as the moral and relational substrate underpinning many leader–follower dynamics. It was rarely symmetrical yet was sustained through invitation, acknowledgement, imitation, and emotional responsiveness. Verbal encouragement, collaborative tool-sharing, gesture-based alignment, and affective affirmation revealed a structuring ethos of mutual engagement, particularly visible in moments of peer collaboration and sustained relationship-building. Children whose contributions were affirmed tended to invite others in, establishing virtuous cycles of inclusion. Conversely, when ignored or dismissed, children often withdrew, resisted, or reasserted influence through alternative channels. Reciprocity thus operated both as a validator of identity and a regulator of influence, setting the emotional tone and ethical horizon of group interaction. It also intersected closely with role fluidity, as leadership transitions were frequently triggered by reciprocal acts—such as ceding control, echoing another's idea, or playfully stepping aside.

5.3.4 Integrative Significance

Together, visibility and reciprocity provide more than descriptive texture; they function as conceptual bridges connecting empirical insight with theoretical abstraction. Visibility ensures that agency is seen; reciprocity ensures that it is shared. These dynamics illuminate how children's actions gain social meaning—not only through what is done, but through how, by whom, and to what effect those

actions are recognised or reciprocated. Their analytical significance culminates in Section 5.4, where the higher-order principles of Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy are developed. Far from standing alone, visibility and reciprocity operate as cross-cutting interpretive structures that shape how leadership and followership are co-constructed, navigated, and ethically sustained across varied peer contexts in childhood.

5.4 Progressing from Thematic Anchors to Higher-Order Principles

This section develops a theoretical synthesis that elevates the descriptive insights from Chapter 4 into three higher-order principles: Recognition, Multimodality, and Organisational Heterarchy. These principles extend beyond thematic description to function as theoretical constructs grounded in the empirical findings and shaped by four conceptual lenses—relational agency (Edwards, 2010), epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Nikolaidis, 2023), multimodality (Kress, 2010; Karlsson and Nasi, 2023), and heterarchy (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al*., 2020). Together, these principles underpin the conceptual framework developed in Section 5.5. They illuminate how children's leadership and followership diverge from adult-centric models by foregrounding agency, situational influence, and peer responsiveness as central features of childhood social interaction.

5.4.1 Recognition

Recognition emerged as the foundation of leadership and followership within childhood peer cultures. Across the data, children's influence depended on their contributions being acknowledged, accepted, and validated by peers. Authority was not automatically granted through role or personality but negotiated dynamically through acts of recognition (Fricker, 2007; Spyrou and Christou, 2023). Recognition also operated structurally and relationally within educational and peer ecologies (Nikolaidis, 2023; Mercer, 2024; Donnelly, 2023). Children who proposed ideas or offered support relied on peers to signal that those efforts mattered. Yet recognition was precarious—it could be withdrawn, redirected, or denied, creating a fragile peer economy in which influence was continually renegotiated. This captures the shifting nature of legitimacy within child peer groups, where leadership is earned and lost through moment-to-moment interaction rather than fixed hierarchy. Misrecognition

frequently resulted in what Fricker (2007) terms epistemic injustice, when a child's contribution was discounted or ignored because of implicit bias or social positioning. Such exclusions echo Hughes and Graham (2025), who describe neuro-normative epistemic injustice as a subtle yet pervasive form of misrecognition in schooling. In the Year 4 den-building task, for example, quieter or less popular children's ideas were repeatedly sidelined, not for lack of merit but because the group failed to confer legitimacy. Recognition was also affective. Smiles, laughter, nods, and imitation all served to affirm contributions and sustain participation. Leadership and followership thus rested on relational ethics rather than directive power, reframing both as contingent, co-produced acts grounded in interpersonal acknowledgement.

5.4.2 Multimodality

Children exerted influence through a rich array of communicative modes—gesture, facial expression, spatial positioning, modelling, humour, and affective attunement (Kress, 2010; Leskinen *et al.,* 2024). This multimodal expression subverts adult models that equate leadership with verbal command or authoritative tone. Karlsson and Nasi (2023) similarly show how children's manipulation of play objects mediates social positioning, while relational-expertise research in school makerspaces (Leskinen *et al*., 2024) emphasises the pedagogical importance of recognising these repertoires. Children who were less verbally confident frequently led through quiet modelling—demonstrating a task or using humour to redirect attention. These subtle forms of influence fostered sustained peer engagement and enabled children to negotiate role transitions fluidly, without the need for overt confrontation. In Reception, Evie's smile and open gesture invited others to join her play, establishing leadership through inclusion rather than instruction. This pattern aligns with scholarship on embodied communication (Danby *et al.,* 2020b) and challenges epistemological biases that privilege speech as the dominant mode of influence. As Patel (2024) argues, frameworks grounded in epistemic justice must acknowledge distributed, multimodal agency among learners. Multimodality also intersected with recognition: peers had to perceive and respond to non-verbal cues for influence to take hold. When such cues were ignored, agency was muted, demonstrating that epistemic injustice can arise not only from what is said but from what is seen yet unacknowledged.

5.4.3 Organisational Heterarchy

Children's leadership and followership unfolded within flexible, context-sensitive arrangements resembling heterarchies—networks where power circulates horizontally and is continually renegotiated (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al.,* 2020). This contrasts with hierarchical adult models that rely on stability and status. In the Forest School context, leadership frequently shifted according to who possessed relevant knowledge, emotional awareness, or technical skill. Keith led during construction but willingly followed when a peer proposed a better strategy. Such fluid transitions echo Zhou, Chen and Li (2023), whose review of peer collaborative problem-solving found that effective interaction depended on rotational leadership and shared regulation. Unlike adult organisations, where authority can be institutionalised, childhood influence was situational. Heterarchical organisation enabled multiple children to occupy temporary positions of authority or responsiveness, consistent with the Forest School ethos of adult restraint and peer agency (Knight, 2022; Ødegård, 2024). Recognising children's capacity to navigate heterarchical structures not only extends leadership theory but also guides educators in scaffolding dynamic participation rather than enforcing static roles. Donnelly (2023) similarly argues that acknowledging diverse, emergent forms of agency is central to the epistemic mission of schooling.

Synthesis: The three principles—Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy—provide a conceptual apparatus that captures the distinctive dynamics of childhood leadership and followership. Each draws strength from the empirical evidence and the four interwoven lenses of relational agency, epistemic injustice, multimodality, and heterarchy. Together they underpin the integrated conceptual and pedagogical framework presented in Section 5.5, linking theoretical insight with actionable practice.

5.5 Visual Renderings of the Proposed Conceptual and Pedagogical Frameworks

This section presents two interrelated visual frameworks that synthesise the empirical findings and conceptual principles developed in this chapter. The first— a conceptual framework— consolidates the five thematic anchors (Identity,

Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity) into three higher-order principles: Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy. The second—a pedagogical framework— translates these principles into observable indicators and strategies for educators seeking to recognise and support children's leadership and followership across learning environments. Together, these frameworks respond to the study's third, fourth, and fifth research questions by offering theoretically grounded yet practically applicable models. They mark a deliberate shift away from hierarchical, trait-based conceptions of leadership and followership, positioning both as dynamic, relational, and embedded in children's peer cultures. The visual renderings serve as heuristic tools—both conceptual distillations and practical prompts for noticing, supporting, and designing for inclusive, fluid leadership and followership in primary education settings.

5.5.1 Conceptual Framework: Interlinked Dynamics of Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy

The conceptual framework (Figure 5.1) theorises how leadership and followership in childhood are co-constructed through the interplay of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy. Each principle arises inductively from the empirical findings while drawing strength from the thematic anchors developed in Chapter 4.

• *Recognition* captures how visibility, legitimacy, and validation fluctuate within peer interactions, shaping the social conditions under which leadership and followership occur.
• *Multimodality* reflects the diverse expressive repertoires—verbal, embodied, affective, and material—through which influence is enacted and perceived.
• *Heterarchy* denotes the fluid circulation of influence and authority, with roles negotiated adaptively in response to context, task, and fairness norms.

These principles are distinct but interdependent: peer recognition often depends on multimodal cues; multimodality gains meaning through heterarchical flexibility; and heterarchy is legitimised through mutual recognition. The framework resists linear sequencing, instead portraying children's leadership and followership as recursive, relational processes sustained through interaction. To clarify how these principles

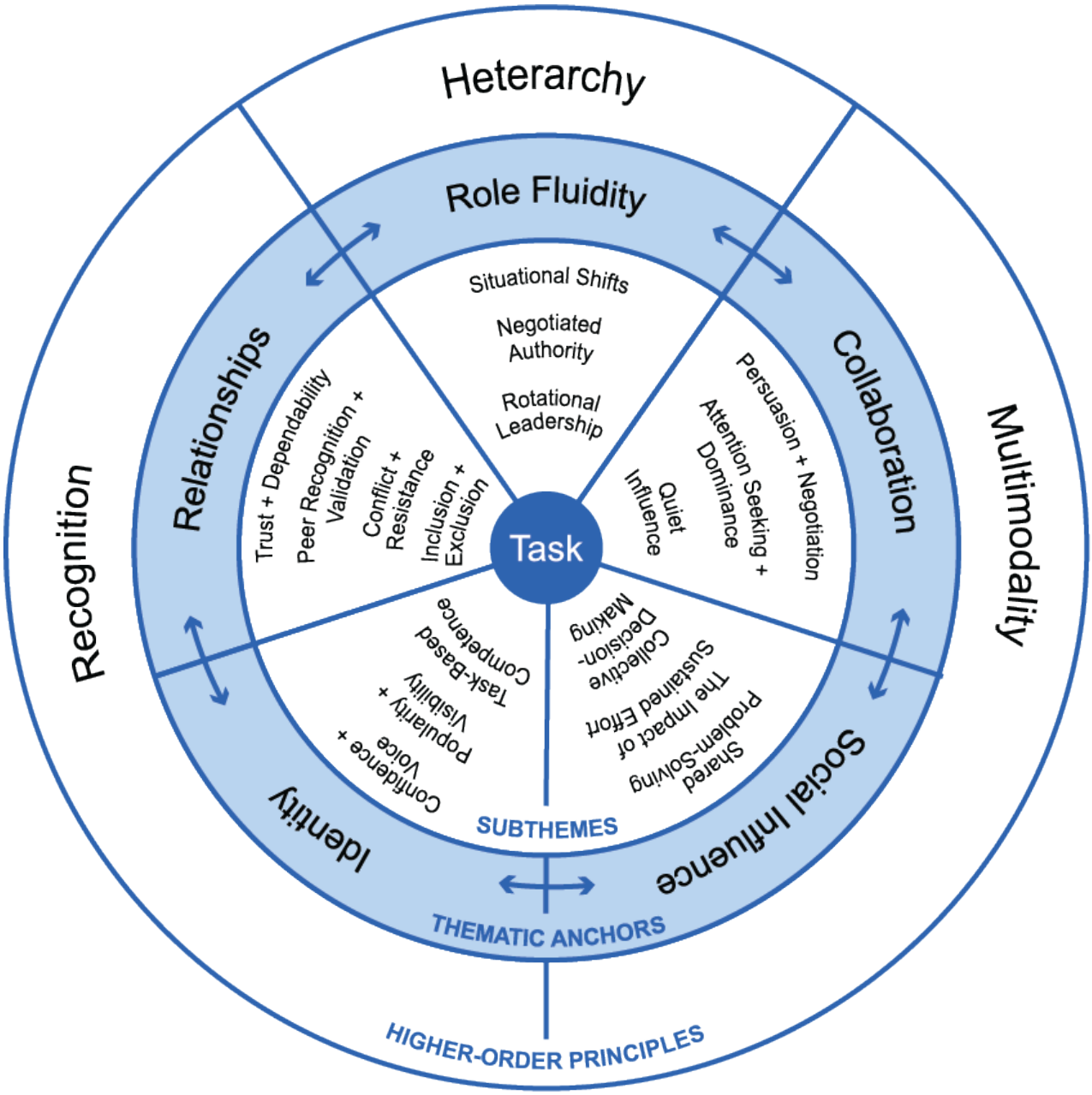
evolve from the empirical base, Table 5.2 maps the five thematic anchors from Chapter 4 to their conceptual domains.

Table 5.2 Mapping the Thematic Anchors to the Higher-Order Principles of the Child-Centred Framework

Thematic Anchor	*Illustrative Focus*	*Higher-Order Principle (Framework)*
Identity	Confidence, competence, popularity	Recognition Authority legitimised through peer validation.
Relationships	Trust, validation, exclusion, silence	Recognition Fragile, situational acceptance or denial of influence.
Collaboration	Shared problem-solving, persistence, co-created tasks	Multimodality Influence enacted through verbal, embodied, and material contributions.
Social Influence	Storytelling, humour, resource control, quiet modelling	Multimodality Authority exercised through diverse repertoires beyond voice.
Role Fluidity	Negotiated authority, reversals, fairness-driven rotation	Heterarchy Dynamic, equitable circulation of authority.

Table 5.2 acts as a conceptual bridge rather than a restatement of data, illustrating how the thematic anchors consolidate into a tripartite model of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy. Together, these principles provide an analytic lens for understanding leadership and followership as co-produced, contextually responsive, and sustained through reciprocity.

Figure 5.1 Conceptual Framework: Interlinked Principles of Childhood Leadership and Followership



As illustrated in Figure 5.1, the framework positions the task at the centre as the site where influence is enacted, roles are negotiated, and peer recognition is earned, maps a progression from empirical detail (subthemes) through thematic anchors to the three higher-order principles of Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy. Rather than implying a linear sequence, the model captures the entangled and recursive character of children's leadership and followership. It moves beyond fixed roles or traits to depict these dynamics as situated, relational, and communicatively co-constructed. The framework extends key theoretical perspectives—relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Spyrou, 2022), multimodal communication (Kress, 2010; Danby and Farrell, 2024), and heterarchical organisation (Stark, 2009; Fairhurst *et al.,* 2020; Ødegård *et al.,* 2021)—to support a reconceptualisation of influence as dynamic, shared, and contextually responsive.

5.5.2 Pedagogical Framework: Noticing and Supporting Leadership and Followership in Practice

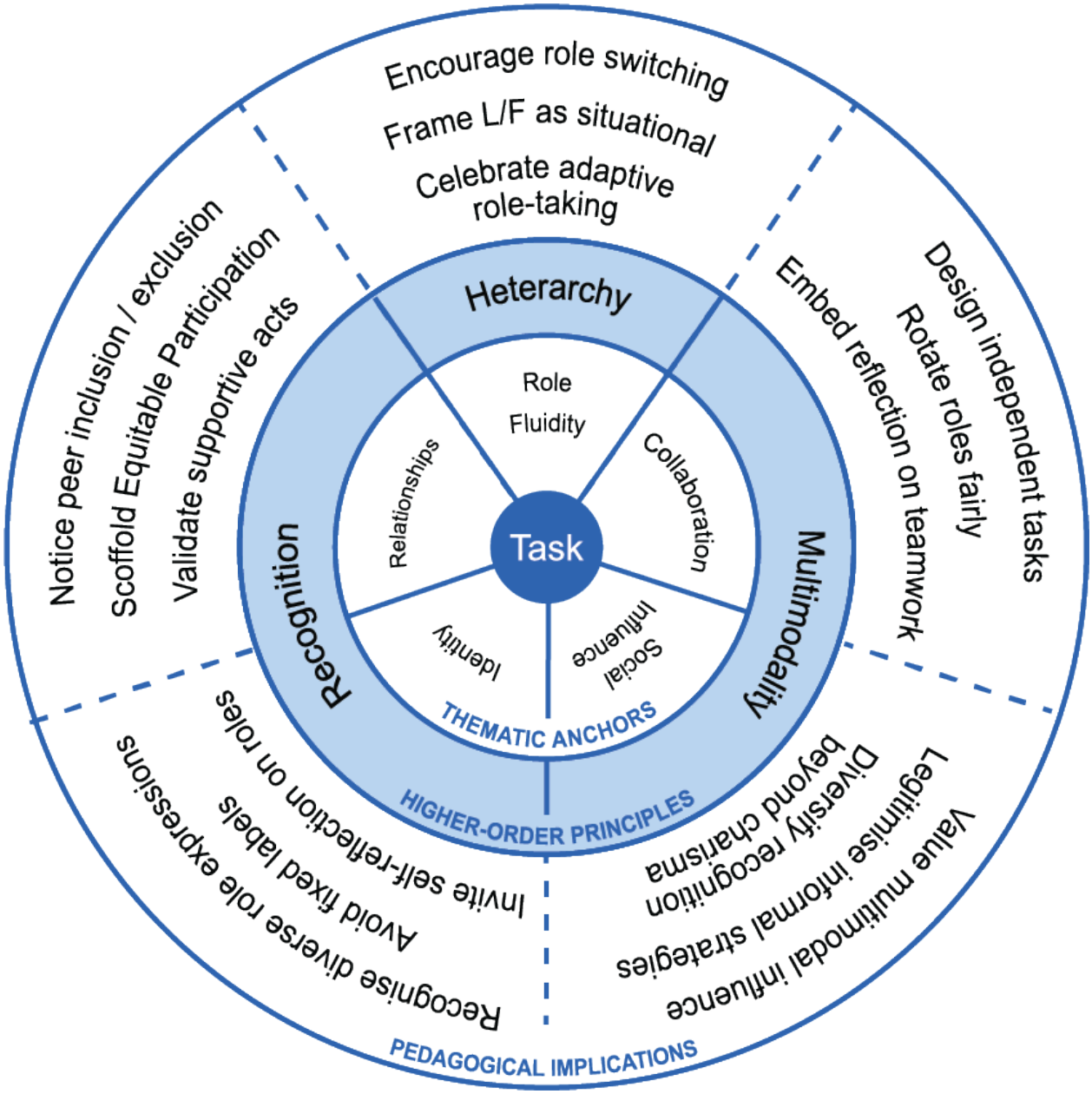
The second framework (Figure 5.2) recontextualises the conceptual principles for pedagogical application. It identifies observable indicators linked to each principle and suggests corresponding practitioner responses. This framework functions as a guide for inclusive, relationally attuned practice rather than a checklist of behaviours.

Table 5.3 Recognising and Responding to Children's Leadership and Followership Practices

Higher-Order Principle	*Observable Indicators in Practice*	*Pedagogical Responses*
Recognition	Peer affirmation or dismissal, visibility or marginalisation	Practitioners name and validate subtle leadership/followership moves, foster space for quieter forms of influence.
Multimodality	Influence through humour, tone, gesture, or spatial coordination	Educators adopt a broadened definition of voice, encourage multiple communicative modes.
Heterarchy	Fluid shifts in role, shared problem-solving, negotiated task authority	Teachers support flexible groupings, resist over-structuring, enable emergent leadership and followership.

Table 5.3 distils conceptual insight into observable classroom phenomena. It highlights how adult attentiveness can either amplify or inhibit children's emergent dynamics of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy. The emphasis is on noticing and nurturing rather than assigning leadership, aligning with the interpretivist stance of the study.

Figure 5.2 Pedagogical Framework: Recognising and Supporting Leadership and Followership (L/F) in Children's Peer Cultures



This second visualisation (Figure 5.2) extends the conceptual model into a pedagogical frame, placing the task once again at the centre as the focal site where leadership and followership are enacted, recognised, and supported. It depicts how the five thematic anchors—Identity, Relationships, Collaboration, Social Influence, and Role Fluidity—interact dynamically around the task, translating the higher-order principles of Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy into pedagogical practice. Rather than prescribing fixed behaviours, the model illustrates how educators can notice, interpret, and scaffold children's diverse enactments of influence. It aligns with the study's interpretivist stance by emphasising responsiveness, relational ethics, and situational judgement. The framework thus operates dually: as an analytic representation of peer dynamics and as a heuristic for designing inclusive, flexible, and dialogic learning environments in which leadership and followership remain fluid, co-constructed, and ethically grounded (See Appendix 5 for a practical design guide for teachers).

Subsequently, Table 5.4 extends the visual framework (Figure 5.2) by connecting empirical anchors to concrete design principles. Each principle repositions practices often marginalised in adult-led frameworks, such as quiet modelling, reciprocity, or non-verbal coordination.

Table 5.4 Translating Thematic Anchors into Pedagogical Design Principles

Thematic Anchor	*Observed Practices*	*Design Principle*
Identity	Confidence, competence, quiet modelling, peer validation.	Broaden recognition Legitimise persistence, subtle modelling, and technical competence alongside vocal assertion.
Relationships	Trust, reciprocity, silence, exclusion, peer validation.	Reframe followership

		Recognise listening, alignment, and supportive reciprocity as skilled and agentic practices.
Collaboration	Shared problem-solving, persistence, negotiation, disengagement / re-engagement.	Embed role fluidity Structure opportunities for rotational authority, shared ownership, and reflective dialogue.
Social Influence	Storytelling, humour, resource control, embodied gestures, quiet modelling.	Legitimise multimodality Value diverse repertoires of persuasion (humour, gesture, imagination, persistence).
Role Fluidity	Situational shifts, negotiated authority, rotational fairness.	Design with heterarchy Distribute resources equitably and scaffold task environments to sustain equitable participation.

While Table 5.4 identifies positive design principles, it is equally important to remain alert to the risks inherent in formalising children's peer dynamics. Finally, Table 5.5 introduces a reflexive layer, highlighting the potential risks of over-formalisation and suggesting mitigations to maintain relational sensitivity.

Table 5.5 Pedagogical Implications and Reflexive Considerations

Thematic Anchor	*Pedagogical Principle*	*Illustrative Strategies*	*Risk / Mitigation*
Identity	Broaden recognition beyond assertiveness	Rotating 'expert of the day', influence diaries.	Risk: new hierarchies. Mitigation: keep categories flexible, celebrate situational contributions.

Relationships	Legitimate reciprocity and validation	Peer-nomination, reflection on listening.	Risk: popularity bias. Mitigation: anonymise prompts, use guided discussion.
Collaboration	Design for role fluidity	Multi-entry tasks, co-set success criteria.	Risk: dominance of confident voices. Mitigation: monitor for equity.
Social Influence	Diversify pathways into influence	Storytelling circles, humour/gesture prompts.	Risk: over-codifying spontaneity. Mitigation: maintain playfulness.
Role Fluidity	Embed fairness-driven rotation	Rotating roles, fairness debriefs.	Risk: over-designing participation. Mitigation: balance structure with self-organisation.

This reflexive mapping underscores that scaffolding recognition, multimodality, or heterarchy can both open and constrain children's agency. The goal is not prescriptive intervention but thoughtful design that sustains equity and responsiveness within peer cultures.

5.5.3 Justification for the Use of Visual Frameworks

The inclusion of visual frameworks is both representational and pedagogical. They distil complex findings into accessible, adaptable formats while retaining analytic rigour.

• *Cognitive accessibility*: visuals translate complex interrelations into formats that are easily apprehended and communicable, particularly for practitioners and policymakers unfamiliar with academic terminology.
• *Pedagogical transferability*: the frameworks prompt reflection, planning, and dialogue in professional contexts, supporting interpretive rather than prescriptive engagement.
• *Theoretical integration*: they bridge empirical insight and conceptual abstraction,

linking the five thematic anchors with the principles of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy.

This multimodal approach mirrors the ethos of the study itself, where meaning-making among children was often gestural, spatial, and affective rather than verbal. The frameworks, therefore, embody the interpretivist commitment to co-constructed, situated understanding.

5.5.4 Beyond Trait-Based Models: Rethinking Competence and Influence

A key implication of this study is the need to move beyond trait-based models that privilege static characteristics such as confidence or charisma. Adult-centric frameworks, especially transformational and behavioural models (Northouse, 2022; Kellerman, 2008), reward visibility and certainty, yet these criteria often misrepresent the distributed and context-sensitive nature of children's influence.

The Forest School data reveal that leadership and followership were shaped by relational sensitivity, peer validation, and task competence rather than fixed traits. Two recurring interpretive distortions were identified:

• *False positives*—overt but low-substance contributions mistaken for leadership due to their performative visibility.
• *False negatives*—subtle, competent leadership by quieter or more reflective children overlooked due to adult expectations of assertiveness.

These distortions underscore the ethical dimension of recognition: understanding influence as relational and negotiated rather than innate. The principles of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy collectively address these misalignments, proposing a more inclusive model of competence grounded in reciprocity and attentiveness.

5.5.5 Heterarchy: Fluidity, Reciprocity, and Peer-Negotiated Influence

Of the three higher-order principles, heterarchy most directly challenges adult assumptions about order and power. It describes influence as relationally fluid and

situational, operating through reciprocal responsiveness rather than positional authority.

In Forest School contexts, leadership and followership were not fixed but continually reconfigured as children yielded, redirected, or affirmed influence through task-based collaboration. These exchanges align with Ødegård *et al*.'s (2021) notion of participatory reordering—the redistribution of influence according to emergent group needs.

Heterarchy thus reframes leadership as a shared, adaptive process rather than a static role. It has particular pedagogical significance: educators who allow leadership and followership to emerge organically enable children to experience mutuality, fairness, and ethical co-agency. Within the conceptual framework (Figure 5.1), heterarchy is represented as a permeable field intersecting with recognition and multimodality, illustrating how authority is continuously redistributed through interaction.

By decentring hierarchy, heterarchy offers a foundation for rethinking childhood influence as a relational, negotiated, and ethically situated practice—one that demands adult reflexivity and trust in children's capacity for self-organisation.

5.6 Implications for Theory and Practice

This section outlines the theoretical, pedagogical, and policy implications of the reconceptualisation of childhood leadership and followership advanced in this study. Grounded in the principles of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy—and informed by the lenses of relational agency (Edwards, 2010), multimodality (Kress, 2010), heterarchy (Stark, 2009), and epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007)—the findings reconfigure childhood influence as situational, fluid, and co-constructed. The subsections below consider how this reconceptualisation unsettles dominant paradigms and opens new directions for theory, pedagogy, and policy.

5.6.1 Conceptual Advances

The study challenges adult-derived leadership and followership theories by foregrounding the fluid, relational, and affective nature of children's influence.

Whereas conventional models hinge on positional authority or personality traits (Kellerman, 2008; Northouse, 2022), the data show that authority among children is relationally earned and expressed through silence, humour, persistence, or shared gestures. Such dynamics render hierarchical or trait-based taxonomies inadequate for understanding children's lived experiences (Fairhurst *et al.,* 2020; Kim, 2023). The principle of recognition reframes leadership as a negotiated process of mutual validation rather than a fixed status. Authority was continually granted or withdrawn through fleeting acts of acknowledgment, echoing Fantinelli *et al.* (2024) in stressing leadership as intersubjective and contingent.

Multimodality extends this conceptual shift by legitimising non-verbal and material expressions of influence—gesture, spatial arrangement, imitation, or tool use—often overlooked in adult frameworks. As Danby and Farrell (2023) argue, attention to embodied interaction reveals distributed forms of agency no less authoritative for being quiet or non-linear.

Heterarchy, finally, challenges structural assumptions of stability and rank. Children's roles were interchangeable and context-responsive (Mason and Danby, 2023), with influence circulating according to relevance or competence rather than fixed hierarchy.

Together, these principles resist what Ødegård *et al*. (2021) call the 'disciplinary imperialism' of adult constructs, offering instead an empirically grounded, child-generated framework that captures the complexity and reciprocity of peer relations.

5.6.2 Pedagogical Implications

The findings invite a shift from training leadership as a discrete skill toward a responsive pedagogy that recognises emergent influence as it occurs. A first implication concerns educators' attunement to multimodal expression. Teachers should notice not only who speaks but also who models, observes, or coordinates through gesture and material engagement. As Reunamo and Suomela (2020) observe, environments embracing action-based leadership better support children whose agency is embodied rather than verbal.

A second implication involves redistributing visibility and recognition. Praise-oriented routines and leadership awards often privilege confident speakers (Spyrou, 2022). Equitable recognition would value varied participation through co-reflective debriefs, child-led observation, and rotational facilitation that recognises quieter contributions. A further implication lies in responsive facilitation. Educators' roles shift from assigning leadership to supporting micro-negotiations of power—helping children to decide when to step forward, when to step back, and how to recognise others (Danby and Keegan, 2024). Finally, followership requires re-evaluation. Far from passive, it was shown to be active, discerning, and relationally skilled. Pedagogies that over-valorise leadership risk reinforcing dominance. Teachers might instead frame influence as reciprocal and fluid, encouraging children to notice who supports, attends, and enables group success.

5.6.3 Curriculum and Policy Implications

Beyond the classroom, the study informs debates on pupil voice and participation. Many initiatives retain tokenistic or adult-controlled forms (Punch, 2023b; Kellett and Fitzalan Howard, 2024). This research, therefore, challenges the assumption that leadership can be taught through fixed roles, proposing instead a model that values situational and relational influence. Curriculum design could embed this understanding within PSHE, citizenship, and expressive arts by assessing both outcomes and processes of mutual recognition. The findings also support calls for an epistemic shift in how childhood competence is framed. Although the UNCRC (1989, 2016) enshrines children's right to be heard, without sensitivity to the diversity of their communicative repertoires such rights remain superficial. The framework developed here—grounded in recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy—offers a means to embed these principles within everyday pedagogy and assessment. Finally, school leaders and policymakers might reconsider how leadership programmes replicate adult hierarchies. Rather than cultivating leadership in children in adult form, the evidence advocates for environments that host and value the influence children already practise—forms that often demand adult unlearning more than child retraining.

Summary: Section 5.6 consolidates the theoretical and practical significance of the study's reconceptualisation of leadership and followership. It extends the argument from Chapter 4's empirical findings and Chapter 5's conceptual synthesis, positioning childhood influence as negotiated, multimodal, and heterarchical. Collectively, these implications advance an agenda for theory, pedagogy, and policy that is responsive to children's lived experiences and attuned to the ethical dimensions of recognition, reciprocity, and shared agency.

5.7 Addressing the "So What?" Question

The question of "So what?"—often the final hurdle for any research project—is especially significant in a study that seeks not only to disrupt adult-centric paradigms but also to replace them with an empirically grounded, child-led framework. As Brooker (2024) observes, followership in early childhood is frequently marginalised in both policy and pedagogy, obscured by assumptions of immaturity or passivity. This study's findings and framework challenge those assumptions, positioning followership as a dynamic and agentic role—visible, impactful, and structurally integral to children's social and educational lives.

From a theoretical perspective, the thesis contributes to debates on epistemic injustice in education. Mercer (2024) and Patel (2024) show how children's reasoning is often undervalued, constituting testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Likewise, Nikolaidis (2023) identifies schooling's structural suppression of children's voices, reinforcing what Hughes and Graham (2025) call neuro-normative epistemic injustice. This study reframes leadership and followership as relational and epistemic constructs reflecting deeper dynamics of inclusion, recognition, and voice. Its theoretical innovation lies in articulating role fluidity, multimodality, recognition, and heterarchical organisation to move beyond hierarchical or trait-based models of leadership. The reconceptualisation presented here offers a viable alternative to the 'hero-leader' trope that dominates educational discourse. Bastardoz and Adriaensen (2023) note the persistence of vertical, adult-centric assumptions in followership theory; the child-led framework developed in this thesis responds to that stagnation, advancing an evidence-based model grounded in reciprocity and distributed agency.

Practically, the study aligns with current educational imperatives. Brooker (2024) and Blackham *et al*. (2023) show how settings such as Forest School foster emotional, social, and cognitive growth through child-led exploration, while Sella *et al*. (2023) and Puhakka *et al.* (2025) confirm the wellbeing and learning benefits of outdoor contexts. Despite this, many systems remain biased toward individual achievement, teacher authority, and performance metrics. This thesis, therefore, answers the "So what?" by providing educators, policymakers, and researchers with a conceptual toolkit for recognising and supporting distributed leadership and followership across learning environments. The model of childhood heterarchy may also hold wider relevance beyond Forest School. Hank and Huber (2024) emphasise that peer dynamics are central to social learning, with cooperative contexts serving as incubators for leadership emergence. By theorising this emergence as fluid, responsive, non-hierarchical, the thesis builds a bridge between early childhood studies, educational leadership, and social epistemology. It also echoes Donnelly's (2023) call to recast education as a justice-oriented practice—not merely concerning access or outcomes, but whose knowledge is valued and how it is enacted in everyday interaction.

Finally, the research contributes to a small but expanding body of work that explicitly theorises followership in childhood (Blom and Mifsud, 2025; Ribbat *et al.,* 2024). It illustrates the bidirectional and negotiated nature of influence among children, portraying followership not as secondary but as an active site of agency, decision-making, and co-construction. Through this reconceptualisation, leadership and followership are democratised—decoupled from adult-centric frames and reimagined as relational processes that are developmentally and ethically attuned to childhood.

Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesises the findings of the thesis by revisiting the five research questions that guided the inquiry, integrating theoretical and practical insights derived from the ethnographic data, and articulating the study's conceptual yield. Rather than merely summarising previous chapters, the discussion brings analytic coherence to the multifaceted findings and demonstrates their contribution to knowledge across leadership studies, childhood studies, and educational practice.

The thesis has argued that children's leadership and followership are neither immature versions of adult behaviours nor rehearsals for future roles. They are distinct, relationally constituted, and socially meaningful practices that emerge within the cultural, affective, and material contexts of peer interaction. The Forest School setting provided a fertile environment to examine these dynamics, enabling children to exercise agency and co-construct influence beyond conventional classroom hierarchies.

The chapter proceeds in three stages. Section 6.2 revisits the five research questions, drawing together key empirical findings and their theoretical significance. Section 6.3 synthesises these responses into a wider account of the study's theoretical and pedagogical contribution. Section 6.4 then considers the conceptual and practical value of the visual frameworks introduced in Chapter 5, affirming their use as heuristic tools for educators, researchers, and policymakers.

Tracing the arc from empirical observation to conceptual refinement and pedagogical application, this chapter consolidates the central claim of the thesis: that children's leadership and followership are not peripheral or preparatory behaviours but core dimensions of social life—deserving conceptual legitimacy and educational recognition on their own terms.

6.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

6.2.1 RQ1: What are children's lived experiences of leadership and followership in a Forest School setting?

The data reveal that children's experiences of leadership and followership are dynamic, situated, and emotionally textured. These practices were not fixed roles or inherited traits but fluid, co-constructed processes continually reshaped through interaction, task demands, and peer negotiation. Leadership was enacted through practical coordination, encouragement, humour, or quiet modelling rather than directive authority. Followership, far from passive, involved attentiveness, idea uptake, collaborative support, and emotional reassurance.

Across cases, children moved seamlessly between leading and following, often within the same episode. This role fluidity challenges binary and hierarchical models, suggesting instead a heterarchical system of influence sustained by reciprocity, trust, and shared purpose. Peer validation emerged as the central mechanism of legitimacy: recognition was relationally bestowed rather than assumed, and affective attunement often outweighed technical ability as the basis for influence. Thus, childhood leadership and followership appear as lived, relational phenomena—defined by adaptability, mutual recognition, and the ethical management of emotion in social interaction.

6.2.2 RQ2: How do relational, contextual, and affective factors shape these experiences?

Children's leadership and followership were inseparable from the relational, contextual, and affective conditions in which they unfolded. Peer relationships—friendships, alliances, and exclusions—acted as scaffolds or constraints on influence. Established friendships fostered confidence and cohesion, whereas social marginalisation could silence or destabilise a child's contributions.

The Forest School context provided fertile ground for these dynamics. Its open-ended tasks, flexible groupings, and emphasis on collaboration enabled children to negotiate authority organically. Material affordances—such as access to tools or

resources—became central to how influence was enacted, with control of materials often functioning as symbolic power. Emotional forces also shaped interaction: pride, frustration, empathy, and humour guided how leadership and followership were accepted, resisted, or redefined. These findings display leadership and followership as contextually contingent and emotionally charged. Relational trust, environmental affordances, and affective attunement interacted continuously, producing what may be termed *situational reciprocity*. This triadic framing challenges static behavioural accounts and underscores the value of interpretive, context-sensitive approaches to children's social organisation.

6.2.3 RQ3: To what extent do adult-oriented conceptions of leadership and followership apply to children's peer interactions?

While some adult-oriented models—such as distributed or relational leadership—offered partial interpretive value, their core assumptions often failed to translate to children's peer cultures. Constructs such as charisma, positional authority, or strategic decision-making presuppose institutional structures and individualised motivation, neither of which characterised children's interactions. The findings expose the limitations of universalising adult frameworks. Children's leadership and followership were driven not by ambition or hierarchy but by fairness, playfulness, and collective engagement. Adult theories also privilege verbal persuasion and rationalised coordination, overlooking the multimodal and embodied forms of influence central to childhood interaction—gesture, proximity, artefact use, and affective synchrony. Consequently, applying adult frameworks risks epistemic distortion: they interpret children's practices through the wrong lens. This study, therefore, positions childhood leadership and followership as autonomous constructs, requiring distinct theoretical grammars that account for their multimodal, affective, and heterarchical nature.

6.2.4 RQ4: How might children's practices of leadership and followership help reframe or transcend adult-centric models?

Children's practices not only diverge from adult paradigms but also offer conceptual resources for rethinking them. Three empirically grounded principles—recognition,

multimodality, and heterarchy—provide an alternative framework for understanding influence.

Recognition captures how legitimacy is continually negotiated through emotional and social validation, emphasising leadership as a product of mutual acknowledgment rather than positional authority. *Multimodality* highlights the embodied and material repertoires—gesture, movement, humour, and tool use—through which agency is distributed and meaning co-constructed. *Heterarchy* reframes leadership and followership as horizontally organised exchanges of influence, where authority circulates according to situational expertise, fairness, or emotional resonance.

Together, these principles form a relational grammar of agency that transcends hierarchical logic. They show that children's peer practices are not immature reflections of adult norms but generative exemplars of distributed, dialogic, and contextually responsive leadership. In short, children's social worlds model alternative possibilities for how influence might be more ethically and collaboratively enacted across ages.

6.2.5 RQ5: What are the pedagogical implications of these findings?

The study demonstrates that leadership and followership are present, evolving practices that merit explicit educational recognition. Several implications follow.

First, teachers can expand recognition frameworks to include quiet, persistent, and emotionally grounded forms of leadership and followership. This entails legitimising followership as an active, discerning stance rather than a passive default, thereby aligning practice with principles of epistemic justice.

Second, task and curriculum design can support role fluidity through rotating responsibilities, shared ownership, and open-ended collaboration. Such approaches echo dialogic pedagogy but extend it by recognising followership as a valued act of social responsiveness.

Third, professional learning and teacher education can incorporate the child-centred framework developed here, cultivating attunement to multimodal and heterarchical

interactions. Practitioners who recognise these subtle dynamics are better positioned to nurture equity, empathy, and balanced participation.

These implications—further elaborated in Section 6.3 and operationalised through the visual heuristics in Chapter 5 and Section 6.4—recast pedagogy as a relational and justice-oriented enterprise. They call for educators to notice, interpret, and sustain the distributed nature of children's influence rather than to prescribe or constrain it.

6.3 The Theoretical and Practice-Based Yield of the Resolution of the Research Questions

The resolution of the five research questions has produced significant theoretical and practice-based insights. This section consolidates those outcomes, showing how they interconnect to reshape understanding of children's leadership and followership. It also provides the conceptual foundation for the visual frameworks presented in Chapter 5 and developed further in Section 6.4.

6.3.1 Theoretical Yield: Reframing Childhood Influence Beyond Hierarchy

Theoretically, this study challenges the dominance of hierarchical and adult-normative leadership models by offering an empirically grounded alternative rooted in children's relational and affective practices. Whereas adult-oriented theories often emphasise fixed roles, positional authority, or transactional exchange, the children in this study enacted leadership and followership as fluid, co-produced, and context-responsive.

This reframing advances a heterarchical model of influence in which authority circulates across participants, shifting according to task, emotion, and group dynamic. It draws upon but also extends constructs such as distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006), leadership-as-practice (Raelin, 2020), and relational leadership (Cunliffe, 2023) indicating peer validation, multimodal communication, and affective attunement as central organising features.

Children's practices further blur the leader–follower boundary, revealing a continuum of influence structured by reciprocity and recognition rather than hierarchy or skill. Leadership and followership thus appear as interdependent, situationally contingent processes that reflect interpretivist and constructivist understandings of meaning-making and agency in childhood. By privileging children's own criteria for what counts as influence, the study contributes to ongoing debates about epistemic justice in childhood research (Andersson, 2024; Spyrou, 2023). It demonstrates that ethnographic, child-centred inquiry can generate conceptual resources grounded in lived experience, thereby resisting the epistemic dominance of adult frameworks.

6.3.2 Practice-Based Yield: Implications for Teaching, Inclusion, and Curriculum

Practically, the findings have wide implications for pedagogy, curriculum design, and leadership in schools. Recognising followership as active and valuable demands a reframing of how influence is discussed, observed, and supported in everyday practice. Leadership should no longer be equated solely with visibility or assertiveness but understood through the full spectrum of peer interaction—quiet encouragement, humour, collaboration, and emotional steadiness.

The practice-based yield of this study can be distilled into three interconnected propositions:

1. *Valuing Role Fluidity:* Educational structures should enable children to move between leadership and followership without stigma or fixed expectation. Rotational responsibilities, open-ended group tasks, and reflective dialogue help decouple leadership from status and normalise reversibility of roles.
2. *Revising Recognition Practices:* Teachers and school leaders should broaden recognition to include collaborative and less visible contributions. Pedagogical attention should focus on peer validation, emotional inclusion, and collective morale rather than individualised leadership rewards.
3. *Embedding Relational Language in Curriculum:* Curriculum areas such as PSHE, Forest School, and citizenship education can integrate the vocabulary of reciprocity, heterarchy, and shared influence, supporting democratic, inclusive learning cultures that reflect children's lived experiences.

These implications do not reject formal leadership programmes but reposition them within a broader discourse of participation, equity, and social responsiveness. The visual frameworks introduced in Chapter 5 provide one mechanism through which such pedagogical shifts can be enacted.

6.3.3 Interdependence of Theory and Practice

A key yield of the study lies in demonstrating how theory and practice co-inform one another. The ethnographic findings underpin a reconceptualisation of leadership and followership that is both analytically rigorous and pedagogically actionable. This convergence underscores the value of small-scale, contextually rich research for generating theory that is directly relevant to practice.

The study also models a productive dialogue between child-specific lived experience and adapted adult theory. Rather than dismissing adult frameworks outright, it reinterprets relational and distributed models through a child-centred lens, producing a context-sensitive theory of influence grounded in reciprocity, multimodality, and heterarchy. In doing so, it contributes to broader educational debates on power, identity, and participation, showing how a nuanced understanding of children's peer cultures can reshape both theoretical and practical conceptions of leadership.

Taken together, these theoretical and practice-based insights establish a cohesive foundation for re-envisioning leadership and followership as fluid, relational, and ethically co-constructed processes. They demonstrate how empirical evidence can be transformed into conceptual and pedagogical innovation without losing contextual integrity. The next section extends this synthesis by operationalising these insights through the visual frameworks introduced in Chapter 5. These frameworks function not merely as summaries but as interpretive tools—making visible the relational, multimodal, and heterarchical dimensions of children's influence and providing educators with tangible heuristics for recognising and supporting these dynamics in practice.

6.4 Potential Value of the New Frameworks

This study concludes by proposing two interrelated frameworks—a conceptual framework and a pedagogical framework—each grounded in the empirical findings and theoretical orientation of the research. Together, they offer a child-centred grammar for re-thinking leadership and followership not as hierarchical or preparatory roles, but as fluid, relational, and multimodal practices embedded in children's social worlds.

These frameworks are intentionally heuristic rather than prescriptive. They are designed to prompt reflection, support interpretive judgement, and scaffold inclusive pedagogy. Their purpose is not to standardise behaviour but to help educators and researchers see differently—to recognise what might otherwise remain unnoticed or undervalued in children's peer interactions.

6.4.1 Conceptual Framework: Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy

The conceptual framework, first developed in Chapter 5, synthesises three interlocking principles as central to understanding children's leadership and followership:

- *Recognition:* foregrounds the ethical imperative to notice and value diverse forms of influence, including those that are quiet, supportive, or enacted through following rather than leading.
- *Multimodality:* accounts for the expressive resources—gesture, movement, tone, humour, silence, spatial positioning—through which children negotiate meaning, roles, and relationships.
- *Heterarchy:* challenges linear or hierarchical notions of leadership, presenting influence as dynamic, circulating, and context sensitive.

This framework does not reject adult leadership theory but recalibrates it through the lens of children's lived practices. Drawing from relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), distributed leadership (Gronn, 2002), and critical childhood studies (Spyrou, 2018), it repositions children as producers of social knowledge rather than passive learners of adult models.

The framework is adaptable across settings—from Forest School to classroom group work—while consistently centring the situated, relational, and agentic nature of children's peer dynamics.

6.4.2 Pedagogical Framework: Design Levers for Equitable Influence

The pedagogical framework translates these conceptual insights into actionable strategies for educators and school leaders. It identifies several design levers that enable more equitable and dynamic forms of participation:

- *Broadening Recognition:* Develop tools or reflective routines that value quiet persistence, emotional labour, and adaptive following—not only vocal leadership.
- *Legitimising Followership:* Shift classroom discourse so that following is recognised as an active, relational contribution to collective endeavour.
- *Designing for Role Fluidity:* Create tasks that allow rotating leadership, shared decision-making, and voluntary transitions between leading and following.
- *Attending to Material and Affective Affordances:* Ensure equitable access to tools, space, and emotional safety, enabling all children to contribute and influence.

These strategies do not demand wholesale curriculum redesign. Rather, they represent low-barrier, high-impact adjustments that extend inclusive and dialogic pedagogy (Alexander, 2020) by explicitly recognising followership and relational influence as valuable learning outcomes in their own right.

6.4.3 Frameworks as Heuristics and Their Integrative Value

The visual and conceptual frameworks are offered as heuristics for reflection and dialogue, not prescriptions for uniform practice. In keeping with the study's interpretivist stance, they invite adaptive and context-responsive use—mirroring the fluidity of the very practices they describe.

By encouraging educators to move beyond adult-defined hierarchies of confidence or voice, the frameworks focus attention on the subtle, multimodal, and fairness-driven ways influence circulates within childhood peer cultures. They thus bridge

theoretical innovation with pedagogical enactment, offering a starting point for deeper engagement with children's social worlds as sites of agency, meaning-making, and ethical learning.

Taken together, the conceptual and pedagogical frameworks constitute a child-centred grammar of influence—a language for describing and designing for relational, heterarchical, and multimodal dynamics in childhood. While not definitive, this grammar provides a generative foundation for further inquiry into the epistemic and ethical dimensions of leadership and followership in education.

6.5 Summary: Towards a Child-Centred Conceptual Grammar of Influence

This thesis has introduced two interrelated frameworks—a conceptual framework and a pedagogical framework—that together articulate what may be termed a *child-centred grammar of influence*. These frameworks are not prescriptive models but heuristics: interpretive tools that support educators and researchers in recognising and responding to the subtle, situated, and socially constructed ways that children lead and follow within peer cultures.

6.5.1 Recognition, Multimodality, and Heterarchy as Core Principles

At the heart of this grammar lie three organising principles—recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy. These principles were not imposed *a priori* but emerged inductively through thematic analysis of children's interactions in Forest School contexts. Their theoretical value lies in their capacity to re-orient inquiry and practice away from adultist assumptions (Burman, 2017; Lee, 2001) and towards a more relational, equitable understanding of peer authority.

- *Recognition:* builds upon epistemic-justice theory (Fricker, 2007; Lundy, 2007) by foregrounding the importance of being seen, heard, and validated within peer groups. In the absence of formal hierarchies, children's influence depended on peers' recognition of their contributions—whether verbal, embodied, or material.

- *Multimodality:* acknowledges that children communicate influence through diverse semiotic resources—gesture, eye contact, positioning, resource control, and spatial proximity (Kress, 2010; Hackett, 2021). These repertoires exceed the verbal-centric models typically valorised in classroom discourse (Alexander, 2020), providing a richer account of how influence circulates.
- *Heterarchy*: distinct from hierarchy, refers to dynamic, context-contingent distributions of authority that permit multiple co-existing centres of influence (Stark, 2009; Ødegård and Bjørnestad, 2023). This principle reflects the fluid, negotiated, and fairness-oriented character of children's leadership and followership, aligning with relational and distributed leadership theories (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Gronn, 2002) but extending them into peer cultures where adult structures are largely absent.

6.5.2 From Conceptual to Pedagogical Frameworks

The conceptual framework developed through interpretive analysis of ethnographic data challenges leadership and followership constructs defined by hierarchy, charisma, or fixed roles. Instead, it positions children as agents whose authority emerges relationally and contextually through acts of negotiation, invitation, and resistance. This perspective resists the framing of children as *leaders-in-waiting* (Alexander, 2020) and instead affirms their current epistemic and ethical agency (Spyrou, 2018; Gallagher, 2008).

Building on this, the pedagogical framework outlined in Chapter 6 offers practice-oriented strategies grounded in these conceptual insights. These include broadening teacher recognition to encompass quiet influence (Myhill, 2006), designing tasks that enable rotational authority (Cremin *et al.,* 2015), and legitimising followership as a valued form of participation (Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2021). Recent studies show how teacher prompting can enhance leadership behaviours even in preschool children (DiCarlo *et al.,* 2024) and how followership is increasingly recognised as an active and agentic construct (Brooker, 2024). These strategies are not curriculum add-ons but shifts in perspective—tools for *re-seeing* and *re-valuing* the forms of leadership and followership that children already practise.

6.5.3 A Generative, Adaptive Grammar

Together, these frameworks constitute a child-centred grammar of influence: a language for describing, legitimising, and designing for the fluid, multimodal, and reciprocal dynamics of childhood peer interaction. The term *grammar* is used metaphorically to signal both structure and generativity—a flexible system of meaning-making that accommodates diversity and emergence (Gee, 2014).

This grammar does not offer universal rules or predictive claims. Rather, it provides a provisional heuristic, grounded in a specific ethnographic context yet adaptable to others. Its purpose is to stimulate reflection, dialogue, and pedagogical sensitivity—not to dictate uniform practice. In line with the interpretivist epistemology underpinning the study (Schwandt, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 2013), the frameworks invite relationally grounded interpretations that remain responsive to children's lived realities.

Ultimately, the grammar of influence developed here affirms that leadership and followership in childhood are not derivative of adult norms but generative of their own ethical and epistemic logics. It offers a conceptual toolkit for researchers and educators seeking to engage with children's peer cultures in ways that are respectful, rigorous, and relationally attuned.

The frameworks developed in this study thus consolidate both its conceptual and empirical contributions, translating rich ethnographic insight into practical and theoretical resources. They exemplify how children's leadership and followership can be recognised not through adult templates but through the fluid, relational, and ethically grounded practices that children themselves enact. This synthesis closes the interpretive arc of the study and prepares the ground for the final chapter, which draws together its overarching contributions to theory, practice, and policy while reflecting on methodological integrity, limitations, and directions for future research.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Overview

This final chapter draws together the core contributions of the thesis, clarifying its significance for theory, practice, and future research. Building on the conceptual and pedagogical frameworks articulated in Chapter 5 and the theoretical synthesis developed in Chapter 6, it consolidates the study's overarching insights. Together, these chapters reframe children's leadership and followership as dynamic, relational, and situated practices that challenge adult-centric assumptions.

At its heart, the study foregrounds children's meaning-making—how they negotiate, share, and contest influence in everyday peer encounters. Through sustained ethnographic inquiry in a Forest School setting, the research illuminates leadership and followership as emergent, co-constructed processes characterised by fairness-driven role fluidity, multimodal expression, and fragile but consequential acts of recognition. These dynamics disrupt static or hierarchical models, positioning children's practices as meaningful in the present rather than merely preparatory for adulthood.

The chapter proceeds in five further sections. Section 7.2 sets out the thesis's contribution to knowledge, showing how the child-centred principles of recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy extend and complicate existing leadership, followership, and childhood theories. Section 7.3 explores practical and professional implications for educators, curriculum designers, and policy actors. Section 7.4 considers the study's limitations, while Section 7.5 identifies directions for future research. Finally, Section 7.6 offers a concluding reflection on the conceptual, professional, and scholarly significance of the study, and on the broader imperative to take children's social and epistemic contributions seriously.

In drawing these threads together, Chapter 7 affirms that children's leadership and followership are not rehearsals for adulthood but expressions of agency, belonging, and meaning-making. What follows clarifies how this thesis contributes—empirically, conceptually, and pedagogically—to the expanding body of work that recognises

children as full social actors whose knowledge and influence warrant recognition on their own terms.

7.2 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge across five interrelated domains: empirical, conceptual, theoretical, pedagogical, and interdisciplinary. Each layer builds upon the next to reframe leadership and followership as situated, relational, and agentic practices within children's peer cultures—distinct from adult paradigms and deserving of analysis on their own terms.

7.2.1 Empirical Contribution

The study provides a rich, longitudinal ethnographic account of children's peer interactions across Reception to Year 6, encompassing 39 Forest School observations and 30 interviews. This multi-year, multi-cohort design is rare in both leadership studies and childhood research. It moves beyond short-term or age-specific case studies to reveal developmental continuities and contextual variation in children's experiences of influence, recognition, and role negotiation.

By situating the research within a Forest School environment—an under-examined setting in leadership research—the thesis captures how leadership and followership emerge organically through play, collaboration, and spatial movement. This empirical contribution extends the evidence base for Forest School scholarship (Leather, 2018; Knight, 2022) while simultaneously addressing a major gap in child-led leadership studies, where naturalistic and longitudinal perspectives remain scarce.

7.2.2 Conceptual Contribution

A central innovation of the study is the development of a child-centred conceptual framework grounded in the principles of recognition**,** multimodality, and heterarchy. Unlike dominant leadership models that privilege voice, charisma, or fixed positional roles, this framework highlights the ephemeral, negotiated, and context-dependent nature of influence among children.

It incorporates quiet leadership, reciprocal followership, and embodied participation, resisting adult-centric framings that portray children as either passive followers or leaders-in-training (Alexander, 2020). The framework introduces a new vocabulary for describing how leadership and followership are co-produced through material, affective, and relational means. In doing so, it directly responds to concerns about epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Spyrou, 2018) by legitimising the subtle and often overlooked forms of influence that sustain children's peer cultures.

7.2.3 Theoretical Contribution

The thesis extends relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Fairhurst and Uhl-Bien, 2012) and followership scholarship (Carsten and Uhl-Bien, 2021) by applying them to a peer-based, child-led context where authority is fluid and negotiated rather than institutionally fixed. Whereas adult-oriented models assume hierarchical or positional structures, this study shows how children distribute leadership responsively, privileging fairness over dominance and adaptability over stability. It further demonstrates that followership in childhood is not an absence of agency but an active, constructive contribution characterised by emotional labour, coordination, and persistence. These findings challenge adult binaries and expand theoretical understandings of how leadership operates within non-hierarchical, co-constructed spaces, offering a generative lens for rethinking social influence more broadly.

7.2.4 Pedagogical Contribution

By translating empirical and conceptual insights into practical strategies, the study also makes a substantive pedagogical contribution. It reveals that educators often overlook leadership and followership behaviours that fall outside dominant visibility norms—such as quiet modelling, embodied signalling, or distributed negotiation.

In response, the research identifies several pedagogical design levers:

- recognising diverse influence styles through heuristic rubrics;
- legitimising followership as a valued role; and
- structuring environments to promote rotational leadership and shared ownership.

These proposals do not require wholesale curricular reform but rather subtle shifts in noticing, feedback, and classroom ecology. The pedagogical framework thus enables teachers to cultivate inclusive participation and equitable recognition, aligning with dialogic and relational pedagogies while extending them through explicit attention to followership.

7.2.5 Interdisciplinary Contribution

Finally, the thesis forges a productive dialogue between childhood studies and leadership studies, two domains that have rarely intersected. By taking children's practices as sources of theoretical insight rather than as developmental precursors, the research challenges adultist assumptions embedded in both fields. It responds to calls for cross-disciplinary innovation (Collinson, 2023; Ødegård and Bjørnestad, 2023) by unsettling hierarchy as a default organising principle and demonstrating how alternative models of influence—relational, multimodal, and heterarchical—can be theorised and practised. The resulting child-centred grammar of influence offers a conceptual bridge between the study of childhood agency and the study of leadership processes, reframing power, belonging, and collaboration as shared and co-constructed across the life course.

7.3 Contribution to Practice

This thesis makes a distinctive contribution to professional practice by offering practical frameworks, pedagogical tools, and design principles that enable educators to recognise and respond to the relational, fluid, and often non-verbal enactments of leadership and followership in childhood settings. Grounded in empirical insight and conceptual clarity, these contributions bridge theory and practice without demanding wholesale curricular reform.

7.3.1 Reframing Recognition in Practice

The study shows that educators frequently privilege overt, verbal expressions of leadership—such as assertiveness, directive speech, or task dominance—while overlooking quieter forms of influence, including persistence, modelling, and humour. By identifying *recognition* as a central organising principle, the thesis reframes

professional noticing. Teachers are encouraged to attend not only to who speaks or leads visibly, but also to the subtle, affective, and collaborative ways that children influence one another.

In practical terms, this means developing recognition rubrics or influence diaries that make space for diverse contributions, thereby expanding the repertoire of what counts as valued participation. Such tools can support practitioners in legitimising children's multiple expressions of agency, ensuring that recognition practices do not simply replicate adultist hierarchies of visibility.

7.3.2 Supporting Equitable Role Fluidity

The findings highlight role fluidity—the negotiated circulation of leadership and followership—as a defining feature of children's peer cultures. Conventional pedagogical approaches often rely on fixed roles or teacher-assigned group leaders, which can inhibit spontaneous, fairness-driven negotiations of influence.

This thesis advocates for rotational authority models and co-designed task roles that allow leadership and followership to emerge and shift organically. Teachers might, for example, embed fairness-driven rotation cycles, provide opportunities for children to nominate an *'expert of the moment,'* or structure tasks to enable multiple points of entry and influence. These small adjustments can foster equitable participation and reinforce the ethical dimension of shared responsibility.

7.3.3 Harnessing Multimodality for Engagement

Children in this study frequently expressed influence through multimodal means—gesture, tone, spatial positioning, silence, and material manipulation. Such modes are often under-recognised in classroom observation or assessment frameworks that prioritise verbal or written output.

Practical strategies include inviting children to reflect on how they or others contributed through actions such as planning, encouragement, tool use, or humour. Techniques like *compliment chains* or *dialogic check-ins* can accentuate the non-verbal and affective dimensions of interaction. These practices validate embodied and emotional contributions without reducing them to narrow performance indicators,

ensuring that leadership and followership are understood as distributed across multiple communicative modes.

7.3.4 Implications for Forest School and Outdoor Learning

The Forest School setting proved particularly generative for surfacing relational and heterarchical leadership dynamics. Educators working in outdoor or play-based environments can use the study's insights to refine observation, grouping, and facilitation practices.

The frameworks developed in this thesis support practitioners in moving beyond intuition toward a more intentional and inclusive *pedagogy of influence*. This includes recognising task-based authority shifts, scaffolding equitable access to materials and spaces, and allowing peer-led decision-making to unfold across time. These adjustments strengthen the ethos of Forest School while aligning it with justice-oriented educational principles.

7.3.5 Bridging Theory and Everyday Practice

Perhaps most significantly, the conceptual and pedagogical frameworks developed in this study are designed to travel—that is, to be adaptable across settings and phases. They function as heuristic tools that teachers can interpret and apply flexibly within their own professional contexts.

Rather than prescriptive rubrics or fixed protocols, these frameworks offer *ways of seeing* and *ways of supporting* peer dynamics that are often fleeting yet profoundly consequential. Teachers are thus positioned not as allocators of leadership roles but as designers of equitable learning environments—ones that honour the full spectrum of influence practices children bring into their shared worlds.

In these ways, the study contributes directly to professional practice by equipping educators with interpretive and reflective strategies for recognising, valuing, and nurturing leadership and followership in everyday interactions—both within the classroom and beyond.

7.4 Limitations

As with all qualitative research, this study's claims are necessarily bounded by its specific context, methodological choices, and the positionality of the researcher. The purpose of this section is not to diminish the value of the findings but to articulate the scope and limits of their applicability while modelling the reflexivity that underpins responsible educational inquiry.

7.4.1 Contextual Boundaries

The research was conducted in a primary school in the North West of England with a sustained and embedded Forest School programme. This context provided a rich opportunity to observe leadership and followership in a less hierarchically structured environment, yet it also defined the boundaries of transferability.

The Forest School ethos—grounded in play, risk-taking, and child-led exploration—generated distinctive peer dynamics that may not occur in more traditional or formal classroom settings. Consequently, the applicability of the findings to schools without outdoor or experiential learning components must be treated with caution. The conceptual and pedagogical frameworks proposed here are heuristic rather than prescriptive**,** designed for adaptation and dialogue rather than direct replication.

7.4.2 Methodological Scope

The longitudinal ethnographic design—comprising 39 naturalistic observations and 30 child and teacher interviews across Reception to Year 6—yielded deep, situated insights into the lived experience of leadership and followership. However, the study did not incorporate quantitative triangulation (e.g. sociometric analysis or peer nomination techniques) or external perspectives from parents or community stakeholders.

The focus on present-tense interactions also limits temporal scope: while children's leadership and followership were examined across age phases, the research did not trace individual developmental trajectories or transitions (for instance, to secondary schooling). The findings, therefore, offer a richly descriptive but temporally bounded account of influence in primary-aged peer cultures.

7.4.3 Researcher Positionality and Research Dynamics

A key limitation—and simultaneously a distinctive strength—stems from the researcher's dual role as headteacher and ethnographer. The dual roles afforded sustained access, relational trust, and contextual depth rarely available to external researchers. Yet it also introduced complex power asymmetries and the potential for role entanglement.

Although ethical safeguards—including informed consent, child assent, and ongoing reflexive journaling—were implemented, the researcher's institutional authority inevitably shaped the research environment. Some children may have moderated or amplified behaviours in response to perceived adult presence; staff interviews may likewise have been influenced by collegial relationships.

While these dynamics were continuously examined and mitigated through reflexive practice, they underscore the interpretive contingency of the findings. Alternative perspectives from an external researcher, peer ethnographer, or participatory child-led design might yield complementary or divergent insights.

7.4.4 Conceptual and Epistemological Scope

The theoretical framework developed in this thesis—centred on recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy—provides a novel vocabulary for describing children's leadership and followership. However, these higher-order principles emerged through interpretive synthesis rather than hypothesis testing and should not be treated as universal categories. They function instead as contextually grounded conceptual tools for understanding peer influence within this particular ethnographic setting.

Future studies could refine or extend these principles across diverse cultural, institutional, and developmental contexts. Additionally, while the study is grounded in interpretivist and social constructionist epistemologies, its reliance on adult observation introduces an inherent epistemic tension. Despite sustained efforts to privilege children's perspectives, analysis remains mediated by adult meaning-making. This tension exemplifies a wider challenge within childhood research:

representing children's social worlds authentically while acknowledging the interpretive filters through which adult researchers perceive them.

7.5 Future Research

This thesis contributes a new conceptual grammar for understanding childhood leadership and followership—centred on recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy—and demonstrates how these principles are enacted within a Forest School context. Rather than offering a definitive model, the study opens fertile ground for further inquiry. While the frameworks developed here are conceptually and pedagogically useful, they do not constitute a complete theory of childhood leadership and followership. Instead, they serve as provisional scaffolds—grounded in empirical insight but necessarily open to refinement, challenge, and contextual adaptation.

Future research is needed to deepen, diversify, and critically test these frameworks across broader educational, cultural, and technological terrains. This section identifies four primary directions for further study, followed by four additional areas of conceptual expansion that together extend the relevance and reach of this work.

7.5.1 Operationalising Quiet Influence and Followership

A central contribution of this study is its attention to subtle and often-overlooked practices of influence, such as quiet modelling, fairness-driven compliance, emotional regulation, and spatial attunement. These practices were vital to group cohesion yet are rarely given prominence in dominant educational narratives, which tend to privilege assertiveness, verbal confidence, or charisma.

Future research should develop observational tools, coding schemas, or heuristic rubrics capable of identifying and validating these quieter modes of leadership and followership. Drawing on inclusive and participatory methods—such as child-led journaling, visual ethnography, or video-stimulated dialogue—such work could resist adult-normative assumptions and centre children's own definitions of meaningful influence. In doing so, it would advance epistemic justice by legitimising ways of being and relating that are often marginalised in school environments.

7.5.2 Design-Based Inquiry into Pedagogical Implementation

Although this thesis proposes a pedagogical framework aligned with its conceptual model, it does not empirically test how such practices might unfold over time in classroom settings. Design-based or action research methodologies could explore how intentional interventions—such as broadened recognition routines, rotational leadership opportunities, or multimodal expression prompts—affect children's experiences of influence, inclusion, and agency.

These studies could involve iterative co-design cycles with teachers and children, embedding practitioner reflection and adaptation. Importantly, they would illuminate the tension between structured pedagogical intent and the spontaneous, negotiated dynamics of peer interaction. Such work would inform how educators can create conditions in which recognition, heterarchy, and multimodality flourish—without suppressing the organic rhythms of childhood relationality.

7.5.3 Longitudinal Study of Peer Influence Across Transitions

This thesis provides a cross-sectional view of peer influence from Reception to Year 6, capturing developmental variation but not individual trajectories over time. Longitudinal research could follow children through key educational transitions—particularly into secondary school—to explore how early patterns of leadership and followership are sustained, reconfigured, or constrained within different institutional contexts.

Such studies might examine whether relational forms of leadership grounded in fairness, reciprocity, and humour endure amid more hierarchical, performance-driven environments. They could also trace how children's experiences of inclusion or exclusion shape long-term dispositions toward authority, self-efficacy, and civic engagement—bridging early childhood studies with broader inquiries into adolescent and adult leadership development.

7.5.4 Comparative and Cross-Cultural Extension

The specificity of this study—conducted within a single English primary school committed to Forest School pedagogy—means its findings should not be uncritically

generalised. Future research could adopt comparative and cross-cultural designs to examine how recognition, multimodality, and heterarchy manifest across differing pedagogical traditions (e.g., Montessori, Reggio Emilia, mainstream classrooms), cultural contexts, or national education systems.

Such work would test the transferability of the framework and challenge Western, Anglophone assumptions about leadership, voice, and equity. It would also contribute to the development of a globally responsive, child-centred framework sensitive to diverse social norms, relational codes, and institutional affordances surrounding peer influence.

Additional Research Insights and Conceptual Expansions

Beyond these four directions, this thesis invites broader conceptual and methodological innovation. The following areas offer fertile ground for re-theorising leadership and followership in childhood, building upon—but also extending beyond—the parameters of this study.

7.5.5 Leadership and Followership as Emotional and Ethical Practices

The data revealed that peer influence is deeply embedded in affective and moral terrains. Emotions such as pride, frustration, care, resentment, and joy were central to how children led, followed, or resisted influence. Future research could examine how children's emotional literacies and ethical sensibilities shape their leadership and followership behaviours, particularly when negotiating inclusion, fairness, or perceived injustice.

Drawing on relational ethics and moral education, this line of inquiry could inform both theoretical models and pedagogical strategies for helping teachers recognise and respond to the emotional labour of peer interaction. Such work might also explore the micro-ethics of following—too often overlooked—as a form of generosity, trust, or co-creation rather than passive compliance.

7.5.6 Leadership and Followership in Digital Peer Cultures

While this study took place in an outdoor, embodied learning environment, many children now engage in digitally mediated peer spaces—such as games, chat forums, collaborative platforms, and social media. These contexts introduce new dynamics of visibility, status, and asynchronous participation, raising important questions about how influence is recognised, withheld, or contested when interaction is not physically co-present.

Research into digital childhood leadership and followership could examine how avatars, emojis, edits, likes, or silences function as mechanisms of recognition or exclusion. It would also test whether the principles of multimodality and heterarchy require adaptation in environments where power and presence are shaped by algorithms, interface design, or platform culture. This work could bridge childhood studies with critical digital pedagogy, offering insight into how influence circulates across hybrid and virtual spaces.

7.5.7 Intersectional Dimensions of Peer Influence

This thesis touches on themes of visibility, marginalisation, and peer acceptance but did not systematically analyse how social identities—such as race, gender, class, disability, and neurodivergence—shape children's access to leadership and followership roles. Future studies could employ intersectional frameworks to explore how particular forms of influence are legitimised or silenced based on normative assumptions of competence, maturity, or social worth.

Such work would require participatory or voice-centred methods that include children from historically excluded groups and challenge adult-centric constructions of what leadership *looks like.* It would also support educational commitments to inclusion, equity, and anti-oppressive pedagogy, ensuring that leadership and followership research amplifies rather than reproduces diverse epistemologies of influence.

7.5.8 Philosophical Inquiry into Leadership and Followership in Childhood

Finally, this thesis raises fundamental questions about what it means to lead and follow as a child. Future research might take a philosophical turn, drawing on the

philosophy of childhood to conceptualise leadership and followership not as rehearsals for adult roles but as ethical, relational, and imaginative forms of being-in-the-world.

Such inquiry could interrogate the ontological status of childhood agency, the moral implications of following, and the aesthetic or playful dimensions of peer influence. Rather than treating these practices as skills to be cultivated, they might be reframed as expressions of care, curiosity, and co-creation—offering a normative challenge to developmentalist and instrumentalist discourses.

Summary: Together, these research directions reinforce the heuristic nature of the present study. The conceptual and pedagogical frameworks outlined here provide valuable tools for noticing and supporting children's leadership and followership—but they do not seek to close the conversation. Rather, they offer a generative starting point for further theory-building, empirical exploration, and methodological innovation. Future work might formalise these insights into more comprehensive models that account for temporal, cultural, digital, and intersectional dynamics—including emerging forms of asynchronous engagement, where peer influence unfolds over time, across platforms, or through deferred recognition. In such contexts, leadership and followership may manifest not through real-time dialogue but through staggered edits, non-verbal cues, or delayed uptake within peer networks.

The frameworks developed here thus provide a foundation—but not a closure—for understanding childhood leadership and followership. They invite researchers and educators alike to continue listening, observing, and learning from the many ways children enact influence, form relationships, and demand recognition on their own terms.

7.6 Final Reflections

This thesis has explored the intricate and often overlooked terrain of children's leadership and followership. In doing so, it has sought to reposition these practices not as precursors to adult roles, but as meaningful social phenomena embedded within children's lived experiences. From mud kitchens to den-building, from

whispered negotiations to shared laughter, the study has stressed the richness, complexity, and fluidity of influence as it is enacted and understood by children themselves. Central to this journey has been the researcher's own reflexive positioning as both headteacher and ethnographer. This dual role afforded intimate access to children's everyday interactions while demanding sustained criticality regarding power, interpretation, and presence. Observing children in a non-directive outdoor setting—where authority was deliberately decentred—enabled a methodological attunement to subtle cues of influence: glances, silences, gestures of exclusion or invitation that might remain invisible in more formal educational contexts. Yet the researcher's institutional role inevitably shaped the data, simultaneously enabling and constraining what could be seen, said, and interpreted. This reflexive awareness was not a limitation to be neutralised but a generative tension—one that deepened the analysis and sharpened ethical engagement with children's epistemic rights.

The frameworks developed in this thesis make a dual contribution to research and practice, offering conceptual scaffolds that reimagine children's leadership and followership on their own terms. They do not yet constitute a fully-fledged theory, but rather a set of provisional grammars—a foundation from which others might build, adapt, and extend. Future studies may translate these frameworks into more formalised models that account for temporal, digital, cultural, and intersectional complexities, as well as emerging forms of asynchronous engagement and hybrid participation. These directions are not addenda to the thesis but integral to its ethos: that children's practices of influence are diverse, dynamic, and deserving of sustained scholarly and professional attention. This thesis is not a closure but an opening. It gestures toward a pedagogical and theoretical future in which leadership and followership are not bound by status or volume, but understood as relational achievements distributed across space, time, and material affordances. It invites practitioners to look again—not just at who speaks loudest, but at who listens carefully; not only at who leads, but at how others choose to follow. In this way, the thesis affirms that children's leadership and followership are not marginal echoes of adult practice, but distinctive, knowledge-generating activities that demand recognition on their own terms.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Table showing a cumulative data record (interview and observation data) with overall totals

Year Group (Age in years)	Half Term	No. of boys (Consent provided)	No. of Girls (Consent provided)	% Overall Consent	No. of Weeks / Sessions	No. of Observations	No. of Observation Hours	No. of Interviews	No. of Interview Minutes	Transcript Word Count: Observations and Interviews
Y5 (9-10)	Aut2	17 (12)	13 (11)	23/30 = 77%	4	4	8	6	70	9324
Y4 (8-9)	Spr1	8 (8)	21 (21)	29/29 = 100%	6	6	11.75	11	190	36520
Y2 (6-7)	Spr2	16 (13)	13 (11)	24/29 = 83%	3	3	4.25	6	63	11722
Mixed	Spr2	3 (3)	3 (3)	6/6 = 100%	1	1	0.75	3	49	10237
2019/2020 Cumulative Totals / Averages		44 (36) (82%)	50 (46) (92%)	90%	14	14	24.75	26	372	67803
Y3 (7-8)	Aut1	17 (13)	13 (9)	22/30 = 73%	5	5	6.25	No interviews		2785
YR (4-5)	Aut2	18 (15)	12 (10)	25/30 = 83%	4	4	5.25	4	26	5914
Y6 (10-11) Part 1	Aut2	18 (18)	14 (14)	32/32 = 100%	8	8	4	No interviews		25212
Y6 (10-11) Part 2	Aut2	18 (18)	14 (14)	32/32 = 100%	8	8	2	No interviews		15923
2020/2021 Cumulative Totals / Averages		71 (64) (90%)	53 (47) (89%)	89%	25	25	17.5	4	26	49834
Overall Totals		86%	90.5%	89.5%	39	39	42.25	30	398	117637

The table shows the individual and cumulative totals for each year / age group. This includes the consent data provided from the parents and children with an overall percentage showing the levels of consent provided. The table also specifies the number of weeks engaged in observations for each half term and the number of observations (including the number of observation hours); and the number of interviews (including the number of interview minutes); with a total transcription word count for each week's observation and interview engagement.

Appendix 2 Emerging key ideas from observations and early reading of data

confidence - assertiveness - willing followers - effective followers - effective teamwork - collaboration - communication - allowing another's leadership - peer-accepted leadership attributes – friendship - contentment to be led by the leader - leadership and followership roles not formally assigned (by adults or children) – children leading and following - lack of clarity about why certain individuals took the lead and why they were allowed to do so by the followers – popularity - followers making suggestions or offering ideas that were not accepted by the leader – challenge - rebuttals readily accepted - solving problems - importance of followers – fluidity of roles - assertiveness – children happy to follow – status of roles - able to give reasons – able to laugh / to have fun – confidence to interrupt

Full list of Initial Codes: (n = 139)

Commanding, Assertive, Persuasive, Suggestive, Determined, Perceptive, Encouraging, Accepting, Manipulative, Persevere, Cooperate, Organise, Collaborate, Communicate, Observe, Influence, Make decisions, Natural leaders, Popularity, Use initiative, Character, Use of voice, Heated exchanges, Take risks, Concede, Bad leadership, Motivated, Self-discipline, Dismissive, Resilient, Include others, Trustworthy, Willing follower, Competent, Challenge, Adult-led, Diligent, Independent, Consult, Practical, Self-aware, Attractive, Implications for practice, Initiate ideas, Listen, Children's perceptions of leadership, Responding first, Ask questions, Direction, Confidence, Set the example, Praise, Considerate, Teachers' views, Self-justification, Leader and follower, Body language, Eye contact, Control, Coercive actions, Vulnerability, Attention, Appreciation, Enthusiasm, Forest School, Respect, Approval, Employability, Discussion with adults, Taking over, Good leadership, Conviction, Giving up, Self-limitations, Persistent, Personality, Mistakes, Competitive, Dominance, Familiarity, Selfish, Verbally agile, Self-depreciating, Friendly, Concentrate, Creative teaching, Disagree, Natural followers, Control resources, Interview issues, Recognise strengths, Self-reliance, Overconfident, Comfort zone, Researcher, Play a role, Discuss, Leader support for follower, Sarcastic, Solve problems, In charge, Self-belief, Age, Work as a team, Charisma,

Distract, Personal authority, Peer accepted leadership, Good followership, Repeat, Seek permission, Seek consensus, Excitement, Less demanding children, Empathy, Academic ability, Manners, Gender, Kind, Lacking confidence, Bad followership, Flatter, Pedagogy, Want a role, Individual action, Enjoyment, Over-compliance, Dominance of followers, Ethics, Prior experience, Teacher's attention, Power, Relationships, Urgency, Emotionally intelligent, Pecking order, Leadership and followership language, Humorous, Success.

These codes supported the development of the five-theme structure detailed in the thesis and were cross-referenced with the observational and interview data from Reception to Year 6.

Appendix 3 Extended codebook of children's leadership and followership

This codebook provides a structured account of all initial codes developed through NVivo, clustered attributes, and their organisation into themes and subthemes. It reflects the iterative and interpretive process described in Chapter 3, particularly Sections 3.5 and 3.6.

Analytic frame: Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
Corpus: 39 observations + 30 interviews (Reception-Y6)
Notation: [Yr, O ##] for observations; [Yr, I ##] for interviews.

THEME: Identity

Subtheme: Confidence and Voice

ID-1 Declarative Claiming *(Recognition)*
Definition: Overt bids to steer task/process (e.g., "*I'll lead,"* hand-raising to allocate turns).
Indicators: Group orientation shifts to speaker; turn allocation rights emerge.
Include/Exclude: Include clear direction-setting; exclude teacher-assigned roles.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*I'm organising the knots - line up here."* [Y3, O-12]

ID-2 Directive Framing *(Recognition + Multimodality)*
Definition: Brief task frames that package a plan ("*First brace, then weave").*
Indicators: Others restate or enact sequence; reduced confusion.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*Two taps each, then pass along."* [Y6, O-28]

Subtheme: Popularity and Visibility

ID-3 Popularity Leverage *(Recognition)*
Definition: Idea uptake linked to social standing rather than merit.
Indicators: Faster take-up for popular child; similar ideas from others ignored.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: Group repeats well-liked peer's suggestion. [Y4, O-19]

ID-4 Visibility Without Voice *(Recognition + Multimodality)*
Definition: Quiet positioning/placement that draws attention (laying tools, staging

materials).
Indicators: Peers move to where materials signal the plan.
Data: O | Exemplar: Materials pre-laid cue next step. [Y5, O-24]

Subtheme: Task-Based Competence

ID-5 Quiet Expertise *(Recognition + Multimodality)*
Definition: Silent technical corrections that others copy.
Indicators: Quality uptick; imitation; delayed verbal credit.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: Roof angle corrected; peers mirror. [Y6, O-31]

ID-6 Proof-by-Outcome *(Recognition)*
Definition: Credibility conferred after visible success ("*Hers stayed up*").
Indicators: Post-hoc validation; later deference on similar steps.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*Do Leah's way - hers held."* [Y6, O-30]

THEME: Relationships

Subtheme: Trust and Dependability

RE-1 Reliability-as-Influence *(Recognition)*
Definition: Turn-to person for holding, fetching, stabilising.
Indicators: Recurrent requests; default assignment of enabling roles.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*Ask Mick - he keeps at it."* [Y1, O-5]

Subtheme: Peer Recognition and Validation

RE-2 Granting Moves *(Recognition)*
Definition: Echoing, aligning, or building onto an idea that legitimises it.
Indicators: "*Let's try X,"* bodies/tools orient; idea becomes plan.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: Echoed phrasing then enactment. [Y3, O-15]

Subtheme: Conflict and Resistance

RE-3 Micro-Resistance *(Recognition - withholding)*
Definition: Side-stepping/contesting proposals (humour, counterplan, delay).
Indicators: Stalled uptake; competing trajectories.
Data: O | Exemplar: "*Or we could … not."* Laughter: plan pauses. [Y4, O-20]

Subtheme: Inclusion and Exclusion

RE-4 Withheld Take-Up *(Recognition)*
Definition: Silence/turning-away that downgrades a contribution.
Indicators: Speaker reduces bids; alternate idea advances.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: Suggestion ignored; group resumes prior plan. [Y6, O-22]

RE-5 Invitation Back-In *(Recognition)*
Definition: Re-integrating a peer ("*Want the next turn?").*
Indicators: Return to task; tension drops.
Data: O | Exemplar: Tool passed with explicit invite. [Y2, O-9]

THEME: Collaboration

Subtheme: Shared Problem-Solving

CO-1 Co-Design Talk *(Multimodality + Recognition)*
Definition: Proposal-counterproposal sequences that fuse plans.
Indicators: Hybrid solution; mapped roles.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*Your bridge; my supports - then swap."* [Y2, O-9]

Subtheme: The Impact of Sustained Effort

CO-2 Persistence-as-Glue *(Multimodality)*
Definition: Steady, low-visibility labour sustaining joint activity.
Indicators: Momentum maintained; peers re-engage after lull.
Data: O | Exemplar: Re-tamping until others return. [Y3, O-16]

Subtheme: Collective Decision-Making

CO-3 Rapid Consensus *(Recognition)*
Definition: Quick "*OK/yeah"* alignment following a workable frame.
Indicators: Synchronous movement; minimal dispute.
Data: O | Exemplar: "*We brace first?" "Yeah."* Everyone shifts. [Y5, O-25]

CO-4 Minority Protection *(Recognition)*
Definition: Group pauses to absorb dissent ("*Let's hear Sam").*
Indicators: Revised plan reflecting concern.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: Turn ceded to quieter peer. [Y6, O-29]

THEME: Social Influence

Subtheme: Persuasion and Negotiation

SI-1 Reasoned Persuasion *(Recognition)*
Definition: Short justifications linking plan to success/effort/fairness.
Indicators: Idea uptake rises after rationale.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*This holds better because…"* [Y6, O-30]

SI-2 Trade and Swap *(Recognition + Heterarchy)*
Definition: Offering resources/turns to secure alignment.
Indicators: Accepted trade; smoother flow.
Data: O | Exemplar: "*You take the rope; I'll time."* [Y5, O-24]

Subtheme: Attention-Seeking and Dominance

SI-3 Tool Gatekeeping *(Heterarchy – risk)*
Definition: Controlling scarce tools to steer pace/priority.
Indicators: Queueing; complaints; withdrawal if unfair.
Data: O | Exemplar: Hammer monopoly stalls peers. [Y4, O-19]

SI-4 Loud Override *(Recognition – contested)*
Definition: High-volume directives drowning alternatives.

Indicators: Short-term compliance; later resistance.
Data: O | Exemplar: "*No - do mine!"* Others go quiet, then peel off. [Y4, O-20]

Subtheme: Quiet Influence

SI-5 Modelling and Gesture *(Multimodality)*
Definition: Demonstrating sequences; pointing/placing to cue next action.
Indicators: Immediate mirroring; smoother coordination.
Data: O | Exemplar: Gestures for bracing positions. [Y5, O-24]

SI-6 Affective Cueing *(Multimodality)*
Definition: Humour/calm tone to reduce friction and re-align.
Indicators: Tension drops; renewed participation.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: Light joke before turn swap. [Y6, O-28]

THEME: Role Fluidity

Subtheme: Situational Shifts

RF-1 Competence Switch *(Heterarchy)*
Definition: Initiative moves to child with immediate know-how.
Indicators: Brief de-centring of prior lead; continuity maintained.
Data: O | Exemplar: Knot expert steps in, then steps back. [Y2, O-8]

Subtheme: Negotiated Authority

RF-2 Micro-Negotiated Turns *(Heterarchy + Recognition)*
Definition: On-the-fly agreements ("*Two taps each")* to allocate initiative.
Indicators: Reduced contestation; visible fairness logic.
Data: O | Exemplar: Timed rota agreed at the tool. [Y6, O-28]

RF-3 Conditional Following *(Recognition)*
Definition: Alignment given if fairness/competence conditions met.
Indicators: "*I'll follow if…"* clauses; swift renegotiation on breach.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*Your plan, but we all swap."* [Y5, O-23]

Subtheme: Rotational Leadership

RF-4 Planned Rotation *(Heterarchy)*
Definition: Pre-agreed cycles (roles/turns) to share authority.
Indicators: Visible schedule; high perceived fairness.
Data: O/I | Exemplar: "*Expert of the day*"/turn board. [Y6, O-27]

RF-5 Exit–Re-entry Repair *(Recognition + Heterarchy)*
Definition: Brief withdrawal prompting renegotiation, then return.
Indicators: New rota; returning child re-engages.
Data: O | Exemplar: Leaves queue; returns once sharing set. [Y3, O-14]

Crosswalk to Conceptual Principles

- Recognition: ID-1/2/3/4/5/6; RE-1/2/3/4/5; CO-1/3/4; SI-1/2/4; RF-2/3/5
- Multimodality: ID-2/5; CO-1/2; SI-1/2/5/6
- Heterarchy: SI-2/3; RF-1/2/4/5

Notes on Use

- The codes are modular: any subtheme can be lifted with 1–2 core codes straight into the Chapter 4 vignettes.
- For Chapter 5 linkage, the Role Fluidity items (RF-2/4/5) neatly evidence designed fairness and negotiated initiative.

Appendix 4 Ethics Form (November 2019) Including List of Consent Forms and Information Sheets with Examples

Liverpool Hope University **Ethical Approval Request for research involving human participants including children or vulnerable adults** For research projects involving human participants who are NOT children (under 18) or vulnerable adults there is a different form which should be used.	
SECTION 1 [TO BE COMPLETED BY THE RESEARCHER]	
1.1 Researcher **For staff: Name:** **(For joint research conducted by staff, the names of all the researchers should be given with the Principal Researcher's name given in bold.)** **For students: Name, student ID, name of supervisor:**	**Mark Dixon** **Student ID: 16010487** **Dr. David Feeney**
1.2 Title of Proposed Project:	**"Can I play?" An ethnographic study of children's experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.**
1.3 For students only: Programme Title and Level of Study (e.g. MA Education; Philosophy and Ethics Level H).	**Ed.D. (Year 3) Ethical Approval required prior to starting research (Post CDRI).**
1.4 For staff only: Position held at Hope (e.g. Lecturer).	
1.5 Faculty and Department or equivalent: *for research involving two Faculties or rtments, please state both. The name first given d be that of the Faculty and Department whose sub-ittee is being asked to approve.)*	**Education**
1.6 Start date of proposed research (note: this must be later than the date at which approval may be given)	**12th November 2019**
End date of proposed research	**31st August 2021**
1.7 Professional guidelines referenced	**Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research, BERA 2018;** **Liverpool Hope University Research Ethics Policy (2015-16 v3.1);** **And Vitae Researcher Development Framework.**

SECTION 2

NOTES ON ALL RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

Approval will be given by

(a) The University Research Ethics Sub-committee for
- research that may involve deceptive or covert activity
- empirical research into illegal activities
- research that may be connected to any aspect of national security
- and/or research deemed to pose a significant risk to the University's reputation.

The researcher should identify all such cases and refer them to their supervisor, who in turn will contact their Departmental Research Ethics Lead (DEL) for suggestions. The DEL will forward the application to the Faculty Research Ethics Sub-committee for consideration and, if necessary, for referral to the University Research Ethics Sub-committee

(b) The Faculty Research Ethics Sub-committee for research involving children (under 18) or vulnerable adults and recommended by a Departmental Research Ethics Lead (DEL)

(c) The DEL for research involving human participants but NOT children (under 18) or vulnerable adults.

(d) An authorized staff who for good reason cannot refer the request to a supervisor

NOTE: There is separate request form for research not involving human participants. Likewise, there is another distinct request form for research involving human beings excluding children (under 18) and vulnerable people groups.

In all cases, initial scrutiny will be carried out by the supervisor or DEL, as appropriate.

Initial scrutiny consists of a careful reading of the request coupled with ensuring completion of the checklist given at the end of this form. This process may need to be iterative with the researcher*. When ALL responses are satisfactory, the initial scrutineer should complete the last section of the checklist and should send this form (and any associated documentation) on to the next stage of the process as explained at the end of the checklist.

*If ANY prompt cannot be given an acceptable response, the initial scrutineer should return the form to the researcher, clearly explaining the remedial action needed, and advising of a deadline for the form to be returned to the initial scrutineer. If, after this process has been rigorously followed, there is a 'No' in the checklist which the initial scrutineer regards as potentially valid, the form should be referred (via a DEL if the initial scrutineer is a supervisor) to the Research Ethics Sub-committee for ratification.

Section 3. INFORMATION ABOUT PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY

Note: the checklist given at the end of this document should be completed by the researcher. The initial scrutineer may either add to it, or simply endorse it as agreed. A supervisor or DEL receiving a form without the checklist having been completed will return it to the supervisor (for student research) or the researcher (for staff research) for completion.

3.1 GENERAL

a) Full title of the research project:

Can I play?: An ethnographic study of children's experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.

b) Aims and objectives:

My overall aim is to witness and comment upon the experience of leadership and followership amongst primary school children and their friends. Leadership and followership experiences will be observed within the living culture of the school especially during the Forest Schools curriculum sessions using an ethnographic approach. The research will be staged with each year group having its own half term's observation programme; and staged in the sense that children will also have the opportunity to become co-researchers observing other children in the setting.

<u>Stage 1 Objectives:</u>

1) To identify and determine the respective values that pupils allocate to leadership and followership.

2) To identify and determine the respective behaviours that pupils allocate to leadership and followership.

3) To collate existing research on leadership and followership and to filter existing associated theories through the lived school experiences of pupils.

4) To evaluate the degree of pertinence of existing research into adult leadership to the experiences of children.

To do this:

5) A friendship questionnaire to be completed by all children with consent to identify friendship groups.

6) Knowledge about the characteristics of leadership and followership behaviours will be advanced via direct observation of the children engaging in Forest School Activities*.

7) Pupil reflection on these behaviours will be collected through the facilitation of open-ended interviews with individuals or small groups to investigate/pursue outcomes of the leadership/followership observations.

8) As the lead researcher, I will sustain ongoing reflexive consideration of all interaction and discussion.

<u>Stage 2 Objectives:</u>

9) The inclusion of children as co-researchers by sharing the observation role following their experience of being observed and interviewed in their year group's half termly Forest School sessions.

10) To further determine the respective values and behaviours that pupils (in their co-researcher roles) allocate to leadership and followership.

11) To determine what all members of school communities can learn from the insights generated into leadership and followership behaviour and to investigate how this knowledge can be effectively applied.

12) To generate methodological insights relevant to adult-led ethnography in child-populated environments.

*** *'Forest School Activities'* relate to the outdoor learning opportunities that form part of the school's Forest School curriculum provided by the school's qualified Forest School teacher practitioners.**

c) Brief outline of the research study. Please ensure that you include details of the **design** (qualitative/quantitative, etc) as well as the **methods and procedures** (questionnaire, interviews, experimental trial, observation, etc).

The overarching methodology is derived from the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the Constructivist/Interpretivist paradigm within which this study is based. Therefore, the study will utilise an Interpretivist methodology that will produce qualitative data from the methods used because I will be attempting to understand the culture and contextual situation from the individual research subjects' lived perspectives, constructed from within the observed phenomena using an ethnographic approach.

From the experience of my Pilot Study, I believe the most appropriate methods will include the use of a friendship questionnaire (to initially identify friendship groups); observations; and open-ended interviews. The knowledge to be sought rests within the gift of the individual participants and the experiences they have together. All analysis will be formed or constructed through engagement in this methodology.

My awareness of the importance of reflexivity will be particularly important throughout this research, particularly because I am the headteacher of the research participants / co-researchers. Therefore, a strong awareness of and sensitivity to the inherent power imbalance associated with these roles will be a crucial part of my ongoing ethical position in relation to this research throughout the project.

In order to address the potential for the emergence of debilitating forms of power imbalance within the course of my research undertakings, I will:

1) **Secure voluntary and informed consent from the parents of the children and then from the children themselves. The children's consent forms will only be given to the children whose parents have already consented.**
2) **Distribute the friendship questionnaire to the children (with consent from their parents and themselves).**
3) **Analyse the children's questionnaire responses to identify any target friendship groups to offer a range of leader/follower opinions and perspectives.**
4) **Observe the friendship groups during their Forest School sessions.**
5) **Conduct open-ended interviews to investigate any leadership/followership experiences / issues that emerge.**
6) **Audio-record the interviews (permission included in the consent form) and transpose the participants' comments for evaluation and analysis. The outcomes of the transposed interviews will subsequently allow for deeper reflection, understanding, analysis and comment to be constructed.**

7) **During the introduction to the children's consent form discussion (Form 3), I will highlight the withdrawal sections of the Information Sheet for Children (Form 8) that explains that withdrawal can be at any stage for any reason. This is done simply by a child telling one of the adults of their wish to withdraw. I will also ask the teachers to explain this process in my absence so the children are very clear that this is an option open to them should they decide to take it. Furthermore, I will ask the teachers to remain vigilant towards a child's inclination to want to withdraw and for them to be free to start a withdrawal conversation.**
8) **I will also talk to the children about my headteacher role and my researcher role being very different for the duration of their involvement in their half termly Forest School sessions. I will explain my research is designed to find out what the children do and think; and I want them to see me in my researcher role (not my headteacher role), as someone trying to find that out. For that to happen, I will explain I want the children to be completely honest about what they think and do. I simply want them to do what they would normally do whether I was there or not.**
9) **These forms of interaction will be designed to help change the power dynamic from the children towards me, from headteacher to researcher. I will talk about researchers being people who try to find out what children think and that they need honesty from the people concerned. I also want this to be a liberating experience for the children; one that they embrace with their honesty. I will be very receptive and appreciative of their openness and honesty.**

d) As mentioned under Section 2 (a), some types of research must be referred (by the Faculty Ethics Research Sub-Committee) to the University Research Ethics Sub-Committee. Therefore, please state here if your research involves or may involve deception, the use of covert methods, is into matters involving national security, is into illegal activity or might endanger the University's reputation. Please also highlight the key aspects which cause it to fall into one or more of these categories.

No

e) Where will the study take place and in what setting? If in a workplace, or if the participants are from a workplace (e.g. a school), identify what your connections are with that workplace.

The workplace is the primary school in Lancashire where I am the headteacher.

f) Give a brief description of your target sample (e.g. age, occupation, gender).

4-11 years old; primary school aged children; male and female pupils of mixed ability.

g) Is the participation individual or as part of a group?

Both individual and/or part of a group.

Vulnerable groups: Special considerations

h) By use of this Form you are highlighting that some (possibly all) of your participants are in vulnerable groups (e.g. children under 18, or individuals with learning difficulties or mental illness). Please specify the nature of the vulnerability.

If you are in any doubt about whether adults whom you wish to research should be classed as vulnerable, please consult your supervisor or a DEL early in the process.

Participants will be male and female primary school aged pupils (between 4-11 years old) in mixed ability classes and they will attend the primary school in Lancashire where I am the headteacher.

Vulnerable groups: Special arrangements

i) Define the special arrangements which will be made to deal with issues of informed consent (e.g. is parental/guardian agreement to be obtained, and if so in what form?) and also of the participants' freedom to withdraw from the research at any time.

Parental informed and voluntary permission will be sought from all individuals, groups and classes of children involved to ensure that all information about the research is available and transparent. Participants and their parents will be reminded at the outset of the project, and at regular intervals throughout its completion, that withdrawal is always an option at any stage for any reason.

See Section C:1 above: 'In order to provide maximum agency for the children, I will secure consent from the children themselves first before securing consent from their parents. I will also make clear to the parents that their child has already given their consent.'

All parents/carers, children and teachers will be asked to provide informed consent by adapting Liverpool Hope University's consent forms. It will also be made clear from the outset that all participants will have the right to withdraw at any stage of the process.

Participants will either give voluntary, informed consent or not, and they have the right to withdraw their consent for any reason at any stage without giving a reason. I will make this very clear and I will do so sensitively without intended coercion. I will ensure participants do not feel compelled or coerced into participation. I will introduce the study but then ask the class teacher to repeat the information from their perspective, so all participants are fully informed and understand the implications of their involvement.

I will also make sure that any withdrawal discussion could be with any member of staff involved so a distance could be created from me as headteacher which I understand may be more difficult to broach for the individual. There will also be two formal gatekeepers from the school's Governing Body (one external to the school staff and one member of staff) to receive any comments or issues of concern from any party who would offer advice and support to withdraw from the research for any reason at any time.

I have to presume that some children will not wish to participate in the study. However, I will still proceed with my methods of data collection but only with children for whom permission has been granted. My involvement and participation should not be affected by any withdrawals because I also have to presume that sufficient children to form a group will indeed give their permission. The Forest School's half termly activities will also be delivered as planned whether any research was taking place or not. My research methodology will only apply to the children who have given their consent.

The friendship questionnaire is designed to objectively identify a friendship group and this group may then form a potential interview group. The questionnaire is also designed to identify popular children within the groups and my investigation will attempt to find out what leadership or followership qualities these individuals possess.

All members of our school community including children, parents, teachers and Governors are aware of my engagement in the Ed.D. at Liverpool Hope University. The Governors are supporting this qualification and research as part of my Performance Management.

Additionally, the children's consent form will include consent for subsequent groups of children to give permission to be observed/interviewed by other children as co-researchers. This relates to the second stage of my research to increase the children's agency and sense of self-efficacy by their direct involvement in the research as co-researchers. An understanding of the responsibilities of confidentiality in these circumstances will be made clear to the co-researchers.

j) How will participants be selected, approached and recruited?
Identify clearly and analyse fully any issues of power relations that might arise and say what steps you will take to alleviate them. This applies particularly if the location of the research is a place of the researcher's own employment, or if they have other strong links with the participants.

I will use a friendship questionnaire with willing participants designed to highlight which of their classmates are their friends. Mayeux (2007) * found children were not hurt or upset by such assessments and most enjoyed the procedures. (*Mayeux (2007) 'Perspectives on the Ethics of Sociometric Research with Children'). It is this culture and atmosphere around my research in school that I'd like to emulate and create.

There may be methodological issues arising from non-participation decisions but there will be a number of friendship/working groups in every class and if some members of the group do not wish to participate (or if their parents don't give their permission for them to participate), then I will choose a friendship/working group (identified from the friendship questionnaire) where the children are happy to participate.

As stated earlier, the activities taking place will not be affected by a child's decision to participate or not; nor will their place in them be affected. The Forest School activities will be delivered by the practitioners regardless of whether an individual has given permission or not. There will not, therefore, be any impact on the observed or unobserved activities from the outcomes of the consent forms.

My Pilot Study responses provided almost 100% of the children giving their consent as they enjoyed being involved in the process. Whilst I do not presume the same level of consent to be offered for the first half term and subsequent half terms, I am working on the expectation that the response will be reasonably successful in relation to the numbers of children wishing to be involved by them providing their consent.

However, I am also prepared to work on a worst case scenario of only six children providing their consent. This number of children would still be sufficient for leadership and followership experiences to be observed and discussed as planned, albeit with a smaller group.

My interviews will not require members of an objectively identified friendship/working group to comment on non-participating children. All comments will relate to members of the friendship/working group who have given permission.

Informed and voluntary parental permission is sought to ensure all information about the research is available and transparent and that withdrawal is always an option at any stage for any reason.

As I am the headteacher at the school, I am very aware that I am in a powerful position with the children and teachers. The school enjoys effective standards of behaviour and safety that have been objectively measured by Ofsted as Outstanding (January 2018) for the second time with the school measured overall as 'Good' for the second time too (Ofsted, October 2013).

Due to the effective discipline at the school, especially in relation to bullying, the children may feel they do not have the freedom to deny their headteacher of their wish to participate or not. To counter this possibility, I will ask the teachers to remain vigilant of this issue and to make clear to both the child (and I) that withdrawal is fine. In this way, I can also support the child's decision to withdraw and make them feel comfortable in doing so. I am also very aware of the constant need to be conscious of my role in relation to how the children feel about participating in this research. Withdrawal from the research experience will not mean exclusion from any of the Forest School activities for any of the children. It will simply mean that they will not provide any data for the research.

I will constantly liaise with the class teachers and the Forest School Practitioner teacher(s) to remain personally vigilant towards the potential for upset amongst the children -

especially in relation to the research. I will encourage all parties to regularly encourage children to openly express their feelings about their involvement and to be free at all stages to withdraw their consent for any reason at any stage without the need to give a reason. However, this eventuality didn't occur during my Pilot Study experience and I am not expecting it to occur during the research periods.

If, however, there are queries or times when teachers are unsure of a child's discomfort due to his or her involvement in the research, I will actively encourage the teacher to support and encourage the child to withdraw.

With appropriate permissions in place, I will administer the friendship questionnaire as part of a routine activity in class about leadership, followership and friendship. This is something that occasionally happens in the school anyway, so this part of the process will not be unfamiliar to the children. The questionnaire will be completed as part of a normal PSHE / Citizenship lesson and will be a whole class session when all the children complete the friendship questionnaire.

The children who have not given their consent can still complete this simple task as it provides a useful social, friendship update for the teachers of the children in their class. From experience in my Pilot Study, this task does not take a long time to complete. However, only the children who have provided consent, will go on to be included in the rest of the research methodology.

The school is a one-form entry primary school and as headteacher, I know all the children personally and I talk to them frequently, I greet them every morning and I 'play out' at playtime and lunchtime every day. I am constantly in and out of all the classes, so I do not believe my presence in their Forest School or classroom activities as researcher would be unusual. In my opinion, I am not a distant headteacher to the children. I am very involved, and I am also well-known in and around school, and with parents (with an intentionally high visibility and presence) but again, none of that will be taken for granted.

I will also make clear that if anyone is unhappy with the research at any stage then Mrs. Mel Barber, (Office Manager and Governor) in school or Mrs. Debbie Barsby, (Chair of Governors) out of school will act as points of referral for parents, staff and pupils with any concerns.

The same power imbalance issues apply to the subordinate role of the class teachers in relation to the requirements of my research and my headteacher position. The teachers will be free to participate or not. I am fortunate that we have an excellent teaching team at the school but that will not be taken for granted in my approach for voluntary and informed participation. I have already spoken with all the teachers in the school (and Teaching Assistants) and the leadership team about my research and they have expressed interest in it and have asked to be kept informed of my progress. They have also asked if they could help. I will, therefore, also ask them to complete a consent form to engage in the research with their classes and assert their freedom to withdraw at any stage too for any reason.

I will also ask the school's qualified Forest School teacher practitioners leading the outdoor learning opportunities to provide their specific consent to be involved in the research.

k) Is written consent to be obtained? **YES**.

please complete the appropriate sections of the standard Consent Form(s) and the accompanying Research Information Sheet(s) that can be found at the end of this documentation.

If **NO**, please state *why*. As free and informed consent is essential, you need to give strong and convincing reasons for not obtaining informed consent.

How will the participants' right to withdraw be ensured?

Participant and parental permission will be sought for the research to ensure all information about the research is available and transparent and that withdrawal is always an option at any stage for any parties for any reason.

I will provide separate, age-appropriate information and consent forms for pupils, parents/carers and staff.

I will also ask the teachers to complete a consent form and assert their freedom to withdraw at any stage too for any reason. I would also assert that there would not be any negative consequences for not participating or withdrawing.

3.2 Risk & Ethical Procedures.

Please note: all studies with human participants have the potential to create a level of risk. "No risk" is thus not an acceptable answer, although "Minimal risk" is. You are fully responsible for the protection of both yourself and your research participants. Please try to anticipate the context and perspective of your participants when completing this section.

a) What potential risks are there of physical harm to participants? Please specify, and explain any steps you will take to address them.

Minimal risk: I cannot see where there could be any risk of physical harm to any participants unless someone became upset about what someone else had said about them outside the research. However, the culture of the school is very positive and would not support any aggressive responses and that is known to all the children. An aggressive response would not be a normal reaction to events at the school. This is an opinion supported by Ofsted (2013 and 2018).

The Forest School activities are different to the activities ordinarily engaged in the course of the normal school day. However, all activities (including and especially Forest School activities) are all risk-assessed and, therefore, do carry minimal risk of injury but any activity associated with my research, carries no additional, potential risk of physical harm that is not covered by the Forest School risk assessments. It is worth noting that pupils would be engaging in the same (risk assessed) Forest School activities even if this research were not taking place, so any risk of physical harm to which pupils might be subjected in the course of these activities is not generated as a direct result of participation in this study.

The interview questions will emerge from the experiences witnessed during the observations so specific questions cannot be shared at this stage. However, the interview questions will simply follow the experience of the activities engaged in by the children (and what they think about it) so there shouldn't be any controversial issues arising from the questions (please see section 3.2 b below for initial question suggestions).

Any distress caused as a consequence of engagement in Forest School activities will be dealt with as a matter of course by the Forest School Practitioner teachers and will be treated as separate to the research process. However, any distress caused as a consequence of engagement in the research process will be dealt with by all parties encouraging the child to consider withdrawing his or her consent from and their involvement in the research process.

b) What potential psychological risks are there to participants? In particular, how might participation in this research cause discomfort or distress to participants? Please specify, and explain any steps you will take to address these issues.

Minimal risk: Mayeux (2007) found children were not hurt or upset by Sociometric assessments and most enjoyed the procedures. I wish to express awareness of the potential for individuals to become upset or embarrassed or to experience discomfort or distress especially in relation to any disturbance of their learning time. However, as stated earlier, any distress caused as a consequence of engagement in the research process will be dealt with by all parties encouraging the child to consider withdrawing his or her consent from the research process. This will be after opportunities to discuss and understand any uncertainties or problems have been provided for the child.

I will also be aware of the potential impact on any teachers' time through involvement in my research. These outcomes will be minimised where possible and all members of the team and I, are vigilant anyway to any distress experienced by any child. This is part of the existing positive culture of the school, but I will ensure any challenges will be minimised especially as a result of participation in the research.

There is also the potential for a child to be upset if they are not immediately selected to be a co-researcher in the research. Opportunities can always be provided to ensure all children feel part of the process should they wish to be involved. Short observation sessions can be arranged for these children.

My research methodology includes interviews as one of the methods of data collection and an awareness of appropriate questioning will be important to protect the participants during and after the interviews. The actual questions to be asked are as yet unavailable as some questions will depend on the individual and the circumstances surrounding a particular participant's responses and his or her situation. High levels of researcher sensitivity and emotional intelligence will be appropriate.

During this phase of the study, I will be aiming to witness types of behaviours, attitudes, values, expressions, actions and consequences of actions that demonstrate aspects of both leadership and followership. I also aim to clarify the children's intentions (intentional or otherwise) that may lie behind the observed features of leadership and followership through discussion and interview.

Indicative range of introductory questions:

- Did you enjoy that? What was the best bit? (*These two questions to be asked at the same time to establish positivity from their enjoyment and to start the interview*).
- Did your team get the job done/complete the task? (*This is to establish a positive feeling of success in the group).*
- Who had some good ideas? (*This question is designed to lead the group towards thinking about leadership and their responses may mention someone who had had some great ideas:)* Would you say someone led this activity? (*These two questions to be asked roughly at the same time to enquire if the children perceived there to be a particular leader of the group and if they were prepared to identify him/her).*
- (If a leader (X) is suggested…) Did it matter if there was a leader? Would you agree that X was the leader? *(This is to open the children's thinking to positive feelings of being a leader or a follower).*
- To the others: Why do you think X was the leader? (*Exploring what the group members think*).

- To X: (*Possibly later*): Why do you think they said you were the leader? (*Exploring what s/he thinks*).
- *(Statement about the tasks:)* There were many other important tasks to carry out and jobs to do: who did those jobs? Were they good jobs to do? *(These questions are designed to further open the children's thinking to positive feelings of being a follower).*
- What could we call these people (*referring to the followers*)? So who were these people? What was important about their roles?
- And did these people (*the followers*) do some of the leading? *(Further questions designed to raise the profile of the value added by the followers).*
- Could the job have been completed without a leader?
- Could the job have been completed without followers?
- What does this tell us about the importance of both of these roles in the group?
- Do the children provide a more appropriate or value-neutral term for follower?

c) Are there any risks to you as the researcher (and / or your co-researchers, if you have any) in this project? If so, outline the steps you will take to minimise them.

Minimal risk: I cannot see any risk applicable to myself as researcher other than issues arising from aggression within a parental complaint. However, all parties will be free to withdraw from the research at any stage for any reason and that will be made clear at every stage so there shouldn't be any reason for any escalation to aggression.

I aim to remain in regular contact with my Supervisor (Dr. David Feeney) regarding the emergence of any personal distress to myself as researcher throughout the process. I will clearly and openly communicate any issues to him.

d) How might participants benefit from taking part in this research?

There will be no financial benefit to engagement in the research, but I hope all participants will have the opportunity to secure an enhanced self-awareness of leadership and/or followership through involvement and discussion in this research.

Another benefit for participants rests in the knowledge that their engagement in the research may help subsequent cohorts of teachers and pupils with an enhanced and deepened understanding of the experience of leadership and followership.

e) Does any aspect of your research require that participants be naïve *(i.e. they are not given full or exact information about the aims of the research)*? Please explain why and give details of the debriefing procedures you would use when the need for the naiveté is over.

Minimal risk: This is not appropriate to this research as I intend to be fully open and transparent in all discussions with all parties.

3.3 Data Security, Confidentiality, Anonymity and Destruction

a) Where and how do you intend to store any data collected from this research? Give details of steps you will take to ensure the **security** of any data you collect.

Note that data protection regulations stipulate that data must be stored securely and not be accessible or interpretable by individuals outside of the project. Hence, data should be stored in a password-protected file on a password-protected device such as a desktop or laptop, and not on easily movable devices such as USB keys or CD ROMs.

All information and data related to this course will be stored on a password-protected file on my password-protected laptop that has been specifically purchased for my EdD course and it isn't used for any other purpose or for storing any other data. I will back up any data on the University Cloud. I will not use any USB sticks, CD ROMs or any other devices to store data in relation to this study.

In order to further protect the anonymity of all parties concerned, the school will not be referred to by name in the final research output. Any positive outcome that could come from an association with the school to this research, does not outweigh the potential for the loss of anonymity for any participant.

The potential for any children to be identified from their association with the school is totally inappropriate, as is the identification of any teachers from their association also. This further applies the principles of anonymity and confidentially as fully as possible.

However, due to my own association with the school, I am aware that any discussion pertaining to this research as part of any CPD dissemination, as I engage with others about what I've learned, will inevitably create an association with the school. However, leadership and followership experiences occur in all schools all the time and reference to any participants or individual teachers in any CPD will simply not be necessary or useful and, therefore, no party will be named. All participant identities will be concealed from the research outcomes, assuring their anonymity as far as possible.

What steps will you take to safeguard the **anonymity and confidentiality** of personal records?

Confidentiality and anonymity of personal records will be assured as far as possible for all parties and to the best of my ability, assurances will be made that no party will be identified in the outcomes of my research at any stage of the formal, written report. I will also ensure any implications of the (May 2018) General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) will apply to any records I hold for the duration of my studies. I also wish to explicitly state that none of the personalised data collected will be shared with any other party.

Every effort will be made to secure the anonymity of all parties but it cannot be completely guaranteed. However, the confidentiality of the data can be guaranteed by stating any data will not be shared outside the research team.

c) Will this research require the use of any of the following (please delete as appropriate):

Video recordings
Audio recordings
Photos
Observation of participants

If you answered YES to any of the above, please provide a more detailed explanation of how you will ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

I stated 'yes' to audio recordings because I'm sure this will be a useful method of recording interviews for transcription to avoid the need to take notes during an interview. Active listening

will be a priority during interviews as I respond to answers or comments without the pressure of note-taking.

In relation to recording who said what, when reporting issues that relate to the interviews, I will make every effort to ensure anonymity (and confidentiality) and will not use the children's actual names, nor share any data they volunteer with any parties outside the research team. I will however, allow the children to give themselves another identity for the purposes of the research. This is something I think the children will enjoy.

I also stated 'yes' to 'Observation of participants' as this will be the main method of data collection and is central to the research methodology.

I will make every effort to ensure the children's identity remains anonymous and confidential throughout the whole research process including data from recorded observations and interviews. The children's actual names will never be used and data will never be shared outside the research team.

Hohti (2016) and Hohti and Karlsson (2014) both used observation as a method of data collection within narrative ethnography. Hohti (2016) was also the teacher of the children acting as research subjects who managed both the existing power-imbalance of those relationships and the ethical issues surrounding this research.

d) Please confirm that you will destroy all personal data and indicate at which point you will do so.

For students: A date should be provided. This should normally be no later than the end of their degree programme. Students should NOT make this point dependent on a successful outcome of their studies.

I hereby confirm that I will destroy any personal data stored and will do so at the latest by the end of my study period which will be 31st November 2021.

Due to the importance of the protection of the anonymity of the participants, I will remove all reference to individuals in the transcript and then destroy the audio files once they have been transcribed and checked for accuracy.

I can confirm that any other information that doesn't form part of the recorded thesis will be discarded and destroyed on or by 31st November 2021.

For staff: A date should be provided. For certain types of research, it is acceptable for destruction of anonymised data to be indefinitely deferred. This must be clearly declared in the Research Information Sheet.

4 For students only: Supervisor's Comments

(Please note that applications that were submitted without your supervisor's comments will not be considered.)

Mark and I have worked through several iterations of this form and I am now satisfied that ample consideration has been given to all issues that might conceivably have a bearing on the ethics of his proposed research undertakings.

Supervisor's name: Dr. David Feeney

Date: 07/11.2019

Blank Research Consent Forms and Research Information Sheets are appended. Please ensure you complete the relevant forms, and delete any that are not required.

Note 1

The question of when childhood is deemed to end, such that mentally capable young people can themselves give free and informed consent without needing parental consent, is much discussed, and to some extent depends on the reason why the consent is being sought. As a precaution the University takes the age of personal consent for research participation as being 18, and this should be applied throughout. The University is aware that this requirement is stricter than that of some other accrediting bodies.

Note 2

Parental consent is mandatory for those under 18. In addition, the University, in line with best practice, strongly encourages researchers to seek consent from the child also, although it does not insist on this. The Research Consent Form and Information Sheet should be adapted as appropriate to the child, and if used the researcher should state how the contents will be communicated to small children or those with literacy issues.

Full list of Consent Forms and Information Sheets included in the Ethics Form.
*Examples included below (**in bold**).

* 1. **LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 1**
Chair of Governors: Mrs. [redacted] (Gatekeeper 1)

2. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 2
Office Manager: Mrs. [redacted] (Gatekeeper 2)
3. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. R)
4. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. 1)
5. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. 2)

* 6. **LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. 3)**

7. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. 4)
8. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. 5)
9. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. 6)
10. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 4
Co-researcher's Name ……..…….

***11. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 5**
Parent or Guardian on behalf of child
***12. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 6**
Staff: Class Teacher / Teaching Assistant
Staff Member's Name ……..…….
***13. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 7**
Staff: Forest School Teacher Practitioner
Staff Member's Name: Mrs. [redacted] / Mrs. [redacted]
***14. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET FOR CHILDREN: FORM 8**
***15. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS / GUARDIANS: FORM 9**
***16. LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET FOR STAFF: FORM 10**

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 1:

Chair of Governors: Mrs. [redacted] (Gatekeeper 1)

Title of research project:

Can I play?: An ethnographic study of children's experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.

Name of researcher: Mr. Mark Dixon

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	Yes	No
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	Yes	No
I agree to take part in this research project and for the anonymised data to be used as the researcher sees fit, including publication.	Yes	No

Name of Chair of Governors: Mrs. [redacted]

Signature:

Date:

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 3 (Yr. 3):

Year 3 Child's Name ……

Title of research project:

Can I play?: An ethnographic study of children's experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.

Name of researcher: Mr. Mark Dixon

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	Yes	No
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	Yes	No
I agree to take part in this research project and for the anonymised data to be used as the researcher sees fit, including publication.	Yes	No

Name of Y3 Child:

Signature:

Date:

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 5:

Parent or Guardian on behalf of child

Title of research project:

Can I play?: An ethnographic study of children's experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.

Name of researcher: Mr. Mark Dixon

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	Yes	No
I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and or she is free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	Yes	No
I agree that my child may take part in this research project and for the anonymised data to be used as the researcher sees fit, including publication.	Yes	No

Name of Parent/Guardian:

Name of child:

Signature of Parent/Guardian:

Date:

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 6:

Staff: Class Teacher / Teaching Assistant

Staff Member's Name ……..…….

Title of research project:

Can I play?: An ethnographic study of children's experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.

Name of researcher: Mr. Mark Dixon

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	Yes	No
I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that he or she is free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	Yes	No
I agree that my child may take part in this research project and for the anonymised data to be used as the researcher sees fit, including publication.	Yes	No

Name of Teacher / Teaching Assistant:

Signature:

Date:

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH CONSENT FORM 7:

Staff: Forest School Teacher Practitioner

Staff Member's Name: Mrs. [redacted] / Mrs. [redacted]

Title of research project:

Can I play?: An ethnographic study of children's experiences of leadership and followership in primary school.

Name of researcher: Mr. Mark Dixon

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above research project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	Yes	No
I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and or she is free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.	Yes	No
I agree that my child may take part in this research project and for the anonymised data to be used as the researcher sees fit, including publication.	Yes	No

Name of Forest School Teacher Practitioner:

Signature:

Date:

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

FOR CHILDREN: FORM 8

Who is the researcher?

Name:	Mr. Mark Dixon
Institution:	Liverpool Hope University
Researcher's University email address:	16010487@hope.ac.uk

Outline of the research:

In my research, I want to find out about how some children take a lead but also how some children follow. I also want to understand how this works with your friends and how you all use leadership and followership skills with each other during Forest School sessions and in the classroom or at play.

I think being a leader and being a follower are both really important and valuable and I'm interested in both. So when I watch what you do in Forest School, I will be looking for times when (and how) some people lead as well as when (and how) some people follow. I'm interested in how you think both of these things are important and if you like the term 'follower'.

What will my participation in the research involve?

I will ask for your permission to be involved (because you are the most important people in this process); but first I will ask for permission from your parents/guardians. And your teachers!

The first part is a friendship questionnaire that involves everyone in the class who wants to take part (and who has parental permission to take part).

I will then observe your Forest School sessions on Fridays. I may then talk with you and some of your friends following my observations about any leadership and/or followership behaviours that I might see.

I will also audio-record conversations so I can listen to you properly. This research will all take place during this academic year (2019/2020).

Some children may be asked to become co-researchers (with me) to observe and interview other children after they have been observed and interviewed themselves. I will ask for their consent to become co-researchers.

Will there be any benefits to me in taking part?

There will be no major benefit to taking part in this research for anyone,

but I hope everyone will have the opportunity to have a better understanding of leadership and followership by being involved. I think being a leader and a follower are both important and valued roles.

It may also be interesting to know that you have been involved in a research project with your classmates and friends in school. From my Pilot Study, this was something the children really enjoyed. You will also know you have played a part in potentially helping teachers better understand children's behaviour in this area and that might help other children in the future. You also get to give yourself a research name!

Will there be any risks to me in taking part?
There is minimal risk involved in engaging in this research. In fact, a researcher called Mayeux in 2007, found that children were not hurt or upset by questionnaires and actually most children enjoyed the process.

However, sometimes, children may become upset especially if any learning time is disturbed or if you are not chatted with when you wanted to be. However, I will always listen to you. Also, I will only ask easy questions when we talk and there aren't any right or wrong answers. This means you don't need to worry about getting anything wrong. I just really want to know what you think.

What happens if I decide that I don't want to take part during the actual research study, or decide that the information given should not be used?
Your parents' and your own permission will be needed to be part of this research and you can withdraw at any stage for any reason. If you want to withdraw (or stop being involved in the research), you can do so at any time just by telling someone. Just say you no longer want to be involved and they will tell me. You will certainly not be in trouble if you make that decision.

How will you ensure that my contribution is anonymous?
Your personal records will be confidential and anonymous. This means your actual names won't be used so nobody will be identified in the research at any time ...but you can give yourself a research name!

All data related to this research will be password-protected and backed up on the University Cloud and will be destroyed when my studies are complete.
Many thanks for reading (listening to) this information sheet and showing interest in my research! Mr. Mark Dixon

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

FOR PARENTS / GUARDIANS: FORM 9

Who is the researcher?

Name:	Mr. Mark Dixon
Institution:	Liverpool Hope University
Researcher's University email address:	16010487@hope.ac.uk

Outline of the research:

I am investigating children's leadership and followership and the influence of primary aged children within their friendship groups. I also want to understand how that influence operates within the peer group from the young leader or young follower's perspective and explore how these individuals use leadership capacity in the classroom and/or at play. I'm then interested in using the outcomes of my research to help teachers better-understand the psychology of children's motivation in this area.

What will my participation in the research involve?

I will identify friendship groups by asking all the children to complete a simple friendship questionnaire which will simply identify who everyone's friends are. I will then observe the children during their Forest School sessions on Fridays. I may then interview them following my observations of any leadership or followership behaviours. I will also audio-record these conversations so I can actively listen. These experiences will all form part of the data collection process during my research throughout this academic year (2019/2020).

Voluntary and informed permission will be sought from parents (Form 5); children (Form 3); and staff (Forms 6 and 7).

Consent can be withdrawn at any time for any reason by you or your child and you do this simply by telling someone you no longer want to be involved. You could tell any adult, including me (using the email address provided at the top of this document); your child's class teacher; the Forest School practitioner teachers (Mrs. [redacted] or Mrs. [redacted]); or the formal research process gatekeepers: Mrs. [redacted] (Chair of Governors) or Mrs. [redacted] (School Office Manager).

Some children may also be asked to become co-researchers (with me). This is when they may be invited to observe and interview other children after they have been observed and interviewed themselves.

Will there be any benefits to me to taking part?
There will be no major benefits to you as a parent allowing your child to take part in this research. However, it may be of interest knowing your child has had the opportunity to be involved in a research project with his or her classmates in school. From the Pilot Study, this was something the children really enjoyed. The children will also know they have played in a part in potentially helping teachers better understand children's behaviour in this area in the future.

Consent has already been sought from the children because I want to give them maximum levels of agency. This is designed to treat them with the greatest levels of respect because they are the most important people in this process and this research is about them. However, I recognise the potential for conflict between a consenting child and a non-consenting adult (or vice-versa) and ask that discussion takes place with me or one of the other key adults at school to address any concerns or answer any questions.

Will there be any risks to me in taking part?
There is minimal risk to anyone in engaging in this research.

What happens if I decide that I don't want to take part during the actual research study, or decide that the information given should not be used?
From the outset, I will encourage all participants to open a conversation with me or the child's class teacher about any issues that arise as soon as any concern is felt. There are also two of our School Governors: Chair of Governors; Mrs. [redacted] and School Office Manager; Mrs. [redacted] acting as formal gatekeepers to ensure everyone remains happy throughout the process.

I include the class teachers in this comment to create some distance from me as headteacher if at all required. I wish to make this very clear as it is important that no coercion or any perception of coercion from me in particular or from any party at any stage is seen to have any part in this process.

If any participant decides that they no longer wish to participate, then they must feel completely free to withdraw their consent at any stage for any reason. Equally, if any participant decides that any information given should not be used, then they must also feel completely free to make that decision at any stage.

Consent can be withdrawn by simply telling someone you no longer want to be involved. You could tell any adult including me; your child's class teacher; the Forest School practitioner teachers (Mrs. [redacted] or Mrs. [redacted]); or the

formal research process gatekeepers: Mrs. [redacted] (Chair of Governors) or Mrs. Barber (School Office Manager).
During the introduction to the children's consent form discussion (Form 3), I highlighted the withdrawal sections of the Information Sheet for Children (Form 8) explaining that withdrawal can be at any stage for any reason. I will also ask the teacher to explain this process to the children in my absence so they are very clear that this is an option open to them should they decide to take it. They simply tell someone that they no longer wish to be involved.

How will you ensure that my contribution is anonymous?
I make my assurance that actual names will not be used in this research to directly identify any participant and all child participants (or co-researchers) will be referred to by the names they give themselves. Any parental or staff members' contributions that are referenced in the research will also be referred to as Parent A, B or C or Staff A, B or C.
As a potential outcome of this research, I aim to raise teachers' awareness of leadership and followership behaviours in primary school children through the dissemination of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) undertakings. In order to further protect the anonymity of all parties concerned, the school will not be referred to by name in the final research output.
Any positive outcome that could come from an association with the school to this research, does not outweigh the potential for the loss of anonymity for any participant.
The potential for any children to be identified from their association with the school is totally inappropriate, as is the identification of any teachers from their association also. This further applies the principles of anonymity and confidentially as fully as possible.
However, due to my own association with the school, I am aware that any discussion pertaining to this research as part of any CPD dissemination, as I engage with others about what I've learned, will inevitably create an association with the school. However, leadership and followership experiences occur in all schools all the time and reference to any individual participants or individual teachers in any CPD will simply not be necessary or useful and, therefore, no party will be named. All participant identities will be concealed from the research outcomes, assuring their anonymity as far as possible.
Please note that your confidentiality and anonymity cannot be assured if, during the research, it comes to light that you are involved in illegal or harmful behaviours which I may need to disclose to the appropriate authorities. All data related to this research will be password-protected and backed up on the University Cloud and will be destroyed when my studies are complete.

Many thanks for reading this information sheet and showing interest in my research! Mr. Mark Dixon

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

FOR STAFF: FORM 10

Who is the researcher?

Name:	Mr. Mark Dixon
Institution:	Liverpool Hope University
Researcher's University email address:	16010487@hope.ac.uk

Outline of the research:

I am investigating children's leadership and followership and the influence of primary aged children within their friendship groups. I also want to understand how that influence operates within the peer group from the young leader or follower's perspective and explore how these individuals use leadership capacity in the classroom and/or at play. I'm then interested in using the outcomes of my research to help teachers better-understand the psychology of children's motivation in this area. I also wish to make clear to all parties that a value-neutral approach will be taken to the distinguishing features of leadership and followership.

What will my participation in the research involve?

I will identify friendship groups by asking all the children to complete a simple friendship questionnaire. I will then observe the children during their Forest School sessions on Fridays. I may then interview them following my observations of any leadership or followership behaviours. I will also audio-record these conversations so I can actively listen. These experiences will all form part of the data collection process during my research throughout this academic year (2019/2020).

Voluntary and informed permission will be sought from parents (Form 5); children (Form 3); and staff (Forms 6 and 7). Consent can be withdrawn at any time for any reason.

Some children may be asked to become co-researchers (with me) to observe and interview other children when they have been observed and interviewed themselves.

Will there be any benefits to me to taking part?

There will be no major benefits to you as a teacher taking part in this research. However, as a result of engaging in the research, you may be in a position to talk to other teachers from a more knowledgeable position in this particular field. There may also be other research in this area that follows this research. It may also be of interest knowing your child has had the

opportunity to be involved in a research project with his or her classmates in school. From the Pilot Study, this was something the children really enjoyed. The children will also know they have played in a part in potentially helping teachers better understand children's behaviour in this area in the future.

It is important to add that there will be no negative consequence from me as Headteacher to your free decision take part in this research or not. This recognises my role as Research Practitioner and Headteacher in the school and I understand and appreciate your involvement is entirely voluntary.

The children's consent has already been sought because I wanted to give them maximum levels of agency. This is because they are the most important people in this process and this research is about them.

Will there be any risks to me in taking part?
There is minimal risk to anyone in engaging in this research.

What happens if I decide that I don't want to take part during the actual research study, or decide that the information given should not be used?
From the outset, I will encourage all participants to open a conversation with me or the child's class teacher about any issues that arise as soon as any concern is felt. There are also two of our School Governors: Chair of Governors; Mrs. [redacted] and School Office Manager; Mrs. Mel Barber acting as formal gatekeepers to ensure everyone remains happy throughout the process.

I include the class teacher in this comment to create some distance from me as headteacher if at all required. I wish to make this very clear as it is important that no coercion or any perception of coercion from me in particular or from any party at any stage is seen to have any part in this process.

I also wish to assure the teachers that there will be no negative consequences for them, should they decide not to participate.

If any participant decides that they no longer wish to participate, then they must feel completely free to withdraw their consent at any stage for any reason and they do so by simply telling someone. Equally, if any participant decides that any information given should not be used, then they must also feel completely free to make that decision at any stage, again simply by telling someone. Participants can notify me or any other adult of their intention to withdraw their consent in person, or by using the email address provided at the top of this document.

How will you ensure that my contribution is anonymous?
I make my assurance that actual names of participants or the name of the school will not be used in this research to directly identify any participant. All child participants (or co-researchers) will be referred to by the pseudo-names they give themselves. Any parental or staff members'

contributions that are referenced in the research will also be referred to as Parent A, B or C or Staff A, B or C.
As a potential outcome of this research, I aim to raise teachers' awareness of leadership and followership behaviours in primary school children through the dissemination of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) undertakings. In order to further protect the anonymity of all parties concerned, the school will not be referred to by name in the final research output.
Any positive outcome that could come from an association with the school to this research, does not outweigh the potential for the loss of anonymity for any participant.
The potential for any children to be identified from their association with the school is totally inappropriate, as is the identification of any teachers from their association also. This further applies the principles of anonymity and confidentially as fully as possible.
However, due to my own association with the school, I am aware that any discussion pertaining to this research as part of any CPD dissemination, as I engage with others about what I've learned, will inevitably create an association with the school. However, leadership and followership experiences occur in all schools all the time and reference to any individual participants or individual teachers in any CPD will simply not be necessary or useful and, therefore, no party will be named. All participant identities will be concealed from the research outcomes, assuring their anonymity as far as possible.
Please note that your confidentiality and anonymity cannot be assured if, during the research, it comes to light that you are involved in illegal or harmful behaviours which I may need to disclose to the appropriate authorities. All data related to this research will be password-protected and backed up on the University Cloud and will be destroyed when my studies are complete.

Many thanks for reading this information sheet and showing interest in my research! Mr. Mark Dixon

CHECKLIST FOR RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL REQUESTS (STAFF OR STUDENT)

Name of researcher: **Mark Dixon**

Name of Supervisor (if student): **Dr. David Feeney**

Date completed: **7th November 2019**

For use by staff or students to help improve the Ethics Approval request before submission

For use by supervisors before completing the Supervisor comments section of the form. If you cannot answer 'Yes' to every prompt, please discuss with, or return the form to, the student.

Checklist completed by: David Feeney **Date:** Nov 7th 2019

PROMPT	See form:	Yes/no
1 Start-date is after date of scrutiny	1.6	Yes
2 Appropriate professional guidelines are identified	1.7	Yes
3 Informed consent is being sought from ALL relevant parties and Consent Form(s) and Research Information Sheet(s) are included. *Note that the University encourages, as good practice, but does not insist on, asking children explicitly for their consent. Parental consent MUST be sought for all participants under 18.*	3.1 i–j End of document – Research Information sheets and Consent forms. Check that they match.	Yes
4 Power relations are clearly defined and discussed and appropriate steps to address any issues are set out	3.1 e	Yes
5 Risk to research subjects is adequately discussed and addressed. 'No risk' is not an acceptable response, although 'minimal' is. *Note that if questionnaires or interviews are involved, part of the assessment of risk is linked to the questions to be asked. It is therefore helpful if these can be attached, or at least if there can be as full information about them as possible.*	3.2 a	Yes
6 Risk to the researcher is adequately discussed and addressed	3.2 d	Yes
7 The right to withdraw is explicit and fully thought through in this Request Form. The Inform Consent Forms the Research Information Sheet(s) contain further information. It might be necessary for the researcher to give quite detailed information about HOW participants can withdraw and how possible psychological harm could be avoided.	3.1. i	Yes

8 Anonymity is adequately dealt with in the Request Form and is confirmed in the Research Information Sheet(s)	3.3	Yes
9 Confidentiality is adequately dealt with in the Request Form and is confirmed in the Research Information Sheet(s)	3.3 b	Yes
10 Security of information is adequately dealt with in the Consent Form and is confirmed in the Research Information Sheet(s)	3.3 a	Yes
11 Destruction of information is adequately dealt with in the Request Form and Research Information Sheet(s) Note: it must not be made dependent on **successful** completion of the research project; for students, an expression such as 'when my studies are complete' covers all eventualities. It is acceptable for staff research to have a 'never destroyed' statement, but this must be transparent in the Research Information Sheet(s) and Consent form(s).	33. d	Yes
12 The research is NOT into illegal activities	2 a & 3.1. d Likely to be buried in the narrative	Yes
13 The research does NOT employ deceptive or covert methods, such as to negate or impede the ability of the participants to give informed consent.	2 a & 3.1. d Likely to be buried in the narrative	Yes
14 The research HAS NO interaction with issues of national security	2 a & 3.1. d	Yes

Note that if any of the last three prompts indicates that the problem scenario is present, the request will not necessarily be refused, but it will need to be sent (by the Faculty Sub-committee) to the University Sub-committee. Please flag this up when sending the form to the Faculty Sub-committee, but it would be helpful if you also completed the rest of the checklist.

APPROVAL

Please select A or B, as appropriate. Delete the other.

A: For STUDENT OR STAFF RESEARCH – to be completed by the Departmental Ethics Lead:

This research *does not* involve deceptive or covert activity, it *does not* investigate illegal activities empirically, it *is not* connected to any aspect of national security, and it *does not* pose a significant risk to the University's reputation.

On behalf of the Faculty Research Ethics Sub-Committee, I can therefore APPROVE the research and it may begin immediately. Any improvements listed below (or as communicated – please make clear) should be made and incorporated in your completed work.

Name: Babs Anderson

Role – Departmental Ethics Lead (School ethics lead and chair of SERESC)

Date: Wed, 13 Nov 2019, 11.39

Appendix 5 Practical guide for teachers:

Designing for children's leadership and followership

A short, guide-style summary of the pedagogical strategies making the framework teacher-facing without losing theoretical depth to be viewed alongside the pedagogical constellation figure (Figure 5.2), so teachers can see the conceptual and practical dimensions together. Based on the Child-Centred Framework (Recognition - Multimodality - Heterarchy).

Identity → Broadening Recognition

What to notice: Quiet modelling, persistence, technical adjustments, and calm focus.

Strategies:

- Rotate an *'*expert of the day'.
- Use influence diaries to track diverse contributions.
- Develop recognition rubrics that value subtle, non-verbal forms of influence.

Caution: Avoid turning recognition into a new hierarchy. Keep flexible and context sensitive.

Relationships → Legitimate Peer Validation and Reciprocity

What to notice: Acts of listening, encouragement, and cooperative uptake.

Strategies:

- Use peer-nomination or compliment chains.
- Build structured turn-taking into tasks.
- Hold reflective circles on how peers validated each other.

Caution: Popularity biases can distort validation. Mitigate with anonymised prompts and fairness reflections.

Collaboration → Value Shared Problem-Solving

What to notice: Collective persistence, co-created artefacts, and negotiated solutions.

Strategies:

- Design multi-entry tasks (imaginative, technical, relational).
- Co-set success criteria as a group.
- Display collaborative outcomes in ways that credit multiple voices.

Caution: Without oversight, dominant peers may still control outcomes. Teacher monitoring is essential.

Social Influence → Diversify Pathways into Influence

What to notice: Storytelling, humour, gesture, resource-sharing, and quiet modelling.

Strategies:

- Use leadership cards to highlight varied influence modes.
- Hold storytelling or humour circles.
- Invite reflections on different ways peers shaped outcomes.

Caution: Don’t over-formalise humour or imagination - keep activities playful and organic.

Role Fluidity → Embed Rotational Fairness

What to notice: Negotiated exchanges of authority, voluntary role swaps, and fairness-driven rotation.

Strategies:

- Rotate leadership/resource monitor roles.
- Hold fairness debriefs after tasks.
- Encourage groups to narrate how roles shifted during a project.

Caution: Imposed rotation may override children's organic negotiations. Balance structure with respect for self-organisation.

Integrative Reflection for Teachers

- Leadership and followership are relational, fluid, and situational, not fixed traits.
- Use these strategies heuristically, not prescriptively: they are prompts for noticing and valuing influence, not rigid checklists.
- Pair strategies with a simple risk-mitigation reflection: 'What unintended consequence might this create?' 'How can I adapt it?'