

Listening through the Eyes of Children: An Entangled Mosaic approach to Gender Expression in the Early Years

By Kate Dudley

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Abstract

This thesis explores the vibrant and deeply entangled ways young children express gender within early years settings, challenging assumptions that gender is a fixed identity possessed by the child. Instead, it embraces gender as a dynamic process emerging through continuous intra-actions between children, practitioners, materials, and environments, shaped in-with-through the relational forces of the social, physical, and metaphysical world. Woven through a New-Hermetic Materialism framework, it threads the relational, interconnected view of Matter found in new materialism (Braidotti, 2019) with Hermetic understandings (Atkinson, 1908) that see all becoming, human, material, or cosmic, as deeply connected, each mirroring and influencing the other. Building on this foundation, the research adopts a mosaic listening approach (Clark & Moss, 2006), gathering data through practitioner interviews, observations, and creative child-led methods including photography and drawing. The resulting mosaic is read through three affect modulators (Snaza, 2020): reflective practice, early years resources, and enabling environments, tracing how gender expression unfolded across human and more-than-human entanglements.

The discoveries reveal the importance of diffractive praxis (Barad, 2007), where practitioners reflect on their own entanglements with gender, recognising how their intra-actions shape what becomes possible for children's expressions. Simultaneously, the Thing-Power (Bennett, 2010) of classroom materials comes to life, evidencing that resources are not passive but actively shape children's meaning-making and gender expression. The final discovery reveals that the physical spaces of the early years environment act as a powerful force (Drake, 2019), shaping how freely children move between expressions of masculinity and femininity, and influencing how identities are embraced, stretched, or subtly steered by everyday practices and expectations. Rather than offering a tidy conclusion, this thesis extends an invitation, through its entangled mosaic, to listen differently, dance in the cracks, and co-create early years spaces where every child's becoming is met with care, curiosity, and freedom to express themselves through gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin, 2023).

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List of commonly used language and abbreviations

Early Years – EY

The stage of education and development in the UK, covering children from birth to age five, focusing on early learning, care, and well-being.

Early Years Practitioners – EYP

Professionals in the UK who support the care, learning, and development of children from birth to five within Early Years settings.

Early Years Foundation Stage – EYFS

The statutory UK framework that sets standards for learning, development, and care of children from birth to five years old.

Key Stage 1 – KS1

The first stage of primary education in England, covering children aged 5 to 7 years (school years 1 and 2).

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-Ordinator - SENDCo

The designated professional in UK early years and school settings legally responsible for coordinating support for children with special educational needs and disabilities.

New-Hermetic Materialism – NHM

A philosophical framework that integrates metaphysical, material, and relational dimensions, exploring how energies, bodies, and environments co-constitute lived experience, including in early childhood contexts.

Ethico-Onto-Epistemology – EOE

A posthumanist perspective that understands ethics, being (ontology), and knowledge (epistemology) as inseparably entangled, shaping how research and practice are approached, particularly in relational and affective contexts.

Multi-(Con)textual

An approach that recognises both the multi-textual (the diverse forms of expression; spoken, written, visual, embodied, that children use to communicate meaning) and the multi-contextual (the varied social, spatial, cultural, and material environments in which meaning is made). In this thesis, the hyphenated form multi-(con)textual reflects the entangled, co-constitutive nature of Matter, energy, and environment.

Chapter One

Journeying in-with-through the research: How it came to be

“We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (Barad, 2007, p.185)

1.1 Research Focus:

The narrative of gender is often explored in research based on sexuality (Johnson and Mughal, 2024) or through children’s social transitions (Horton, 2022), making it a prominent topic in trans community discourse. Yet, gender expression is not solely the concern of those questioning their assigned sex at birth; it is an unfolding process in all children’s development, shaped through intra-actions with people, materials, and environments from as early as 17 months (Zosuls et al., 2009). Gendered understandings emerge well before formal schooling, reinforcing the importance of Early Years (EY) provision as a foundational site for gender development. However, with limited research and policy support, a significant gap remains in understanding how young children express gender beyond binary, sex-based assumptions. This thesis calls for deeper exploration of gender expression for all children within the critical EY period, before restrictive norms are fully ingrained.

Amid increasing scrutiny of gender identity and expression in political and educational discourse, recent UK policies like the Cass Review (2024) and DfE guidance (2023) highlight the complexities of biological, psychological, and social factors. However, they often overlook the need to foster environments where gender expression can emerge freely, before it is shaped by external pressures. This omission is concerning given rising gendered social influences, such as the rhetoric of toxic masculinity promoted by figures like Andrew Tate. A Hope not Hate (2023) study found 45% of British males aged 16 to 24 viewed Tate positively, suggesting how deeply such discourse permeates youth culture. Reports from educators suggest these ideas are filtering into primary schools (Foster, 2024). With many boys growing up in fatherless households, the crisis of masculinity in Britain (CSJ, 2025) suggests they are less exposed to healthy expression and more

vulnerable to echoing misogynistic narratives and policing gender among peers (Dodd, 2023). Without intentional pedagogical interventions in EY, such influences risk reinforcing rigid gender norms that limit children's ability to express the full range of their identities.

In response, Warin (2023) advocates gender-flexible pedagogy, an approach that supports diverse gender expressions rather than simply avoiding stereotypes. Without such interventions, EY settings risk reproducing the binaries that constrain children's potential for self-expression. Warin emphasises that early childhood education must move beyond passive inclusivity to actively create conditions where children can experiment with, express, and redefine gender on their own terms. Yet little research explores how this can be enacted in practice. This thesis builds on these ideas, calling EYPs to be critically aware of their own entanglements with gender and to cultivate spaces where children are not only shaped by society but also given freedom to navigate identity without restriction.

To engage with gender expression as a fluid, unfolding process, a theoretical framework is needed that transcends static categorisations. This thesis embraces entanglement as central. Barad's (2007) work is foundational, offering entanglement as the deep interconnection between entities where boundaries are fluid and dynamic. As Barad explains, "phenomena are the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies" (p139). Foregrounding how relations do not occur between pre-existing, independent entities; instead, their boundaries emerge through becoming. Understanding one aspect requires recognising its relation to others. Within this context, children's gender expression is seen as multifaceted and complex, where child, environment, and practitioner co-create the dance of entanglement. This thesis also holds that gender is not only shaped by humans, but that materials such as dolls, cars, dressing-up clothes, and blocks act as active agents in shaping meaning. Drawing on Thing-Power (Bennett, 2010), it explores how gender expression is co-constructed through intra-actions with people and objects. Such complexity demands the cultivation of noticing (Tsing, 2015), helping us tune into things, appreciate their value, and understand how they work, what matters, and to whom.

This thesis also weaves in my own entanglement with the research, where seemingly ordinary objects such as chickens, towels, and a greenhouse became more than metaphors. They are active participants in the thinking, writing, and analysis that shaped this study. These entanglements guided my journey through the complexities of gender expression and materialised in the discoveries themselves. The chicken unsettles linear assumptions, like the question of whether gender expression begins with the child or practitioner. The towel carries a quiet force, a thing-power (Bennett, 2010), where its folds gather the unnoticed labour and affective charge of care, routine and relational practice. The greenhouse, with its shifting conditions, embodies the environments children navigate as they explore who they are. These intra-actions between concepts, materials, children, and practitioners disrupt the idea of the knowing human as the centre of all things (Murrin, 2021, p.7), revealing that gender, like research, is never fixed but always in motion, unfolding through entangled relations with the human and more-than-human world.

Given the entangled nature of these topics, structuring the thesis presented a challenge: how to remain true to New-Hermetic Materialism while offering a navigable structure for the reader. Rooted in the relational materiality of New Materialism and the esoteric wisdom of Hermeticism, my approach recognises that meaning emerges through dynamic intra-actions between the physical, conceptual, and unseen forces shaping becoming. To address this, I draw on Barad's (2007) concept of agential cuts, temporary, situated distinctions made within a web of entanglements to examine specific phenomena. These can be seen metaphorically as slicing light through a prism, not dividing it into lesser parts but refracting its complexity to reveal new patterns, nuances, and relationships. In this thesis, agential cuts delineate chapters and shape ideas, providing clarity without reducing the whole. Yet this clarity is not an attempt to resolve the complexity, it is a temporary scaffolding, a way to make the work accessible. I remain inside the messiness as I write, aware that linear structure can only ever be a partial offering. Rather than tidying the entanglements, I provide an invitation into them with me, not to master them, but to move alongside them, sensing their shifts and intensities as I experienced them. The mosaic approach, introduced here and returned to throughout the thesis, offers my way of holding this complexity. Like the children it seeks to honour,

the mosaic is never fixed nor complete, but it begins with my own positionality, represented through the chickens, towels, and greenhouse, tiles that mark my entanglement with the work. As the thesis unfolds, so too does the mosaic, expanding with ideas and experiences, while leaving space for what cannot yet be known.

1.2 Researcher Rationale

For a thesis so entangled in-with-through the Matter of both human and more-than-human participants, it feels unnatural to segregate my personal and professional positionality. However, as Holmes (2020) suggests, recognising one's positionality is crucial in understanding how research is chosen, conducted, and interpreted. To this extent, I attempt to temporarily separate the woven threads of my personal and professional journey, acknowledging their influence before situating them within the theoretical positioning and research questions that follow.

My understanding of gender has been shaped by a deeply personal journey, shifting from a traditional religious upbringing, where masculinity and femininity were framed as oppositional forces rooted in behavioural expectations and judgements, to a more expansive spiritual and philosophical lens embracing gender as fluid, entangled, and co-existing. Initially shaped by binary expectations, my worldview expanded through engagement with esoteric and hermetic texts (Tao Te Ching, no date, cited in Mitchell, 1988; Kybalion, 1908), reframing gender as an interplay of forces rather than fixed roles. This shift transformed not only my sense of self but also my theoretical positioning.

Hermetic Philosophy (Atkinson, 1908), which acknowledges the interconnectedness of mental, physical, and universal planes of existence, offered a way of understanding gender beyond social conditioning alone. While Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity reveals how gender is shaped through cultural, historical, and personal contexts, it remains largely situated within material-discursive structures. Hermeticism extends these ideas by recognising gender as more than a reactive social construct: it is an unfolding process shaped by material and immaterial forces alike. Gender is not only performed in response to societal expectations but also emerges as an energetic, relational, and ever-shifting expression across multiple planes of existence.

These ideas intersect with my professional background in childhood development, particularly in how gender is both reinforced and resisted in early childhood. My work with vulnerable children and families, from EY settings to youth offending services, has illuminated how societal expectations shape children's gendered experiences from an early age. Observing these dynamics, I became increasingly aware of the implicit and explicit messages children receive and the ways practitioners either affirm or constrain children's expressions of self. As Warin (2023) argues, gender-flexible pedagogy requires EYPs to engage in critical self-reflection, recognising their own entanglements with gender and their role in either reinforcing or dismantling restrictive binaries, yet structured support for this remains limited across EY practice.

My academic journey has been shaped by this entanglement of personal, professional, and theoretical perspectives. While personal experiences led me to question how gender expectations are socially constructed and internalised, my professional practice reinforced the need for pedagogical approaches that not only challenge stereotypes but actively nurture gender fluidity and openness. This research, therefore, is not only about how children express gender, but also how the energetics of environments, things, practitioners, and societal structures shape those expressions in often unnoticed ways.

At the heart of this work is a commitment to advocacy. Whether in my work with children and families or in my role as an academic supporting EY practitioners, my focus has remained on amplifying voices that are often marginalised or overlooked. The voice of the child, enshrined as a fundamental right (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989), must extend beyond policy rhetoric into meaningful practice. Through this research, I seek to create space for children's gender expressions to be noticed, valued, and understood, not through an adult-imposed lens of what gender should be, but through the multiplicities of their own becoming. In this thesis, children's voices are honoured not only through verbal words (Clark and Moss, 2010), but also through drawings, photographs, stories, practitioners' observations, and other multimodal traces that speak of their worlds, each recognised as valued expression and participation (Hackett, Holmes and MacRae, 2002). As Clark and Moss (2010, p.3) remind us, "young children communicate their views and experiences in many different

ways,” and it is in this spirit that their contributions are presented throughout this work in layered, diverse, and relational ways.

1.3 Theoretical Position

This thesis does not align with a single theoretical framework but embraces an entangled approach, drawing together multiple perspectives to offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of gender expression in early childhood. Just as gender is not fixed or isolated, neither is the lens through which it is explored. This research works in-with-through an interplay of theories that together offer a dynamic, relational way of engaging with gender as an unfolding process. It explores how these theories intra-act, shaping how gender is expressed, understood, and supported in early childhood.

Each of the four theoretical lenses; Mosaic Approach, Gender-flexible pedagogy, Entanglement, and New-Hermetic Materialism, contributes to the entangled mosaic approach underpinning this research. Rather than existing as distinct strands, they co-exist and intra-act, informing how gender expression is encountered, listened to, and nurtured in-with-through the study. By integrating these perspectives, this work resists fixed categories and binary assumptions, embracing a relational, dynamic framework that reflects the complexities of children lived experiences and offers new ways of thinking to inform both EY practice and policy.

Mosaic Approach

Clark and Moss’s (2010) Mosaic Approach provides a methodological foundation for listening to children through multi-(con)textual means, acknowledging that young children express thoughts, experiences, and identities in ways that extend beyond verbal communication, offering multiple pathways for meaning-making. By gathering data through diverse methods, including photography, drawing, and play-based observations, this approach allows for a more holistic understanding of children’s perspectives. Within this study, the mosaic approach serves as both a methodological tool and a conceptual framework, supporting a playful yet rigorous means of attuning to children’s gender expressions.

However, where traditional uses of the mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2001) view individual "tiles" as separate data points building towards a whole, an entangled lens resists this linear construction. Instead, this thesis recognises that the tiles themselves do not exist in isolation but are always intra-acting with one another, with the researcher, and with the wider world. The act of listening shapes what is heard (Mazzei, 2016), meaning both the method and the researcher's own entanglements actively co-construct children's gender expressions. This study therefore not only applies the mosaic approach to capture gender expression but also considers the relational nature of meaning-making itself, recognising gender as always shifting, always entangled. In this reframing, attention is not only given to what appears within the tiles, but also to the charged spaces between them. It is in these gaps that boundaries, traditions, unconscious bias, and inherited practices surface, offering sites of tension and possibility. These in-between spaces become pedagogically significant, making visible the subtle shifts where gender-flexible practice can take root. While image one may imply fixed lines between tiles, this is a necessary simplification; in practice, these boundaries are fluid, with each tile intra-acting and bleeding into the next, reflecting the dynamic, co-constitutive nature of the research itself.

Gender-Flexible Pedagogy

Warin's (2023) theory of gender-flexible pedagogy is a fundamental influence on this thesis, offering a framework for understanding how practitioners can actively challenge restrictive gender norms in early childhood. Her work requires "practitioners to be reflexive about their own gender identities, provide diverse resources, and create open-ended environments where all children can explore who they are beyond binary limits" (2023, p.5).

This approach aligns with feminist post-structuralist perspectives, which view gender not as innate or fixed, but as a social construct continuously produced and reproduced through discourse and interaction (Severson and Barclay, 2015). While often associated with critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000), feminist pedagogy has also critiqued its patriarchal tendencies and exclusion of women's experiences (hooks, 1994; Ellsworth, 1989). Freire later acknowledged these limitations. Feminist pedagogy challenges traditional power

dynamics in education and advocates for diverse voices and lived realities. Knowledge is understood not as static but as emerging through ongoing negotiation between teachers and students. Similarly, post-structuralist theories problematize the notion of singular, knowable truth, proposing instead that realities, including gender identities, are constructed through language and social practices (Warin, 2023). These perspectives illuminate how children actively 'do' gender, constructing meanings of femininities and masculinities from discourses available in their everyday worlds (Blaise, 2005).

However, despite growing discourse around gender inclusivity, studies including Warin and Adriany (2017) and Wingrave (2018) found that practitioners "rarely acknowledge their influence on gender development, positioning gender as something children bring rather than something shaped through everyday practice" (Wingrave, 2018, p.78). As such, professionals often deny their role in shaping children's gender development, positioning themselves as neutral facilitators rather than active participants. This reluctance, whether due to lack of confidence, training, or institutional constraints, reveals a critical gap in how gender is understood and enacted within EY settings. While Warin's (2023) framework provides an important foundation, it could do more to fully account for the entangled nature of gender expression, where practitioners, resources, and environments do not merely influence gender but are intra-actively co-constituted within it. This thesis builds upon Warin's model by arguing that gender flexibility must be understood as an emergent process shaped not only by practitioner actions but by the material-discursive intra-actions shaping children's becoming.

To explore these entanglements, this research draws on Barad's (2007) concept of diffractive praxis, a mode of critical reflection that moves beyond identifying patterns to tracing the intra-actions that shape what comes to matter. Practitioners are not passive facilitators of gender expression but are deeply entangled within it. Their assumptions, language, and actions diffract through the learning environment, shaping what children feel is possible in their self-expression. A gender-flexible pedagogy that fails to account for this entanglement risks remaining at the level of surface inclusivity, rather than reconfiguring the conditions under which children explore gender.

Furthermore, this thesis emphasises the Matter that matters (Barad, 2007), the material-discursive forces that shape gender expressions through children's intra-actions with people, objects, and spaces. While Warin (2023) acknowledges the relationship between practitioners, resources, and environment, this study foregrounds their inseparable entanglement. Gender expression is not something children 'possess' but something that emerges in-with-through their interactions with the world. By integrating Warin's (2023) framework with Barad's (2007) diffractive praxis, this thesis extends the conversation around gender flexibility in early childhood. Rather than focusing solely on practitioner intent or policy, it embraces the entangled, emergent nature of gendered becoming, shaped by the ongoing intra-actions of children, practitioners, materials, and environments.

Entanglement

Entanglement serves as a further theoretical lens within this thesis, positioning gender expression not as an individualised trait but as an ongoing, relational process shaped in-with-through intra-actions. Warin (2023) recognises the interconnectedness of practitioners, resources, and environments in shaping children's gender expressions; this thesis extends the discussion by embedding a deeper material-discursive entanglement (Barad, 2007). Drawing on Barad's notion of intra-action, this research resists viewing children's expressions as separate from their surroundings; instead, identities emerge dynamically through ongoing intra-actions with people, materials, and discourses.

The concept of Thing-Power (Bennett, 2010 p.xvi) "gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness", reinforcing how materials within EY settings, such as toys, dressing-up clothes, or even the classroom carpet, are not passive objects. Rather, as Pomerantz and Raby (2018 p.142) suggest, "objects in school spaces are not neutral; they carry discursive weight, shaping how gender is understood, enacted, and made intelligible". As such, this thesis considers how practitioners, environments, and materials are not separate from children's gender expressions but entangled within them, co-producing what can be expressed, noticed, and valued. In this way, gender-

flexible pedagogy cannot exist in isolation; it is continually shaped and reshaped by the material-discursive world in which children live, play, and learn.

New-Hermetic Materialism

New-Hermetic Materialism weaves together the relational materiality of New Materialism (Murriss, 2021) with the Hermetic understanding (Atkinson, 1908) that all forms of becoming, human, material, and universal, are deeply interconnected. While new materialist perspectives emphasise the co-construction of matter and meaning through intra-action, Hermeticism expands this ontology by considering unseen forces: the energetic, metaphysical, and vibrational dimensions of becoming. This framework offers a unique contribution by positioning gender not only as a social construct or material-discursive phenomenon, but as an entangled interplay of mental, physical, and universal forces.

1.4 Research Questions

These research questions have been shaped through an entanglement of my own rationale, the theoretical frameworks adopted, and a commitment to centring children's voices within the study. Rather than approaching gender expression as something to be defined from an adult perspective, these questions emerge from a recognition that children's lived, meaning-making experiences must be prioritised. They also aim to reflect the influence of gender-flexible pedagogy, diffractive praxis, and entanglement as key conceptual threads that guide this research.

The title of this research showcases the importance of listening to children's unique expressions, tuning in through their lenses rather than imposing adult-centric understandings. It references an entangled mosaic approach as a core methodological foundation while foregrounding the research focus on gender expression. The three research questions supporting this title reflect the interwoven layers of this study. The first seeks to explore what can be learnt from children's gender expressions through multi-(con)textual listening, considering how meaning is made in-with-through their intra-actions with people, materials, and environments. The second investigates the role of diffractive praxis for practitioners, exploring how critical reflection and intra-active

awareness can evolve gender-flexible pedagogy. The third extends this discussion by examining entanglement itself, considering how recognising gender as an ongoing relational process may shape EY practice.

1. What can be learnt about a child's gender expression through multi-(con)textual listening to their lived, meaning-making experiences?
2. What is the role of diffractive praxis for early years practitioners in providing gender-flexible pedagogy?
3. How can the lens of entanglement benefit early years practitioners in providing gender-flexible pedagogy?

These questions acknowledge that gender is not a static identity to be 'found' but a fluid, co-constituted process shaped in-with-through human and more-than-human interactions. They aim to invite an exploration that resists fixed conclusions and instead embraces the complexities of becoming, both for children and for the practitioners who engage with them.

1.5 Navigating the Power of Language

Posthumanism offers opportunities to navigate new terrains of understanding through language, reshaping interpretation and meaning (St. Pierre, 1997). If language shapes how we understand the world, then shifting language can generate new ways of knowing, new subjectivities, and new relational possibilities (Spivak, 1993). Language is not merely a communicative tool but an agential force (Barad, 2007), actively participating in meaning-making. Each word cuts through entanglement, highlighting some connections while obscuring others, constructing reality as much as describing it.

Language carries generational conditioning, connotations, culture, and power. Yet, when navigated intentionally, it enables freedom of expression and new realms of understanding. Kimmerer (2013) observes that the English language limits recognition of existence beyond human subjects. In contrast, Indigenous languages such as Potawatomi grammatically animate the world; a hill, for example, becomes a verb: "to be a hill," always hilling. English, by reducing non-human entities to 'it,' removes agency

and relationality in a more-than-human world. This thesis takes seriously Kimmerer's provocation, recognising that how we speak about the world shapes how we come to know and live within it. If language functions as a sense-making apparatus, then rethinking the language of sex and gender may open new possibilities for understanding and being (Taylor, 2021).

This is especially significant when exploring gender, where language has historically reinforced binaries, imposed expectations, and determined whose experiences are acknowledged. Posthumanism (Susen, 2021) and the entangled approach of this thesis resist such limitations. Rather than treating language as static, it is understood as active in knowledge's unfolding (Murriss, 2022). The 'dance' of gender expression aligns with this notion, moving beyond fixed categories toward fluid, emergent identity. Here, words participate in world-making, attuning to becoming's nuance rather than confining it.

This thesis thus engages language not only to describe but to enact the diffractive, relational approach it embodies. The next section clarifies key terms, acknowledging language as an entangled, evolving phenomenon.

Gender:

Utilizing a hermetic understanding of gender allows for greater clarity in defining the key terms used throughout this research:

Mental Gender:

Gender exists on the mental plane of existence, referring to how individuals think and feel about themselves in relation to masculinity and femininity. In Hermetic thought, mental gender is not a fixed identity but reflects the internal balance of masculine and feminine energies within each person, shaping cognitive, emotional, and intuitive processes. Both principles exist within all beings, and their interaction influences how individuals navigate experiences and express themselves (Lindroth, 2022). Hermeticism extends this beyond the social sphere, framing gender as an ongoing energetic and metaphysical interplay. Thus, mental gender is not merely a reflection of cultural norms but part of a deeper, relational process of becoming.

Gender Expression

Gender exists on the social plane of existence, referring to how individuals outwardly express masculinity and femininity through clothing, behaviours, mannerisms, and social interactions. Gender expression is often seen as performative (Butler, 1990), shaped by context, culture, and relational dynamics. It is fluid rather than fixed, adjusting to social environments and personal experience. In early childhood, gender expression emerges through play, interactions, and engagement with the material world (Giamminuti and Gillie, 2022). The toys children choose the roles they adopt in play, and how they move through space are forms of gender expression (Halim and Ruble *et al*, 2017). These expressions are not solely driven by internal identity but emerge in-with-through children's entanglements with people, objects, and broader societal narratives. This study focuses on attuning to these early manifestations, moving beyond adult-imposed interpretations to listen more deeply to children's lived, meaning-making experiences.

Sex-Based Gender

Derived from the Latin meaning "to beget: to procreate and produce," sex-based gender is traditionally situated on the biological plane. Contemporary discourse often defines this through chromosomal configurations (XX/XY) and observable physical differences between male and female bodies. However, in this thesis, biological sex is not viewed as a static or isolated category but as one strand in the entangled web of gendered becoming.

From a Hermetic perspective, gender is not confined to biology but seen as a universal force flowing through all existence. Generative and receptive energies mirror across human and more-than-human worlds, not as literal biological assignments but as metaphysical principles shaping emergence, creation, and interaction. Atoms are not 'male' or 'female' literally; rather, dualities such as positive and negative charges reflect energetic principles that govern becoming across life forms. While contemporary science does not personify Matter with gender, Hermeticism's symbolic language offers an interpretive tool for understanding relational forces across existence. The interplay of polarity is not biological determinism but a metaphor for vibrational, energetic principles

moving through bodies, beings, and Matter (Taylor and Hughes, 2016). Rather than opposing biology and gender fluidity, this Hermetic framing situates biology within a larger cosmos of relational intra-actions. By framing gender through a Hermetic lens, this thesis resists narrow definitions that confine gender to biology or social roles, instead exploring gender as an entangled, relational force across multiple dimensions of existence. In doing so, it aligns with posthumanist thought (Susen, 2021), which challenges human-centred definitions of identity and meaning, expanding how gender is understood and expressed.

Word Strings:

This thesis models how hierarchical power structures can be disrupted through word strings, opening new possibilities for interpretation and meaning-making. Drawing from posthumanist and new materialist perspectives (Barad, 2007; St. Pierre, 2021), word strings acknowledge that knowledge, being, and action are co-constituted. Rather than treating ontology (being), epistemology (knowing), and methodology (doing) as distinct, this thesis embraces their inseparability, reflecting the diffractive, processual nature of knowledge production. For example, the hyphen in word strings like *know-be-do* and *think-be-do* marks intra-activity, emphasising the entanglement of knowing, being, and doing (Barad, 2007). Though not used throughout, these examples show how language can perform relationality and complexity. The hyphen acts as a hinge, highlighting the continuous movement between mind, matter, and action. Similarly, *in-with-through*, as in this chapter's title, resists linear or hierarchical notions of relationship, gesturing toward the entanglement of forces, bodies, materials, and discourses. Phenomena emerge relationally, not in isolation. By incorporating word strings, this thesis not only acknowledges but enacts entanglement through language, disrupting conventional academic separations of knowing, being, and doing. This linguistic practice aligns with a diffractive approach (Barad, 2007), where meaning is reshaped through relational intra-actions. Word strings perform the entangled nature of research, reinforcing knowledge as always in motion.

Intra-action:

This thesis draws on Barad's (2007) concept of intra-action to understand the relational nature of gender expression in early childhood. Unlike interaction, which assumes separate entities coming together, intra-action suggests that Things, children, materials, and environments emerge through their relationships. As Barad (2007, p. 33) explains, "distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action." In EY, where everything is in constant flux, this concept helps attend to the complex ways gender expression takes shape. In this study, intra-action explores how children's gender expressions are not fixed or purely individual but unfold through entangled relationships, with practitioners, peers, materials, and the broader environment. A child's play, for instance, is shaped in the moment by what is available, who is nearby, and the social and material cues present. This view aligns with the New-Hermetic Materialist orientation, recognising that becoming, physical, mental, or energetic, happens through dynamic connections. Intra-action becomes more than a research tool; it is a way of thinking and being that values complexity, fluidity, and becoming.

Matter:

The mattering of Matter, or the Matter that matters, draws on Barad (2007) and Alaimo (2014), offering a way to view Matter as both material and meaning-making. In this study, Matter refers not only to things, the objects, resources, and material-discursive forces in EY classrooms, but also to what comes to matter, shaping possibilities for children's gender expressions. This challenges traditional notions of materiality by positioning Matter as an active participant in meaning-making. Embracing both interpretations, this thesis explores how gender expression is entangled in-with-through intra-actions with the material world, reinforcing that identity is not solely socially constructed but materially co-created. Children's gender expressions emerge through their meaning-making experiences with the Matter that matters, foregrounding how materials, relationships, and environments shape becoming.

Entanglement:

Barad (2007, p.4) claims that to be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. This thesis embraces entanglement as more than metaphor; it is a way of understanding how children's gender expressions emerge in-with-through relationships, materials, and environments. Unlike complexity theory, which focuses on bounded systems and discrete elements, entanglement resists fixed separations, recognising that meaning is generated through blurred, shifting intra-actions. Entanglement shapes this thesis's methodological approach and the entangled mosaic as a way of listening to children's meaning-making. It invites me to remain in the generative tension of the messy, where meaning is not always clear, but always alive, pulsing with possibility. This is not about removing the gaze from the child (Murriss and Fullagar, 2022), but tuning into the dance of relations between child, practitioner, and environment. Children's voice is not expressed in isolation; it unfolds through intra-actions with peers, practitioners, resources, and space. A child's choice to layer costumes, shift between rough-and-tumble and storytelling, or experiment with colours, textures, and gestures is not an isolated preference but a negotiation of identity shaped by materials, others' reactions, and the environment's implicit messages. Observing these moments involves what Barad (2007) terms agential cuts, temporary distinctions that trace becoming without reducing entangled complexity. These cuts are held lightly, not to tidy or extract meaning, but to notice what flickers at the edges, where life, learning, and identity are always in motion.

1.6 My Entanglement with Chickens, Towels, and a Greenhouse

“We must learn to live in the middle of things, in the tension of conflict, confusion and possibility: we must become adept at making do with the messiness of that condition and finding agency within” (St. Pierre, 1997).

This thesis was never simply a study of others; it has also been a journey through my own uncertainty, discomfort, and becoming. I did not arrive here with neat answers or fixed positions, but with questions I could not yet voice and experiences I could not yet name. I found myself unable to answer my own children's questions about the differences they noticed in their friends, about identity, about gender, about belonging. I realised I did not

fully understand how these things had played out in my own life: in the people I love, the stories I have inherited, and the silences I have kept. The research began in the classroom but soon moved into the everyday moments of life itself, shaping how I see myself as a mother, a partner, a woman, a practitioner, and a researcher. It has been, in every sense, a messy journey. Not a distraction from the research, but the very material of it.

Rather than tidy the edges, I have stayed with the questions. In doing so, I have learned to live, as St. Pierre (1997, p. 407) writes, “in the middle of things, in the vague, in the messy.” It was here, in this in-between space of living and learning, that the threads of my entanglement began to become visible. To trace these threads, I undertook an experimental process of self-mapping that allowed me to witness how my thoughts, actions, and environments were constantly interacting and shifting over time. This became the Entangle Tracker: a visual and reflective method that helped me notice patterns as they emerged. Not in a linear or predetermined way, but in fragments, repetitions, and unexpected moments. Through this process, three recurring spaces and actions surfaced: chickens, towels, and a greenhouse, each deeply significant in context. My entanglement with each of these are introduced below, drawn on from my reflection’s documents throughout the process.

Chickens: Embracing Chaos and Rhythm

“My brain is frazzled... It’s a step forward and a mile back each time! Why wont this flow on paper the way it does in my mind? My head hurts... This feels like overwhelm.

The chicken coop is a place I find myself when in a mental state of chaos. I’m greeted with the erratic flapping of wings, happy clucks, the naughty ones trying to escape, chicken acrobatics, one dustbathing in the corner flapping dust around, pecking order dramas, and so much more. As I navigate between 9 chickens I stop and enjoy the beam of sunlight streaming into the coop. The warmth of the sunshine and the chaos around me calms my mind, the messy and unavoidable intra-actions greet me with purpose as I exhale deeply.”

(Extract from my study diary, 2024)

Image One: Chickens, extract from my study diary.

The process of research can be chaotic and messy, often leaving the researcher with more questions than answers (Monforte, 2018). Yet, through self-observation, I found steadiness within the unpredictability surrounding me. The chicken coop became a place I was subconsciously drawn to throughout this research. It was a space of disorder, yet within that disorder, a subtle organisation was always at play, an ongoing intra-action of bodies, movements, and negotiations that allowed the flock to coexist.

As I navigated the complexities of philosophy, gender, and New Materialism, I noticed parallels between the coop and my research journey. Brady (1990) describes chaos theory as a question of how things are, or are not, organised within one's mind and environment. The coop became a sanctuary where I could sit amongst the chickens and find grounding amid conceptual turbulence. Yet, as I observed them, I realised that the perception of chaos was my own; for them, this was simply the rhythm of existence. They thrived in what I saw as disorder, operating within their own structures of meaning and interaction. This left me reflecting: when I entered their space carrying my own thoughts, was I disrupting their world as much as they unsettled mine?

The entanglement of self, the more-than-human material Matter of the coop, and the chickens themselves became central to my journey through New-Hermetic Materialism. Over time, I became attuned to the rhythms unfolding around me, patterns of movement, interaction, and cohabitation that initially appeared chaotic but revealed an underlying harmony. Drawing on the Hermetic principle of rhythm (Atkinson, 1908) and its belief that 'things too will pass,' I noticed similar patterns within myself. The coop became a space where I could step outside the intensity of my thoughts, allowing ideas to settle and reconfigure unexpectedly.

Animals have the capacity to shift our thinking, offering diffractive encounters that challenge human-centric knowledge-making (Sidebottom and Carlyle, 2023). In many ways, the chickens acted as diffractive companions, prompting me to question assumptions, embrace uncertainty, and lean into the unfolding nature of research. Much like the children at the heart of this thesis, the chickens invited me to sit with the unpredictable, to remain present with the unknown rather than resolve it. And, as chickens so often do, they reminded me to look at the world a little upside down.

Image Two: Chickens



Towels: Thinking through the folds

“100 million pieces, scattered around in my mind. How do I begin piecing it all together? How can thoughts be so contrasting, so powerful when connected but seemingly meaningless alone? How do such thoughts manifest a fold into existence from mind to paper?”

The warmth of the tumble-dried towels comforts me. The softness and smell of fabric conditioner brings awareness to my senses, the environment and texture between my fingertips. I fold the towels one by one, creating layers and structures from the crumpled heap in the dryer before me. I am the power of the fold, feel the Material in the fold, what’s inside the fold is the same as outside. My relationship to this warm material has meaning to the purpose of the object I know as a towel.”

(Extracts from my study diary, 2024)

Image Three: Towels, extract from my study diary.

The simple act of folding towels became an unexpected site of reflection, where the material world and my inner world seemed to move together. As I passed them through my hands, smoothing and folding, I noticed how the fabric layered and refolded, echoing the non-linear rhythms of research itself. The towel was not static but alive with

possibility, holding the warmth of the tumble dryer and the quiet force of repetition. It was an active participant in my thinking; its folds gave shape to thoughts that didn't yet have words. The towel came to represent the shifts, complexities, and multiplicities of my own meaning-making, not as metaphor alone, but as a material companion in the process.

Image Four: Folded towels



Like the research journey, the towel refused to be smoothed into a single, final shape. I was not an external observer but part of the very fabric, shaping, folding, refolding. Folding was not simply organising towels but moving with something that moved with me. Bennett's (2010) concept of Thing-Power reminds us that objects are not passive but vibrant, affecting us in ways we may not always notice. The towel became more than a household item; it acted on me, offering comfort, resistance, rhythm. The act of smoothing, pressing, folding was not just physical but conceptual, allowing me to dwell in-between thoughts, to feel through tension, and to let ideas settle where they needed to. From this small, repeated act emerged a kind of clarity. The towel, through its texture and motion, invited an intimacy with thought that helped me reflect on ethics, entanglement, and relation. In this way, I was living with St. Pierre's (1997, p. 407) in the messy, thinking not from a distance, but from within the folds of life and research. Like research itself, the towel held traces of what had come before, pressing one layer into another, shaping what was yet to come.

Greenhouse: Exploring spaces for growth

“Now what? The threads are there; how do they evolve? I see the same argument from different places, but how do they come together? Can’t have one argument without the other...”

The right temperature, sunlight, water, air, nutrients, and time is what it takes these seeds to germinate. I stood in the greenhouse with the kids today and realised the mirror towards knew knowledge. It takes all these different aspects for a plant to survive, remove one piece of the required environment or damage the seed itself and it dies. The magic lies in the entangled phenomena of the tiny seed.”

(Extracts from my study diary, 2024)

Image Five: Greenhouse, extract from my study diary.

The third space revealed through the *Entangle Tracker* was the greenhouse, a site of transformation, care, and cultivation. Here, new knowledge began to take shape, ideas germinated, and scattered seeds of thought found room to grow. Just as plants require a balance of light, water, and nutrients, I reflected on the conditions needed for knowledge to take root. The parallel between growth in the greenhouse and the cultivation of understanding in research became undeniable.

Standing among the plants, I returned to Maslow (1943) and Bronfenbrenner (1979), contemplating the interplay between environment, care, and development. The greenhouse had become a place of homeschool learning for my children, where they observed, experimented, and developed *gnosis*, the embodied knowledge that arises through experience. Their intuitive understanding of what plants required mirrored my own journey in research: a slow process of tending, noticing, and adapting. Growth, whether in plants or ideas, happens through a web of interdependencies, where nature and nurture entangle in continuous, unfolding processes.

Image Six: Greenhouse

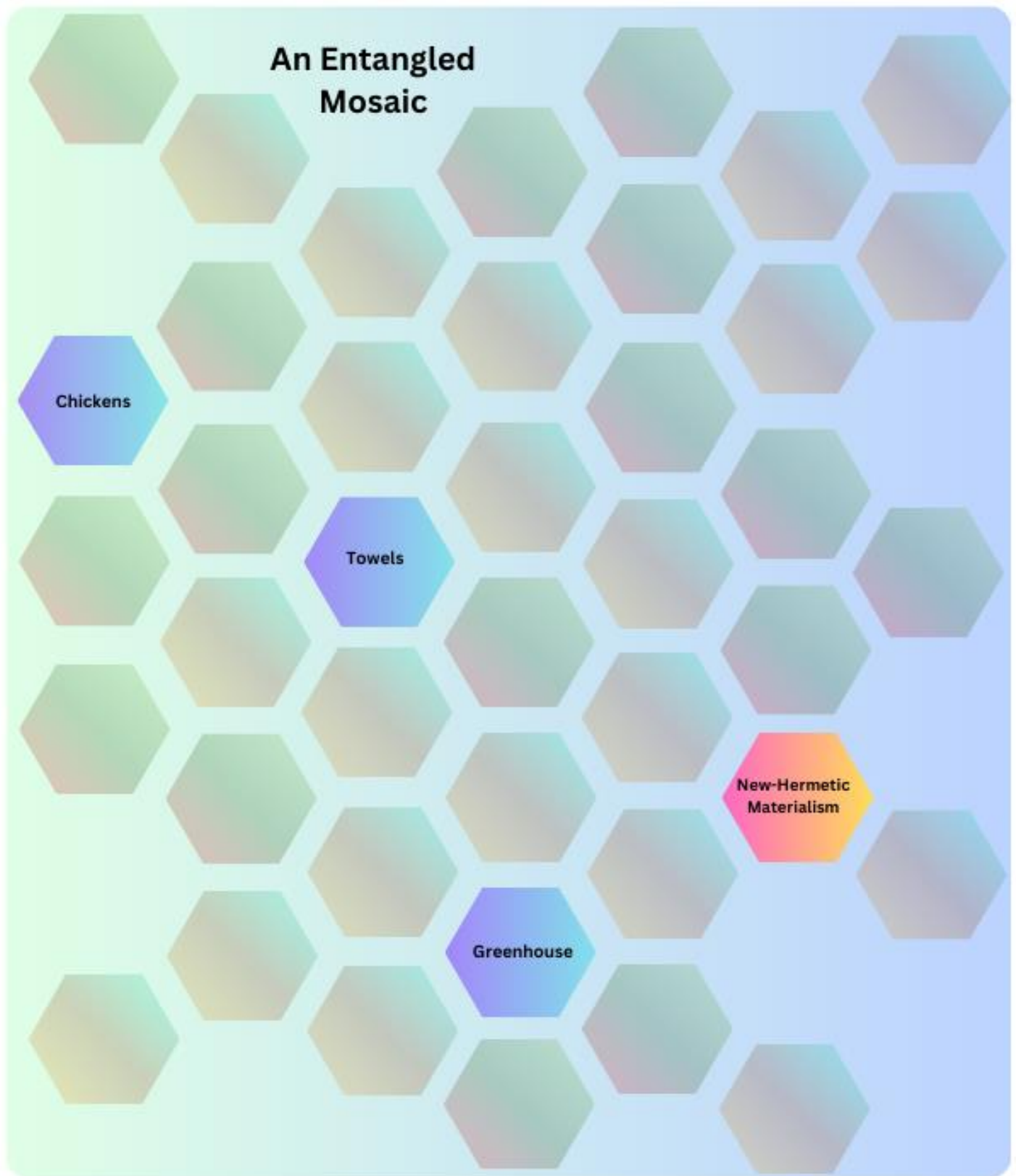


Drake's (2019) exploration of energetics and space further deepened my reflections on the vibrational forces at play within the greenhouse. The Hermetic Principle of Vibration (Atkinson, 1908) suggests that everything moves, everything has frequency; all things, human and more-than-human, are constantly in flux. Chowdhury and Gupta (2012) evidence that sound vibrations, music, and even spoken words can influence plant growth. The idea that unseen forces shape material becoming resonated with the central focus of this thesis: how environments in EY settings influence the unfolding of gender expression. If plants respond to vibrations, to subtle intra-actions, then what of children? How does the Matter that surrounds them, the spoken words, the materials, the spaces shape their becoming? These were the questions I began to ponder.

The greenhouse became more than a site of reflection; it was a reminder that growth is always entangled, dependent on both seen and unseen forces. It reinforced the importance of space, conditions, and energetics not only in research but in the environments, we create for children. The learning spaces of EY education, like the greenhouse, are not passive backdrops but active participants in shaping what is nurtured, what is possible, and what has room to flourish.

The entangled mosaic does not arrive fully formed; it evolves. As each thread of this research becomes woven with the next, a fuller, more complex picture begins to emerge. The first image offers a starting point: it brings into view my own positionality, the philosophical grounding of New Hermetic Materialism, and the everyday materials, chickens, towels, and a greenhouse, through which I began attuning to matter, relation, and meaning-making. These early tiles are not decorative curiosities, but active forces, shaping how I came to see, feel, and engage with the research that followed. Just as the chapters and structure of this thesis unfold and deepen, so too does the mosaic, growing more entangled with every layer.

Image Seven - An Entangled Mosaic: The starting point



1.7 Structure of the thesis:

The thesis unfolds across five interconnected chapters. The literature review situates the research within current academic and policy contexts, tracing three key threads: the social construction of gender in early childhood; the child's right to a voice and lived experiences; and the affective influences shaping gender expression, including the roles of practitioners, environments, and materials. Together, these strands establish the need for a more flexible, responsive pedagogy and highlight the limitations of binary or deficit-based models of inclusion.

The methodology chapter outlines the entangled mosaic approach underpinning the research design. Rather than presenting a linear method, it offers a transparent, reflexive account of how knowledge emerged in-with-through the research. It introduces the participants, both human and more-than-human, alongside key ethical considerations, and describes the layered, iterative process of data generation and analysis.

The discovery chapter offers three thematically organised explorations, replacing traditional 'findings' with discoveries. The first, *The Chicken or the Egg*, explores the entangled roles of children and practitioners in shaping gender expression, considering the implications of superposition in pedagogical practice. The second, *Tuning into the Hidden Folds*, draws on the material presence and quiet force of the towel to examine the layered influences of power, relationships, and social structures in children's meaning-making. The third, *Creating a growing environment*, focuses on the role of the EY environment, including policy, materials, and transitions, in enabling or constraining gender expression. Each chapter foregrounds intra-action and offers insight into how gender is lived and negotiated in EY contexts.

The final chapter, *An Entangled Mosaic: new knowledge and way forward*, synthesises the discoveries and reflects on the research questions. It considers implications for EY practice, including how gender-flexible pedagogy can be developed and enacted. Recommendations are offered for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers, drawing on the study's theoretical and empirical contributions. In doing so, the thesis advocates for a critically reflective, ethically responsive, and relationally attuned approach to

gender in early childhood education, one that values complexity, difference, and the ongoing processes of becoming.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction: Scope of the Literature

This research explores the lives, experiences, and expressions of early years (EY) children in relation to gender. The literature review adopts a narrative approach, offering a flexible route through a wide and sometimes contradictory field (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). It creates space for the layered, shifting ways gender is lived and understood by young children, aligning with the entangled nature of Chapter One. Key searches identified both foundational and recent literature spanning early childhood, gender theory, and child development. These texts are organised into five themes that support the study's inquiry and reflect its conceptual and ethical positioning.

The Complexities of Gender engages with broader cultural, political, and philosophical conversations. It considers how children's experiences are shaped by language, historical power structures (Butler, 1990), and a societal focus on gender identity. This discussion draws on anthropological perspectives (Ryan and Jetha, 2010) and explores the more-than-human entanglements (Moxnes and Osgood, 2018) that influence meaning-making. Positioning Gender in EY explores how these conversations manifest in practice. Grounded in developmental theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and philosophical views of children as becomings, this theme examines how binary notions of sex and gender are reinforced in EY systems. It interrogates stereotypes and mental models of gender (Bem, 1981), highlighting expression as integral to children's agency and identity.

Listening to the Voice of the Child focuses on listening practices. Methods like the Mosaic Approach (Clark and Moss, 2010) support attunement to children's many languages of expression. Grounded in Malaguzzi's (1993) work on the 100 languages of

childhood, this section considers how many are lost in formal systems, alongside ethical and power-related tensions in listening (UNICEF, 1989; Foucault, 2020). Gender Blindness in policy and practice shifts focus to the practitioner. It explores reflection and reflexivity in addressing blind spots in gender awareness, drawing on reflective theory (Dewey, 1933) and emotional intelligence in professional identity (Goleman, 1996). Diffractive methodologies (Sidebottom and Carlyle, 2023) help make visible intra-actions between practitioners, children, and environments. This section revisits critiques of dominant discourses (Wingrave, 2018; Johnson, 2023), calling for deeper engagement with gendered dimensions of EY work. Finally, Gender Flexible Pedagogy considers what is possible. Building on Warin's (2023) call for inclusive approaches, it explores reflective practice, EY resources, and enabling environments. This includes the spatial politics of learning (Borve and Borve, 2017), gendered aspects of toys and media (Ede and Da Ros-Voseles, 2010), and alternative approaches to material play (Anggard, 2011). Recognising how environments and materials shape gendered experience, this theme explores how practitioners can design spaces that expand, rather than limit, children's self-expression.

Together, these themes trace the terrain shaping gender in EY, spanning the social, material, and relational. This chapter offers both a map and a narrative: a review of literature on children's gender expression and a journey into what it means to truly listen, observe, and respond in EY practice.

2.2 The complexities of Gender

“Gender is in everything; everything has its Masculine and Feminine principles; Gender manifests on all planes of existence”.

(The Kybalion, 1908- 2018)

Society is witnessing a significant shift in how gender is understood and discussed. This transformation is reflected in evolving social norms, political debates, and EY policy initiatives (Warin, 2023). Whilst gender has long featured in global agendas such as the United Nations, its visibility within education has grown, reflected in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015), which highlights inclusive, quality

education (SDGs 4 and 5). These broader shifts increasingly inform EY practice in the UK (Josephidou and Bolshaw, 2020; Stock, 2021).

Recent figures from the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS, 2023) report over 4,700 referrals including children as young as four. In response, the National Health Service (NHS) commissioned the Cass Review, raising questions about how best to support gender-diverse young people (Cass, 2023). Yet, the Department for Education's non-statutory guidance (DfE, 2023) leaves many EY practitioners navigating these conversations with limited clear support.

This study adopts a focus on how gender is lived, expressed, and co-constructed in EY contexts. It centres young children's social worlds, examining how relationships, environments, and pedagogies shape emerging understandings of gender. This lens complements dominant narratives by focusing on early expression rather than later transition. Simultaneously, concerns have grown about toxic masculinity and online misogyny. Figures like Andrew Tate have gained traction with young audiences, with UK teachers reporting increases in sexist language and gendered behaviours among boys (Weale, 2023). These early influences shape attitudes for years to come, making EY a critical period for addressing harmful stereotypes and cultivating respectful gender understandings. The complexities of sex and gender shape not only identity but also children's relationships, opportunities, and sense of belonging (Bosson, Buckner and Vandello, 2022). As a society committed to children's rights (UNICEF, 1989), safety, and well-being (DfE, 2023), it is vital to engage meaningfully with gender from the earliest stages. Very young children are deeply influenced by their environments yet often excluded from policy conversations. As the Early Years Coalition (2021) argues, EY practitioners are not only educators but play a key role in supporting children's emotional, social, and identity development. By attending to gender in early childhood, this research aims to contribute to more thoughtful, inclusive pedagogies that listen to children and create space for diverse ways of being.

Complexities of language

Language surrounding sex and gender has evolved over centuries (Meyerowitz, 2008), with scholars from women's studies to psychology attempting to clarify distinctions (Scott, 1986). Unger (1979) highlighted confusion in psychological literature, advocating for 'sex' to denote biological attributes and 'gender' for culturally constructed aspects, a distinction echoed by Bosson, Buckner, and Vandello (2022). However, biology and social influence intertwine; for instance, while men may exhibit higher aggression on average, this reflects complex biological and social interplay (Severson and Barclay, 2015). Joel and Vihanski's (2019) brain analyses further suggest minimal sex-based differences, emphasizing social influence on biological behaviour and developed emotions.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) acknowledged that prior government definitions of sex and gender "are no longer current and do not reflect a current cross-government agreed position" (ONS, 2023). Yet, in recent legal developments, (April 2025), the UK Supreme Court ruled that, under the Equality Act 2010, 'sex' refers to biological sex, excluding both transgender women and men from the legal definition of 'woman' or 'man' even with a Gender Recognition Certificate (Sedghi, 2025). This has significant implications for legislation like the Gender Recognition Act (2004), raising debates about its alignment with contemporary understandings.

This research thesis aligns with the NHS's (2021) definition of sex as a classification based on genetic and biological characteristics, encompassing male, female, and intersex. Stock (2021) and Eagly (2013) similarly define sex biologically. While Stock's position aligns with recent UK legal interpretations (UK Supreme Court, 2025), it has been critiqued for overlooking lived, socially constructed dimensions of gender and for failing to capture the complexity and diversity of identity (Fine *et al.*, 2023). Stock calls for separating sex and gender identity, while critics argue these cannot be easily divided. Furthermore, Blackless *et al.* (2000) estimate that approximately 1.7% of infants are born with intersex traits, though this figure has been debated (Sax, 2002). Regardless, such evidence challenges strict biological male/female binaries, highlighting the need for understandings of the spectrum of biological sex to be inclusive of intersex bodies.

While definitions of sex may appear more fixed, gender is widely recognised as fluid and socially constructed. In the U.S., young people have identified over 100 terms to describe gender identities (Rankin and Beemyn, 2011); a UK study found 23 terms among young people (Bragg *et al.*, 2018), illustrating this diversity. Language evolves (Garg, Scheibinger, and Jurafsky, 2018); for example, 'girl' once referred to any child, and pink was historically linked to boys, with colour associations shifting over time (Aries, 1965). These shifts challenge gender norm fixity and open space for authentic, evolving self-expression.

Current policy struggles to provide stable definitions of gender. Etymological study offers insight into language's evolution alongside cultural narratives. The term *gender* dates to the 1300s, from Latin *genus* (species/kind) and *generare* (to beget/procreate). In the 14th century, it encompassed masculinity and femininity not as fixed binaries but as individual, fluid attributes (Etymonline, 2023). Whereas, from the 17th century onward, sex became increasingly eroticised and subject to moral governance (Foucault, 2020).

This research reclaims gender in line with Hermetic philosophy as a layered, multidimensional concept existing across three interconnected planes (Atkinson, 1908). First, on the physical plane, gender includes biological sex and physical attributes, here termed sex-based gender. Second, it operates on the mental plane, reflecting a person's internal sense of masculinity and femininity, which is commonly termed gender identity (Bosson, Buckner and Vandello, 2022). Third, gender functions socially, as outward expression through clothing, presentation, and interaction (Martin, 2011). This three-plane framing allows for broader understandings that resist binaries and acknowledge the dynamic nature of gender.

Non-Western and historical frameworks offer rich, alternative perspectives on gender. Many Indigenous cultures present holistic understandings of gender, not as fixed or tied solely to biological sex, but as fluid, relational and culturally embedded. For example, Native American Two-Spirit identities encompass both masculine and feminine traits recognised as spiritually significant and socially integrated (Roscoe, 1998). Similarly, in South Asia, Hijras are recognised as a third gender. While many are born biologically male, but their social, ritual, spiritual and expressed identities position them as

something other than male or female. This third-gender identity holds deep cultural significance (Nanda, 1999). The Muxe in Zapotec communities of Mexico represent accepted third-gender identities (Mirandé, 2016), not as marginal exceptions but as integrated members of society. These examples demonstrate that gender diversity is neither new nor inherently marginal, rather, it has long been part of richly woven cultural fabrics that resist western binaries. Western historical perspectives also offer alternative framings. Laqueur's (1990) one-sex theory suggests that until the Enlightenment, male and female bodies were viewed as variations of the same essential form. Only later did rigid two-sex models emerge, reinforcing binary thinking. Revisiting these diverse and historical narratives offers a critical lens through which to examine how language, culture, and power have shaped, and continue to shape, our understandings of gender. Clarifying these terms lays the groundwork for educational research that supports more inclusive, nuanced, and respectful practice (Kamler and Thomson, 2006).

Gender, power, and its complications

Sex-based gender, its accompanying power dynamics, and social stereotypes have long been central to EY research (King *et al.*, 2021). Yet, the narrative surrounding these expectations has evolved through centuries of interwoven social change, shifting roles, and transformations in how power is organised and enacted. Understanding this landscape calls for revisiting ancient tribal norms (Ryan and Jetha, 2010) and recognising the lasting influences of agriculture, industrialisation, and colonialism (Said, 1978). Each has shaped contemporary concepts such as sex-based characteristics (Bem, 1974) and gender performativity (Butler, 1990), which continue to inform how gender is understood today.

Rewinding several million years reveals key shifts in early human mating systems. Homo erectus transitioned from gorilla-like alpha-male dominance to more egalitarian sexual access for most males (Lovejoy, 1981) suggesting that rigid monogamy and sex-based hierarchies are not the evolutionary norm, but social constructs emerging later (Ryan and Jetha, 2010). Woodburn (1998), in his research into foraging societies in Botswana, Aboriginal groups, and the Amazon, identified these as 'immediate-return hunter-gatherer societies,' where power and resources were shared within flat hierarchies

(Boehm, 1999). In such contexts, communal care, shared parenting, and distributed responsibility reflected individual capability rather than biological sex. Pragmatic sharing in Indigenous North American tribes (Bosson et al., 2022) reinforces how non-binary gender roles enable ability-based participation. In this way, Woodburn's findings support Ryan and Jetha's (2010) argument that sex-based power dynamics are culturally, rather than biologically, determined.

The Agricultural Revolution marked a turning point. With permanent settlements, land ownership, and property lines emerged, so too did concepts of possession, reproduction control, and paternity (Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Ryan and Jetha, 2010). Building on this, Mithen (2007) links farming with shifts in power, gender roles, and sexuality governance. As these social structures solidified, sexuality became increasingly regulated (Foucault, 2020), voyeuristic, homophobic, and tied to reproduction. In particular, non-procreative sex was framed as morally deviant or economically wasteful, diverting labour from capitalist productivity (Foucault, 1990; Weber, 1905). Foucault describes the division of legitimate and illegitimate sexualities, thereby relegating repressed desires to hidden zones such as brothels.

Women's symbolic status shifted dramatically, from respected autonomy in foraging societies to controlled possessions (Lerner, 1986). In parallel with this transformation, binary gender roles solidified under patriarchy, property, and productivity. However, Bem's sex role theory (1974) challenged these binaries, proposing androgyny, a blending of masculine and feminine traits, as an alternative. According to Bem, strict gender roles, restrict behavioural freedom and authentic expression expanding the critique of binary constructions. Yet rigid gender norms remain deeply entrenched. Early psychological studies such as those by Kagan (1964) and Kohlberg (1966) found that those invested in sex-typed roles actively conform and suppress expression. Martino, Kassen, and Omercajic (2022) argue that inclusive pedagogy must move beyond surface representation to challenge structural marginalisation. This becomes especially urgent in the context of increasingly rigid and harmful gender scripts promoted by some online influencers (Diepeveen, 2024). A nuanced, responsive approach is therefore needed,

one that acknowledges the material realities of biology while actively challenging the stereotypes that constrain children's gender expression within EY pedagogy.

2.3 Positioning Gender in Early Years

In young children's daily lives, gender is already at play, in bodies, feelings, choices, and how the world intra-acts with them. To position gender meaningfully in EY practice is to recognise it as a central part of becoming (UNICEF, 2022). From a New-Hermetic Materialist perspective, gender is not simply learned or assigned but emerges through the entangled interplay of the physical (sex-based), the mental (inner identity), and the social (gender expression). Each dimension shapes how children come to know themselves and others. This section explores how these lenses unfold in EY contexts and why recognising their complexity is vital for inclusive, attuned, and transformative pedagogy.

Sex-Based Gender: Challenging Stereotypes

Challenging sex-based gender stereotypes and their presumed intersection with sexuality is a key focus in EY policy (DfE, 2023) and broader frameworks like the Equality Act (2010). From early on, children encounter societal norms dictating what it means to be a 'boy' or 'girl,' influencing dress, preferences, behaviours, and expression. Martin (2011) emphasises how deeply these expectations are embedded in early childhood. Initiatives like the Girls Can Boys Can project (Wells and Campbell, 2021) promote freedom to explore traits and activities without rigid norms, encouraging environments where children engage in behaviours traditionally labelled as masculine or feminine. Likewise, documentaries such as BBC's *No More Boys and Girls* (2017) illustrate how transforming classrooms into gender-neutral spaces can shift children's perceptions and behaviours. Research by Dinella *et al.* (2017), Marshall and Shibazaki (2020), and Laemmle (2013) further shows how play choices and gender expression are shaped by binary stereotypes in children's environments. While efforts to challenge these norms through inclusive resources, non-gendered language, and diverse representation are commendable, focusing solely on binary views can inadvertently reinforce sex-based gender and overlook children's internal gender identities (Morgenroth and Ryan, 2021).

Emerging research also links gender concepts with children's developing understanding of sexuality, raising concerns about stereotyping. Studies on homophobia in education (Jennett *et al.*, 2004) and heteronormativity in EY settings (Johnson, 2023) show how educational environments often fail to fully support authentic expression due to systemic reinforcement of cisnormative standards. Practitioners' perceptions, shaped by broader social and cultural narratives, influence daily interactions and decisions (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2018). Brownhill and Oates (2017) discuss how gender roles are also imposed on EY practitioners themselves, a longstanding sector issue (Nutbrown, 2012) that affects the shift toward child-centred practice. Addressing these challenges requires significant shifts in both social narratives and institutional practice. King *et al.* (2021) call for research into practitioner perceptions and strengthening institutional knowledge, emphasising benefits for children, educators, and society. This requires reflexive practice, environmental awareness, and active challenges to sex-based stereotypes to minimise gender blindness.

Mental Gender

The interweaving relationship between the physical, mental, and social planes is paramount. The principle of correspondence (Kybalion, 1908) suggests a dynamic alignment between the laws and phenomena of different planes of existence. This perspective offers insight into how manifestation, interpretation, body, and mind align and are expressed into the social world. This research focuses on the mental plane of gender: how a child's reality is co-constructed through lived experience and expressed within the EY environment.

Drawing from Hermetic philosophy (The Kybalion, 1908) and psychological gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), the concept of mental gender proposes an evolving balance of masculine and feminine states that shape one's sense of self, expressed socially. Two spaces occupy this self-understanding: the 'I' and the 'Me'. The 'I', often aligned with masculine aspects, represents active, decisive, and objective characteristics commonly encouraged in children (Bem, 1981). The 'Me' reflects the feminine, creative, caring, and imaginative aspects that generate ideas. Both are expressed uniquely and should be nurtured for holistic child development. However, it is important to note that this 'I'/'Me'

dichotomy reflects Western philosophical traditions and may not universally apply. Yunkaporta (2019), for example, notes that some Indigenous Australian cultures reject such separations, which may even be seen as psychopathic, highlighting the need for cultural sensitivity and caution against imposing Western frameworks universally. Observations indicate that children's expressions are often constrained by what is permitted within specific contexts (Palaiologou, 2019). Therefore, awareness of mental gender in EY enables practitioners to tune into children's unique expressions and support their holistic development.

Gender Expression

Gender expression refers to the external manifestation of one's mental gender identity, encompassing behaviours, clothing, hairstyles, voice, and body language. In EY settings, children's gender expressions are often influenced by societal norms and expectations, which can either constrain or facilitate their authentic self-expression. Research indicates that children's play choices and interactions are significantly shaped by gendered expectations. For instance, Blaise (2005) observed that children's play often reinforces traditional gender roles, with boys engaging in more active play and girls in more nurturing activities. Similarly, MacNaughton (2000) highlights how early childhood educators can unconsciously perpetuate gender stereotypes through their interactions and the resources they provide. To foster an inclusive environment, practitioners must critically reflect on their own biases and the potential impact on children's gender expression. Implementing a gender-flexible pedagogy, as advocated by Warin (2023), involves creating spaces where children feel free to explore a range of identities and expressions without fear of judgment or restriction. By collaborating with parents and caregivers, practitioners can promote consistency, and opportunities for gender expression both within the educational setting and at home, promoting a culture of acceptance and diversity.

2.3 Gender blindness in policy and practice

This discussion begins by exploring the role of policy in shaping practitioner awareness, training, and practice. Preschool development is guided by frameworks like the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2023) and Development Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021), both of which affirm that every child is unique (DfE, 2023). The EYFS states:

“It is vital that we get to know and value all young children as individuals, as all children learn more in the period from birth to five years than any other time in their lives” (p.4).

While promoting individualised learning, the EYFS directs focus toward developmental domains: communication, physical development, personal and social development, literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, and expressive arts (DfE, 2020). Despite their holistic framing, these documents offer limited engagement with gender as part of identity, even though gender shapes children’s social worlds from early on. Foundational theories such as Kohlberg’s (1966) gender constancy model and Bem’s (1981) gender schema theory highlight gender’s early role in identity formation. This policy gap contributes to what scholars identify as gender blindness (Lanfranconi, 2025), the assumption that equality means treating children the same, rather than recognising their gendered experiences. The statutory EYFS (DfE, 2023) offers no direct reference to gender as developmental, limiting guidance to anti-discrimination language from the Equality Act (2010), where gender reassignment is listed as a protected characteristic. In doing so, policy not only omits gender but risks reinforcing a culture where practitioners view gender as beyond their remit.

Non-statutory frameworks provide more explicit, though limited, guidance. Development Matters (DfE, 2023) encourages challenging gender stereotypes through inclusive resources, language, and diverse representations. Birth to 5 Matters (Early Years Coalition, 2021) goes further, urging practitioners to reflect on biases, cautioning that unexamined attitudes perpetuate inequality (p.6), and affirming that settings should support children’s developing gender identities while actively challenging unconscious bias (p.9). Yet even these frameworks treat gender primarily as a social concern,

overlooking it as an integral part of children's identity and development. The absence of children's voices and limited engagement with gender as a complex process suggest either underdeveloped understanding or intentional neutrality. In both cases, this limited engagement does little to challenge dominant discourses, pointing to the need for more robust, inclusive EY approaches.

In contrast, Sweden offers more explicit gender inclusion. Arlemalm-Hagser (2010) highlights how Sweden's national preschool curriculum is underpinned by gender equity and equal rights, directly guiding pedagogy. Yet tensions remain in one setting labelled a "gender-neutral zone," stereotypical behaviours persisted. Even with advanced policy, unconscious norms shaped environments, revealing that policy alone is insufficient, indicating that gender must be embedded and continually reflected upon in daily practice.

Across contexts, policy gaps leave practitioners with limited support or training (Lynch, 2015). Wingrave (2018) notes that practitioners often exhibit gender blindness, failing to reflect on gender or denying their role in shaping children's identities. Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman (2002) similarly found that while practitioners recognise wider social influences, they struggle to see how their own roles influence gender identity. This suggests that gender blindness is not mere ignorance but reflects deeply ingrained beliefs that gender is shaped elsewhere, at home, in media, or biologically, not in EY classrooms.

Martin's (1998) ethnographic research reveals how gender is embodied through routines, voice control, dress codes, and physical movement, often unconsciously reinforced by staff. These hidden curriculum elements suggest that practitioners shape gender even while believing they do not. Martin (2011) also illustrates how children learn gender through play and peer policing, with adults often unaware of these dynamics. Her concept of gender norms enforcement reveals how both children and practitioners participate in maintain traditional gender roles in routine interactions. Collectively, such research suggests gender blindness is not a passive absence but an active process requiring deliberate reflection. As Scantlebury (1995) argues, blindness begins not in

classrooms, but within practitioners' assumptions. Without introspection, practitioners risk reproducing norms they may not even perceive.

2.5 Listening to the Voice of the Child

“The Child has 100 languages, A hundred hands, A hundred thoughts, A hundred ways of thinking [...] and listening, but they steal ninety-nine. The school and the culture, separate the head from the body”.
(Loris Malaguzzi, 1996)

Malaguzzi's words capture the heart of why listening to young children must go far beyond verbal language. Children express themselves in multiple ways, through movement, art, play, gesture, and emotion, which Malaguzzi (1993) famously framed as the '100 languages of children'. This idea, embedded within approaches like Reggio Emilia and Montessori, emphasises the need to recognise children as creative, expressive beings capable of communicating in diverse forms (Biffi and Zuccoli, 2019; Lyndon, 2016; Palaiologou, 2019). Yet, as Malaguzzi warns, many of these expressive languages risk being silenced as children are required to spend more time 'learning' in their head than intra-acting in-with-through the world through using their mind and body. Thus, becoming more prominent as they move through formal education systems, making EY a critical stage for observing their unfolding gendered and personal expressions (Martin, 2011).

Within this context, personalised learning and observation remain central to EY practice and policy (DfE, 2023), where practitioners are encouraged to observe not only developmental milestones but the meaning-making processes behind children's actions and communications (Clarke, 2019). Quast (2018) argues that listening must be seen as a pedagogical stance rather than an optional practice. While it may never be possible to fully separate adult perceptions from children's expressions, responsive listening seeks to centre the child's worldview with care and reflexivity, acknowledging that all voices are shaped by family, peers, media, and wider sociocultural influences. Honouring children as active learners (Johnston, 2012) in their unique expressions suggests that listening through observation holds transformational potential in accessing children's meaning-making processes.

Listening to young children is not simply a passive act but requires attunement to verbal, non-verbal, emotional, and contextual cues (Lefevre, 2010). This provides opportunities to listen to more than just the verbal transmission of ideas but rather a wider mosaic of creative, multi-(con)textual opportunities embedded within daily practice (Clark, 2006). Eide and Winger (2005) add that attuned listening not only enhances children's self-esteem and sense of purpose but upholds their right "to be listened to and taken seriously" (UNICEF, 1989).

As Merewether (2018) highlights, for many children in EY, words are not their primary means of communication. When researching with children, how we listen becomes paramount. Documentation methods such as photos, videos, audio and visual recordings offer further opportunities to capture children's voices. Clarke and Moss's (2006) 'mosaic approach' aligns with this, offering a multi-method, participatory, reflexive, and adaptable framework focused on children's lived experiences. This approach encourages practitioners to listen through multiple lenses to build a fuller representation of each child's unique perspective (Clarke, 2019). Kingdon (2019) further suggests the mosaic approach extends beyond research, offering a broader methodological stance for multi-(con)textual listening.

Listening in multi-textual and multi-contextual ways, that is, attending to children's diverse forms of expression and the multiple environments in which they intra-act, allows for a deeper understanding of how each child experiences themselves and the world around them (Sumsion *et al.*, 2011). The importance of multi-(con)textual listening and its benefits in EY research is well established (Hedges and Jopling, 2019), with growing recognition of the value in 'tuning in' to the lived phenomena of children (Kupfer, 2011). Muela *et al.* (2019), for example, argue for children's active participation in research and demonstrate how adopting Clarke's (2019) mosaic approach can enhance EY provision through more attuned practices.

However, despite these developments, much of the research exploring gender in early childhood has focused predominantly on challenging stereotypes (Manaster and Jobe, 2012), rather than engaging with children's own expressions or practitioner observations (Degotardi, 2011; Wingrave, 2018). Clark and Moss's participatory methodologies offer

new ways to listen to children's voices directly, yet this is not widely reflected in gender-focused studies. For instance, Shutts *et al.* (2017) recreated a preschool classroom in Sweden to promote gender neutrality yet found only moderate effects on children's thinking. Their findings suggest that simply modifying the environment or challenging adult assumptions does not fully capture how children make sense of gender.

This raises an important question: if adult framing alone cannot shift gendered understanding, how might children's internal experiences be accessed more authentically? Multi-(con)textual listening offers a promising route, but only when paired with a deep pedagogical commitment to relational, ethical, and reflexive practice. It is not just an appealing ideal, but a necessary orientation if we are to take children's gendered subjectivities seriously. By adopting new ways of listening, such as Clarke's (2019) mosaic approach, practitioners can tune into the varied ways children express their meaning-making. Yet working with young children through mirrored listening and observation requires careful attention to the power dynamics at play. Involving children as active research participants demands creativity, responsiveness, and ethical sensitivity across the process (Roberts-Holmes, 2005). To minimise the typical panoptical structures that dominate education (Foucault, 2020), children must feel heard, seen, and empowered through interactions embedded in pedagogical practice, not bolted on for research purposes (Dockett and Perry, 2017).

The child's multi-(con)textual voice holds insight into their sex-based, mental, and social expressions of gender (Kohlberg, 1966) but engaging with it can also expose emotional vulnerability, especially if power is not carefully negotiated. Palaiologou (2014) outlines six layers of ethical consideration in child research, with the child-adult relationship positioned as paramount. This need for meaningful relationships was also advanced by Waller and Bitou (2011) who suggest that learning together through play and creativity opens space for children to lead, test boundaries, and navigate agency within adult relationships. Mukherji and Albon (2010) similarly proposed that playful co-participation enables power-sharing and deeper exploration of what matters to both child and researcher.

To support such practice, emotionally intelligent practitioners are essential. Kremenitzer (2005) argues that educators who demonstrate perception, access, understanding, and regulation skills are better able to centre the child's voice in both research and pedagogy (Veale, 2005). Tuned-in practitioners who possess self-awareness and reflexivity are better equipped to engage in mirrored listening and to deconstruct hierarchical norms in EY contexts. Wingrave (2018) reinforces this, identifying significant gaps in practitioner knowledge around gender and their own influence and responsibility in children's gender development.

2.6 Gender flexible pedagogy

This section builds on the work of Warin (2023), who critically explored how EY and primary education often sustain cis-normative binaries, that is, the assumption that everyone identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth, through practice and a lack of gender awareness. In response, Warin coined the term gender flexible pedagogy, a call for practice rooted in reflexivity, responsiveness, and fluidity. Her research identified three influential aspects shaping children's gendered experiences: reflective practice, EY resources, and the enabling environment. This section continues that exploration, examining how each of these strands supports or constrains a child's ability to express their gender. Each is considered in turn for its role in shaping gender expression, before being brought together to reflect on their broader significance in the EY landscape.

Reflective Practice

“Wherever I go, There I am”
(Le Gallais, 2008)

Le Gallais, (2008) offers a simple but profound reminder of the nature of reflection in EY practice. Practitioners cannot separate themselves from their experiences; their emotional, social and intellectual selves are always present (Ashmore, 1989), making reflection a subjective, embodied process rather than a tidy, objective exercise. Kremenitzer (2005) suggest that EY practitioners should innately understand the significant influence they have on children's social and emotional development. A

fundamental aspect of this role involves nurturing emotional intelligence both in themselves and in young children, which requires an awareness of self when responding to the uncertainties of practice (Hargreaves, 2001). Dewey's (1933) early work introduced reflection as thinking-through-doing, where practitioners continually learn from experience. Building on this, Schön (1983), Zeichner (1981), and Cruikshank (1987) developed the reflective teacher model, a practitioner who learns by observing and adjusting practice in response to unfolding situations.

However, as Ashmore (1989) and Clark (2018) emphasise, reflection is not simply an intellectual exercise, but one that involves the full emotional and social being of the practitioner. As such, reflexivity, the ability to position oneself within the experience, becomes vital (Matthews and Jessel, 1996). Manen (1991) adds further depth to this with his notion of pedagogical tact, the intuitive, embodied sensitivity that allows practitioners to respond to children's needs in the moment, drawing on lived experience, empathy and judgment.

Riojas-Cortez, Alanis and Flores (2013) argue that EY teachers not only need to understand how children learn but must also integrate children's personal experiences into learning encounters. When reflexivity moves into action, it becomes praxis, a continual cycle of learning, practice, and reflection that creates opportunities for transformation (Freire, 1972, p.96). However, as Wood and Bennett (2000) caution, practitioners require supportive spaces where they can share experiences, express vulnerability, and engage in professional dialogue to explore these complexities fully. Communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) can provide such collaborative environments for grappling with sensitive and challenging aspects of pedagogy, such as gender, yet accessing such spaces presents its own limitations. hooks (1994, p.21) further suggests that these opportunities are important to practitioners' development as; "Teachers must be willing to confront their own biases if they are to create a learning space that is truly liberatory". Yet, teacher training often lacks dedicated space for practitioners to critically reflect on how their own assumptions and practices may reinforce dominant gender norms (Ellsworth, 1989).

Gender, in its wild nature, is messy. It is multi-faceted and requires one to understand various levels of their own self. Halberstam and Nyong (2018) suggest that this wildness might help explain why it has been so absent from EY policy and practice. Gender blindness, the idea that “sex is the difference that makes no difference” (Martin, 2011), has long shaped teacher beliefs. While treating all children the same may feel like the safest and fairest approach, it can close off opportunities to notice how gender plays out in practice. Warin (2023) describes this as an unconscious disregard, and it has been observed in classrooms for decades (Tobin, 1987). Warin’s (2023) own research with two sample groups, an all-female (Indonesian study) and all male group (Swedish Study) revealed that the male group demonstrated higher levels of gender consciousness and awareness of their role in shaping children’s gendered experiences than the female sample. This highlights how cultural context influences practitioner perspectives and responses, but also reinforces that, across contexts, the widespread belief that EYP have little or no influence on gender remains prevalent (Wingrave, 2016).

To begin moving beyond gender blindness, we might turn to diffractive praxis. Building on Barad’s (2007) idea of intra-action, this approach suggests that nothing stands apart. Everything in an EY space, the child, the practitioner, the weather, the furniture, the memories and moods, is entangled. Diffraction, a term from physics, describes how light behaves differently depending on what it passes through. In a classroom, that prism might be a practitioner’s worldview, or a child’s experience, or a material on the carpet. Sidebottom and Carlyle (2023) explore this diffractive lens in EY work, where practitioners learn to see patterns between themselves, the children, and the world around them. It is not about control or prediction; it is about curiosity. Lambert (2021) and Strom and Martin (2017) echo this, showing how moments in the classroom are shaped by human and non-human forces alike. Haraway (2008) and Braidotti (2019) invite us to imagine what might emerge if we stopped centring the human and started paying attention to the systems and forces, we are part of.

My own reflection during the process of this research evolved through a kind of noticing that often happened in the chicken coop. A space I found myself returning to when feeling overwhelmed. Their lively unpredictability gave me room to reflect, and their chaos

became part of how I stayed with the questions that arose in the data. This approach asks EY practitioners to move beyond the idea that they are separate from the learning encounters in their setting, or from the unfolding of gender. It encourages a shift in perspective, towards recognising how assumptions, habits, and the environment shape what is possible for children to express. Diffractive praxis supports educators in noticing how their presence, the materials they provide, and the relational patterns they engage in all contribute to the conditions of gender expression (Barad, 2007; Sidebottom and Carlyle, 2023). Rather than managing gender, practitioners are invited, as Warin (2023), and Braidotti (2019) suggest, to witness, respond to, and honour it as it emerges, attuned to the entangled, affective, and transformative nature of early childhood learning. This is also central to the approach adopted in this research.

Early Years Resources:

Many resources are selected, adapted, and provided in EY classrooms across the country daily. Yet, when selecting such resources, Warin (2023) explains that practitioners need to consider not only what children do and play with, but how the resources they use have the potential to trap them into sex-based gendered, stereotyped play. Each object, be it a doll, a block, or a piece of fabric, holds the potential to evoke memories, spark imagination, and invite children into a dialogue with the world around them. These materials become containers of narrative, offering children opportunities to explore, revisit, and build upon shared and personal stories. Drawing on Bennett's concept of Thing-power (2010), we recognize that objects possess a vitality that can influence human experiences and actions. Bennett (2010, p.6) describes Thing-power as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle”. In my own reflective practice, the towel became this object to me, seemingly ordinary, yet full of quiet force. Its folds, textures, and rhythms held space for thinking, reminding me that Matter matters. In the context of EY education, this suggests that resources are not passive; they actively participate in the learning environment, shaping and being shaped by the interactions they engage in (Carr and Lee, 2019). Gale (2018, p.155) further suggests that objects are multi-dimensional, in that they are never experienced in the same way twice; their meanings and uses are continually reconstituted through different contexts, interactions, and imaginations. In an EY

environment, resources are in continuous fluxes of assemblages, dynamic networks of relationships that include human and non-human actors, spaces, and temporalities. As Paley (1990) illustrates through her storytelling work, these materials are not just tools but participants in the co-construction of meaning. Each of these unique assemblages underscores the intra-active nature of learning environments, where agency is distributed across various elements, and meaning emerges through entangled relations.

Alongside these material complexities, external cultural forces also shape how gendered narratives enter the EY space, beginning with advertising. The Let Toys Be Toys campaign (2015) emerged in response to highly gendered marketing in children's toys, urging retailers to drop signs and packaging that segregated toys by gender. While their 2016 report noted some progress, they continued to find persistent patterns: boys were marketed toys that emphasised power and action, while girls were steered toward beauty, relationships, and fantasy (Warin, 2023). These subtle and overt messages easily filter into EY settings, shaping both adult expectations and children's self-expression. For practitioners, recognising and disrupting these pre-existing 'norms' becomes crucial when curating learning environments.

Practitioner choices in selecting and presenting resources add another important layer. Anggard's (2011) Swedish study explored how the removal of adult-selected toys, replaced by open-ended natural materials (as often used in Montessori and Reggio Emilia-inspired settings), created space for more fluid play. While these unstructured materials allowed for greater interpretation, children still enacted gendered play narratives, such as superhero battles or family roles, suggesting that open-endedness alone cannot erase the wider cultural scripts children bring with them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Francis (2010) extends this critique, arguing that debates around gendered toys often overlook how particular toys foster learning outcomes: technical or physical development for boys, emotional literacy and communication for girls (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992). If these patterns go unexamined, resource selection may unintentionally reproduce gendered learning pathways.

Parental influence also remains a powerful force. Children often bring transitional objects from home (Litt, 1986), blending family and classroom environments. Francis

(2010), in her research with parents, found that while parents supported challenging stereotypes in principle, their children's favourite toys often reflected deeply gendered preferences: girls favoured dolls like BRATZ and Baby Annabelle, which emphasised appearance and caregiving; boys gravitated toward action figures like Power Rangers, associated with strength and technology. Tenenbaum and Leaper (2002) highlight how parents' gendered expectations shape children's thinking from an early age, while Warin (2023) observes that parents sometimes hesitate to fully embrace more fluid approaches, fearing bullying or feeling that children's identities are being 'controlled'.

Taken together, these intersecting layers, material agency, practitioner choices, advertising pressures, and parental influence, illustrate the complexity practitioners must navigate when creating inclusive, gender-sensitive resource environments. A gender-attuned pedagogy therefore requires practitioners not only to avoid stereotypes but to remain critically reflexive about the full ecosystem of influences shaping children's opportunities for gender expression through play. In practice, this perspective invites EY practitioners to reflect on how the selection and use of resources can reinforce or disrupt dominant gender narratives. Recognising the agency of materials (Bennett, 2010) and their role in shaping children's meaning-making (Carr and Lee, 2019), resources act as co-participants in learning. As Gale (2018) notes, their meanings continually shift through interaction, context, and imagination. By curating environments that embrace this complexity, EY settings can foster gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin, 2023), offering children freedom to explore who they are becoming without fixed expectations.

Enabling Environments

The environments we create for children do more than house activity, they shape what is possible. From a New-Hermetic Materialist perspective, space is not passive; it is alive with energetic and affective potential (Barad, 2007). The materials, atmospheres, and intra-actions within an EY setting become part of the child's becoming, influencing not only what is done, but how it is felt and experienced (Bennett, 2010). Drake (2019) draws attention to the energetic dimension of space, those subtle vibrations, moods, and feelings that shape how individuals express themselves. In EY, where identity and gender are constantly unfolding, enabling environments must attune to these energetic flows,

supporting the authenticity of children's gender expression. In this research, the greenhouse became a guiding metaphor for such environments, not as fixed containers, but as living spaces where children, like plants, stretch, lean, and grow in response to different environments. These are spaces that shift with the weather, adapt to their occupants, and hold the potential for unexpected blooms.

Curriculum guidance, such as *Birth to Five Matters* (Early Years Coalition, 2021), affirms this by describing the environment as a key factor in supporting children as holistic learners. Hodgman (2015) refers to the environment as a "third teacher," reinforcing the idea that learning and self-expression emerge through play, materials, and space. This highlights the importance of considering the effect of different spaces when listening to a child's expression of gender, as arguably, they can limit, predetermine, or celebrate the masculinity and femininity of expression. Understanding the environment as alive, with affective, energetic, and relational qualities, positions practitioners as co-respondents rather than static planners. Through observation and multi-(con)textual listening, we can begin to see how children use spaces in the environment to play, learn, rest, and explore boundaries. Glasman and Crowson (2001) challenge the notion that an environment can ever be static, arguing that although practitioners may provide structure, a single place remains "fluid and alive," filled by children with tension, curiosity, and joy. In this sense, space is both a container of becoming and a collaborator in the child's expression. It therefore demands continuous observation and responsiveness to the meaning-making it helps co-create.

Physical space plays a powerful role in how gender is experienced. Paechter (2007) highlights how spatial boundaries, especially in playgrounds, can perpetuate gender hierarchies, with outdoor spaces often coded as masculine and high-energy, while indoor environments are cast as feminine and nurturing. Martin's (2011) research echoes this, finding that outdoor play environments often reflect and reinforce hegemonic masculinity, with boys dominating active games while girls are marginalised or redirected. Without active intervention from practitioners, these divisions become spatially normalised. Maynard and Waters (2007) suggest the need to challenge such assumptions and adapt outdoor provision to support more inclusive gender expression.

In contrast, Hayes and O'Neill (2019) explored how indoor environments can be designed with intentionality to support balanced participation. Their research across eight EY settings found that structural changes, like transparent dividers and varied play zones, led to more equitable gender engagement, improved behaviour, and greater inclusivity. Borge and Borge (2017) found similar patterns in Norwegian kindergartens, noting that physical space affected children's play choices and peer relationships, with certain zones unconsciously linked to gender expectations. These findings emphasise that indoor and outdoor spaces hold structural power over children's opportunities to express themselves fully. Marsh et al, (2016) extend this argument by showing how learning environments, even the digital and material ones, help shape children's identities and social navigation. Intra-active relations between space, objects, and people create shifting assemblages that inform how gender is performed, resisted, or reimagined (Moore, 2022).

These studies underline that spatial design is never neutral. It mediates power, voice, and identity. When environments unconsciously replicate binary norms, they send implicit messages about who belongs where, and how. In this light, creating truly enabling environments is not just about accessibility or aesthetics, it is a deep pedagogical practice that recognises space as an agent of identity, agency, and expression.

2.7 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore the complexities of gender in early childhood and situate this research within broader interdisciplinary dialogues. Beginning with philosophical, political, and cultural frameworks, it moved beyond a solely social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), drawing on New Hermetic Materialism to position gender as intra-active, embodied, and fluid. Through unpacking the evolving distinctions between sex, gender, and expression, the chapter emphasised mental gender and gender expression as dynamic aspects of children's becoming shaped by entangled relations across body, mind, and environment.

The chapter then examined how gender is positioned in EY practice, highlighting binary assumptions, policy gaps (DfE, 2023; EY Coalition, 2021), and practitioner gender-blindness (Wingrave, 2018; Johnson, 2023). These discussions were grounded in listening pedagogies (Clark and Moss, 2006; Malaguzzi, 1996), which centre the child's voice as an ethical imperative. Finally, Warin's (2023) concept of gender-flexible pedagogy offered a framework through which diffractive praxis, EY resources, and enabling environments were explored as imperative in gender expression. By engaging with material agency (Bennett, 2010), spatial coding (Martin, 2011), and practitioner reflexivity (Sidebottom and Carlyle, 2023), the review outlined a more entangled and responsive EY landscape.

In bringing these threads together, this chapter highlights a key gap in the existing literature: while many studies explore gender in isolation, through policy, space, or pedagogy, few examine the interplay of these dimensions as lived, entangled experiences in EY settings. This research responds to that gap by building on the work of Warin (2023) and Martin (2011), extending their insights through a diffractive, New-Hermetic materialist lens. By focusing on the relational dynamics between practitioners, environments, resources, and children's gender expression, it offers a nuanced approach that foregrounds complexity, agency, and the affective currents shaping early childhood experiences. These layered insights now form part of the evolving mosaic. The new tiles added reflect the literature explored that grounds this research: practitioner reflective practice, enabling environments, early years resources, and children's voice.

Image Eight – An Entangled Mosaic: In evolution



Chapter Three

Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter aims to provide an understanding of my approach to this thesis methodology, its intentions, journey, and the thinking behind its research design. While no research is ever neatly compartmentalised, this chapter seeks to offer transparency around the research process, including its ethical considerations and justifications. It explores the complexities of Ethico-Onto-Epistemology (EOE), the procedural ethics required for research and provides contextual grounding in relation to the participants: both human and more-than-human involved in the study. The research design is shared to justify the strategic decisions taken in response to the thesis focus and research questions, which explore:

1. What can be learnt about a child's gender expression through multi-(con)textual listening to their lived, meaning-making experiences?
2. What is the role of diffractive praxis for Early Years practitioners in providing gender-flexible pedagogy?
3. How can the lens of entanglement benefit Early Years practitioners in supporting children's gender expression?

These questions shape the methodological choices made for an entangled mosaic approach, which is unpacked throughout the chapter. The intention here is not to present a linear 'how-to' guide, but rather to trace the complex intra-actions of myself in-with-through the research design, approach, and delivery. This was not always a comfortable process. I often found myself wanting to make things neater than they were, to find clarity where there was complexity. But I have come to see that the messiness is part of the meaning. Sitting with uncertainty became an important part of my methodological practice, and this is carried forward into the way the data is explored and analysed, offering a bridge into the discoveries that follow.

3.2 New-Hermetic Materialism

This thesis adopts a unique ontological framework termed New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM), which weaves together New Materialism (Murriss, 2021), Hermetic Philosophy (Atkinson, 1908), and contemporary understandings of gender. It offers a lens for exploring the entangled, intra-active nature of children's gender expression, emphasising the agency of Matter (Sidebottom and Ball, 2018), the fluidity of identity, and the intra-connectedness of all things. NHM also carries an axiological orientation grounded in relational and nomadic ethics (Braidotti, 2006), where care, attentiveness, and responsiveness guide ethical decision-making with both human and more-than-human participants. Here, ethics are not external but embedded in the very intra-relations being studied (Hart, 1971). This perspective aligns with New Materialist thinking, which holds that Matter and meaning are co-constitutive, and that ethical responsibility arises from our material engagements with the world (Benson, 2019). This framework underpins the study's approach to listening to children's gender expression as emergent, relational, and materially entangled. What follows is an exploration of posthumanism, Hermetic philosophy, and how NHM shapes the research design.

Posthumanism is a collective term used to understand any discursive narratives that displace the human as central within the world (Campbell *et al.*, 2010), therefore suggesting that the world is bigger than the human entity, we are but part of a bigger picture. Sidebottom (2024) suggests it to be a lens through which one might see the world, one that acknowledges complexities and addresses the entangled nature of worldly experience (Braidotti, 2019). Posthumanism encompasses a range of theories and perspectives that challenge human exceptionalism, explore implications of the rise in technological advances, and navigate the rethinking of human identity in relation to non-human entities and their environments. Drawing predominantly on poststructuralist thinking such as Foucault (1990) posthumanism aims to decentre the human subject, while recognising its construction as arising through social language, power relations, and cultural practices. However, posthumanism also moves beyond poststructuralism's discursive focus, engaging more explicitly with materiality, technology, and the more-than-human world in ways that open new onto-ethical considerations. For instance, in

early childhood education, Hackett and Somerville (2017) illustrate how young children's emergent literacies are co-constructed through embodied interactions with materials, sounds, and spaces, highlighting the agency of the more-than-human in learning processes. Thus, posthumanism acknowledges that human identity is fluid, not fixed, and as feminist thinkers such as Haraway (2016) suggest, there is a need to interrupt the boundaries created between human and animal, nature and culture, organism and machine to understand the shifting nature of what makes up the human. Such boundaries are further explored in contemporary posthumanist work, including Braidotti (2019), who examines how technology, ecology, and bioethics reshape our understanding of what it means to be human. This redefinition opens new possibilities for evolution and becoming, particularly in response to the limitations of poststructural and postmodern thought. This has direct relevance for exploring how young children's gender identities unfold in early years contexts, where becoming is deeply shaped by space, objects, movement, and adult perception

New Materialism is a branch of posthuman thought that emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, seeking to re-evaluate the role of Matter in our understanding of reality (Murriss, 2021). It challenges the dualistic frameworks inherited from Enlightenment humanism and structuralist thought, arguing instead for an integrated understanding of Matter and meaning. New Materialism gives agency to Matter itself, suggesting that materials are not passive or inert, but actively participate in shaping experience and outcomes. This perspective builds on the work of theorists such as Barad (2007), whose theory of agential realism draws from quantum physics to propose that meaning and Matter emerge together through intra-action. Feminist and posthuman thinkers such as Haraway (2016) and Braidotti (2019) also contribute to this view by rejecting the idea of a stable, isolated subject in favour of one that is always entangled with its environment. New Materialism, then, aligns closely with this thesis's concern for understanding children's gender expression not as a fixed identity but as something that emerges through ongoing entanglements with people, spaces, discourses, and materials. It offers a way of recognising how Matter, including toys, clothing, space, and bodily movement, plays an active role in the construction and expression of gendered becoming. It also foregrounds the ethical implications of how we notice, value, and

respond to these entanglements within educational settings, reinforcing the importance of adopting a sensitive and relational approach in EY pedagogy.

Yet, critiques such as Kirby's (2017) argue that the common narrative within new materialism, that reality is entangled, nature and culture are interwoven and created, can overlook what is meant by Matter and its expectations of it. Kirby (2017) explores the idea that when looking beyond the human, it is more than just the physical Matter of nature around us that matters to the experience of being human. Of course, we can only make sense of this through our human senses, shaped by bodies, cultures, and the stories we carry, so even looking 'beyond' the human must start from within. Culture, for example, is influential in the beliefs we hold about experience, nature and even spiritual phenomena (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). This mirrors broader arguments within material feminist and posthumanist thought, which position the material and the cultural not as separate domains but as always already entangled (Fox & Alldred, 2017). It could, therefore, be suggested that the world we experience is made meaningful through the cross-referencing of cultural and social webs of signification, Matter that moves beyond the 'nature' of the world focused on a posthuman lens but encounters wider planes of existence and dimensions (Taylor & Hughes, 2016). Recognizing this interplay is crucial for this study, as it underscores the importance of considering both material and cultural dimensions when exploring gender expression in early childhood. In this way, the theoretical critiques also support the study's methodological choice to prioritise multi-modal data and observe how gender expression is co-created through culture, materials, and embodied experience. By acknowledging that Matter is not only a physical substance but also entwined with cultural and social significances, this research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how children's gender identities are expressed and formed within a web of material-discursive practices (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). This opens the door to more esoteric philosophical traditions, such as Hermeticism, which, long before the emergence of new materialisms, also grappled with the entanglement of mind, Matter, and meaning across multiple planes of existence.

Nineteenth-century science in the Western, post-Enlightenment world was founded upon Newtonian absolute physics, which described the world as an interplay of forces

obeying immutable laws and following a predetermined pattern. This culminated in a materialistic determinism where all phenomena could be reduced to simple chemical or physical interactions (McLean, 1984). Further reductionist views, such as those of behaviourist psychologists like Skinner (1967), promoted the idea of the material brain, deeming anything outside the human body to be a coincidental stimulus–response loop. Yet this theory falls short in explaining creative intellect, artistic consciousness, or spiritual awareness, concepts of the mind that transcend the physical brain.

Prior to this materialist framing, thinkers like Robert Fludd, most renowned for his writings *The History of the Two Worlds* (1671, cited in Godwin, 1979) articulated a worldview linking the microcosm of human life with the macrocosm of the universe, intertwining earthly experience with the spiritual realm. In the early seventeenth century, science and esoteric philosophy had not yet been prised apart; what we might now call mystical insight was considered part of serious scholarly inquiry. Fludd’s work, though unconventional by today’s standards, was recognised within the scientific discourses of his time. However, the Enlightenment era ushered in a rationalist turn, and by the nineteenth century, scientific authority became grounded in Newtonian laws and material determinism. This shift severed the ties between spiritual and scientific modes of knowing, casting the former as speculative or unscientific. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that these once-dismissed esoteric worldviews still offer pedagogical and epistemological value, particularly in how learners engage with interconnectedness and more-than-human awareness in educational settings (de Ruiter *et al.*, 2022).

Contemporary developments in quantum physics have further unsettled these long-standing binaries. Rather than viewing Matter as passive and fixed, quantum theories describe particles as fluid, responsive, and entangled. Thinkers like Barad (2007) have drawn on these insights to argue that reality is co-constituted through relations, not just between human observers and the world, but among all Matter and meaning. Tarlaci (2024) expands this by demonstrating how quantum entanglement may enhance conscious processing and complex learning, indicating that awareness might not be confined to the physical brain alone but instead distributed across relational fields. These ideas resonate with much older cosmologies, including Hermetic thought, where

nature, mind, and spirit are understood not as separate, but as deeply interwoven. Rather than being discredited, such concepts are being reimagined through new frameworks (Dossey,2014), currently offering fertile ground for rethinking the limits of the material brain and expanding our understanding of consciousness, creativity, and even children’s meaning-making experiences. As Dossey (2014, p.23) suggests, “consciousness is not confined to individuals; it is nonlocal, extending beyond our brains and bodies, connecting us with all of life, the world, and the cosmos itself.” This renewed attention to ancient ways of knowing invites a more expansive view of relationality, one that holds resonance with New-Hermetic Materialist perspectives explored in this thesis.

Hermetic Philosophy, often referred to as Hermeticism, is a spiritual, philosophical and esoteric tradition based on writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a composite figure combining the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth. While often framed through a Western esoteric lens, Hermetic principles, particularly the emphasis on the unity of all things, resonate with longstanding ontologies found in Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist and Indigenous cosmologies, where mind, Matter and spirit are not experienced as separate domains but as interwoven aspects of reality. Hermeticism draws on a variety of mystical, alchemical and astrological teachings that emphasise the interconnectedness of the cosmos and the divine, the mental nature of reality, and the transformative potential of spiritual knowledge. Rooted in ancient Greco-Roman Egypt and crystallised in texts such as the Corpus Hermeticum and the Emerald Tablet (cited in Linden, 2003), Hermetic philosophy has profoundly influenced Western esoteric and philosophical traditions, as well as the foundational values of many religious teachings (Hanegraaff, 2012). The initial Hermetic texts, written between the 2nd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, were preserved through the Islamic Golden Age and reintroduced to the West during the Renaissance. Marsilio Ficino’s 15th-century Latin translation of the Corpus Hermeticum (cited in Mead, 1906) sparked a renewed interest in Hermetic thought, which once again became influential in shaping more modern philosophical interpretations, including those underpinning posthuman and new materialist thinking.

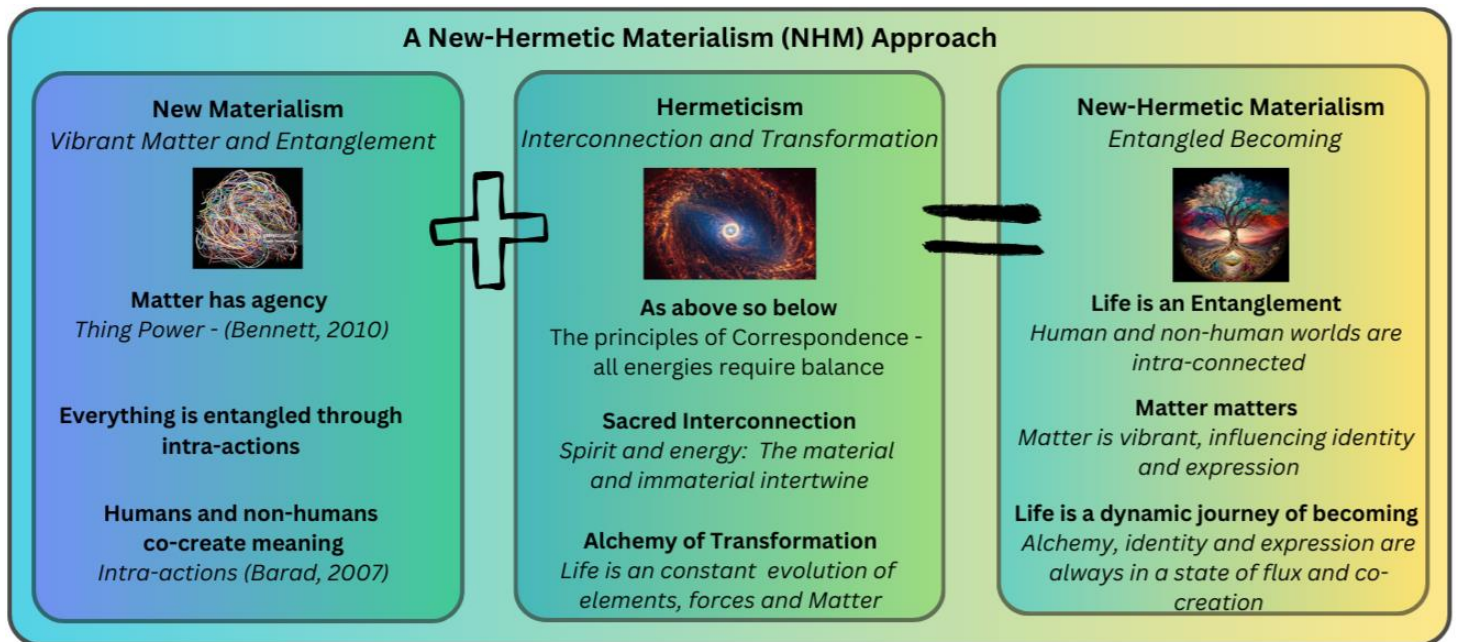
Ramey (2012) explores the work of Gilles Deleuze, suggesting that his ethical, metaphysical, and political ideas are steeped in Hermetic traditions, particularly in the way they dissolve the boundaries between thought and feeling, concept and perception,

mind and nature. These echoes are also found within the Seven Hermetic Principles (Atkinson, 1908), which serve less as a rigid belief system and more as gentle prompts and vibrational threads that invite us to attune differently to the world and its entangled rhythms. Through this lens, Hermeticism weaves itself into the methodological approach adopted in this research, one that pays attention differently, feels through materials, and tunes in to the shimmering, co-constitutive processes of becoming that unfold in children's gender expression. Ideas such as "as above, so below" or "the all is mind" do not dictate but instead ripple in-with-through the key threads of diffractive praxis, multi-(con)textual listening, and entanglement. In a world where children's voices are so often softened or shaped to fit adult-centred narratives, Hermetic philosophy offers a way of taking seriously the idea that gender is not fixed or found, but made and remade in-with-through the messy alchemy of bodies, materials, moments, and meaning-making, a process that resists tidiness and invites us to stay with uncertainty as part of the transformation. As Saffrey and Mertens (2007, p. 18) observe, "Hermetic thought does not offer fixed doctrines, but a fluid set of insights aimed at transformation through participation in the processes of the cosmos." Hermetic philosophy offers a way of taking seriously the idea that gender is not fixed or found, but made and remade in-with-through the messy alchemy of bodies, materials, moments, and meaning-making (Saffrey and Mertens, 2007). In this way, New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM) is not a methodology in itself, but an orientation of sorts, one that leans into the mystery, respects the vibrational texture of experience, and recognises the sacred and speculative work of tuning into children. Rather than laying out a step-by-step guide, this orientation offers more of a felt sense, a kind of entangling with curiosity, aliveness, and the shimmering unknowns of research with. It is from this lively entanglement that a new ontological approach has space to take shape.

NHM offers a rich ontological framework for this research, grounding the child within an Ethico-Onto-Epistemological field (Barad, 2007) shaped by principles of interconnectedness, material agency, and becoming. This approach arises from a considered weaving of Hermetic philosophy with the relational focus of New Materialism (Bennett, 2010; Coole and Frost, 2010). Where Hermeticism brings attentiveness to vibration, transformation, and subtle forces, New Materialism highlights the vitality of

Matter and intra-active relations. Together, they offer a way of understanding gender not as fixed or solely performed, but as felt, vibrational, and unfolding through entangled relations. What follows is image seven and a justification for this orientation through three core principles that guide the study.

Image Nine: A NHM Approach



1. Life is an Entanglement

There is an interconnectedness of all things. Drawing on the hermetic concept of as above, so below, this principle suggests that both the microcosm and macrocosm reflect each other, signifying those individual experiences, and therefore expressions, of gender are entangled in-with-through self and their environment at both micro, and larger social, material and cosmic dimensions (Mohanda and Osgood,2023). This requires us to consider a child as a holistic being in a more-than-human world.

2. Matter matters

Reality is entangled in-with-through the Matter that matters to us. Drawing on new materialist views of Matter being both active and agentic, this principle suggests that Matter (through material objects, bodies, organic and other-than organic) is not just influenced by but also influences our vibrational experiences across all planes of existence. It being therefore imperative that the agency of Matter be considered when

exploring gender expression as a signifying influence in children's phenomena (Osgood and Giugni, 2015).

3. Life is a Dynamic Journey of Becoming

Life is a rich, evolving journey, in which we are becoming. Be it through the hermetic lens of alchemising transformation, or posthuman views of evolving Matter (Burnard and Kobli, 2024), this principle embraces life as a fluidity within polarity, rhythm and gender. It views reality as a rich, dynamic interplay of material and spiritual experiences that shape our phenomena and expression of it. This principle celebrates the requirement of fluidity to create harmony and balance within self and the world in which we choose to live.

Adopting a NHM approach for this study provides opportunity to tune into the child's meaning-making experiences through the entangled Matter that matters to them (Taylor and Hughes, 2016). Doing so aims to explore the unique balance of a child's gender expression through a mosaic of multi-(con)textual methods designed to see the child as central to their own journey of becoming (Blaise, 2010). While this approach opens rich possibilities, it also asks for care. NHM is not yet a well-trodden path in early childhood research. It brings with it mystical elements and an openness to what cannot always be measured, qualities that may sit uneasily alongside more conventional models grounded in evidence and predictability (MacNaughton, 2005). Yet in the context of EY education, where attunement, complexity, and responsiveness are daily practices (Cumming, 2015), NHM offers something vital. It allows space to stay with uncertainty, to notice what is emerging, and to listen differently to the rhythms of children's becoming (Davies, 2014).

Established approaches such as social constructivism and post-structuralist theory (MacNaughton, 2005) have shaped the way we think about learning, identity, and power in early childhood (Cannella, 1997). However, these often emphasise discourse and representation. NHM invites us to look beyond the spoken word, to gestures, energies, atmospheres, and materials, to the moments of expression that unfold outside traditional language structures. This feels closely aligned with EY practice, providing open, embodied, and relational experiences for children (Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Yet

choosing NHM does not mean letting go of depth or integrity, as it reimagines what thoughtful, responsive inquiry can be, particularly in studies that foreground young children's non-verbal or affective expressions of self. Here, research becomes relational and attuned, grounded in a commitment to move with complexity rather than contain it. This is shaped by nomadic ethics (Braidotti, 2006), which values situated responsibility over fixed rules, and recognises the shifting, entangled roles of researcher, child, and world. These tensions are carried with care through a mosaic methodology grounded in diffractive praxis (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016), multi-(con)textual listening, and a view of the child as co-creator of meaning in a world always becoming.

3.3 Value Driven Ethics

The Hermetic phrase attributed to Trismegistus, 'As above, so below; as within, so without; as the universe, so the soul' (Copenhaver, 1992), resonates deeply with my journey in-with-through this research. It reflects the intra-connectedness of all phenomena and has grounded my attunement to the ethical and reflexive dimensions of working with participants, materials, and context. This entangled orientation rejects objectivity or distance, instead embracing ethical responsibility as a grounding force, where knowing, doing, and being are inseparable.

Research ethics have long been central to research design and process, often framed through asymmetries of power, positioning the researcher as powerful and potentially dangerous (Juritzen *et al.*, 2011), yet frequently failing to acknowledge the embodied, entangled complexity of the researcher's role (Sidebottom, 2019). This risks falling short of Foucault's (1990) emphasis on self-care and autonomy (Hammersley & Traianou, 2014). Foucault (1990) presents the care of the self as a form of ethical practice, not simply compliance with external rules but a way of being that resists dominant power structures. This reflects the tension between procedural ethics, often shaped by institutional protocols, and lived ethics, which emerge through reflexivity, situated judgment, and responsiveness within research encounters.

In considering the ethical dimensions of this research and my own entanglement, I draw on Foucault's (1990) care of self to emphasise ethics as a continuous practice of

awareness, responsibility, and formation (White, 2014). This begins with acknowledging my role as researcher and the multiple lenses (Brookfield, 1995) through which my own identity is positioned.

Although I do not position myself as an insider researcher, I align with Milligan's (2016) concept of the 'inbetweeners', occupying fluid roles as researcher, EY practitioner, academic, and parent. Each lens brings valuable skills and experiences into the research environment but also requires continual navigation of power structures and expectations. Practitioners often perceived my presence through a lens of accountability, expecting me to search for evidence of research-informed practice (Sidebottom, 2019), shaped perhaps by prior experiences with Ofsted or other regulatory bodies. Simultaneously, my practitioner instincts to intervene or support children required conscious reflexivity to balance professional care ethics (Taggart, 2015) and my ontological beliefs about gender and childhood.

Working in-with-through Ethico-Onto-Epistemology (EOE), this thesis adopts a NHM approach guided by Barad's (2007) agential realism, which argues that knowledge (epistemology), being (ontology), and ethics are inseparable and always entangled. This challenges traditional distinctions between knowing, being, and doing, positioning research as relational rather than detached (Barad, 2007; Geerts & Carstens, 2019). Exploring gender fluidity within this framework requires attentiveness to how identities are co-constituted through material and discursive intra-actions.

Barad's agential realism draws from their background in theoretical physics and feminist philosophy. They critique Cartesian dualisms, rejecting separations of mind/body, subject/object, and observer/observed. In this view, all measurement and observation are entangled acts of ethical decision-making, shaping what is noticed and what remains invisible. While such entanglement resists neat standardisation, often challenging institutional preferences for fixed categories and outcomes, it fosters a disposition of mindful attentiveness, embracing the complexity of power, Matter, and meaning as they intra-act.

Four key aspects of Barad's EOE underpin this thesis. First, the inseparability of knowing, being, and doing invites continuous reflexivity, not just as a research tool but as an ethical stance that acknowledges my own entanglement within the research process (Barad, 2007). This reflexivity is central both methodologically and personally, as I balanced my roles while collecting data. The entangled mosaic approach allowed multiple ways of listening to children's meaning-making, including observation, creative methods, and reflexive practice.

Second, intra-action reframes the notion of entities as pre-existing. Instead, identities, boundaries, and agencies emerge through relational processes (Gemignani *et al.*, 2023). This resonates with Hermetic principles (Atkinson, 1908), recognising becoming as a constant state. The research design intentionally created spaces where such intra-actions could unfold, allowing children's gender expressions to emerge through entangled relationships with people, materials, and environments.

Third, EOE challenges assumptions of passive Matter, recognising its agential force (Kowalcze, 2022) and suggesting that knowledge is not abstract, but materially enacted. This disrupts deeply embedded Cartesian binaries (Barad, 2003, 2012) that continue to shape educational discourses. In this study, the classroom environment itself, objects, spaces, resources, held agency in shaping children's experiences of gender, reinforcing the need to attune to human and more-than-human participants alike.

Fourth, observation itself becomes an ethical act. Observation is never neutral but always contributes to the becoming of what is observed (Angrosino & Rosenberg, 2012; Pollock, 2012). This research embraced observation as relational, attending to how knowledge is generated through intra-actions between researcher, participants, and the setting itself.

Finally, EOE demands accountability, recognising that every decision defines how existence, knowledge, and ethics materialise (Barad, 2007). The Hermetic principles of vibration and cause and effect (Atkinson, 1908) echo this, reminding us that even subtle choices ripple through meaning-making encounters (Geerts & Carstens, 2019). Reflexivity, therefore, is not introspection alone but relational responsibility (Taggart,

2014), requiring attentiveness to the complex entanglements shaping this research. While EOE is deeply embedded in every layer of this thesis, for transparency I now offer a linear representation of ethical processes using agential cuts (Barad, 2007), mapping the formal ethical structures encountered on this research journey.

3.4 Procedural Ethics

Formal ethical approval for this thesis was granted through two institutional processes as my research journey evolved (see Appendix A). Ethics, even as formality, is not simply a task to complete but an ongoing, iterative process responding to evolving situations (Locher & Bolander, 2019; BERA, 2024). Initial approval for the pilot study followed the University's Research Guidelines (2024), with BERA (2018) guidance informing the ongoing development of methodological and consent revisions for the full year-long study.

As part of this formal process, gatekeepers play a key role not only in providing consent but in supporting the evolving understanding of research complexities (Kay, 2019). In this study, the headteacher of the participating setting acted as gatekeeper and was provided with a full information letter (see Appendix B) outlining the study, participant requirements, and consent materials for children and parents. The gatekeeper was informed of the right to withdraw the setting from the study at any time prior to the completion of data collection in July 2023. Full consent for the setting's involvement was obtained (see Appendix C).

Navigating parental consent is both ethically paramount and practically complex in research with children (Wolfenden *et al.*, 2009), particularly within educational settings. This study critically reflected on consent structures and how they operate in practice. David, Edwards, and Alldred (2001) highlight distinctions between active and passive consent in schools, where parents often provide blanket permissions for photography, observations, and trips, but are rarely involved in meaningful, ongoing dialogue. A conversation with the headteacher confirmed that parents of the reception class typically sign such general consent at the start of the year. However, rather than solely relying on pre-existing permissions, the research design fostered informed, iterative, and

relational consent (Gallagher, 2009; Alderson, 2012). A full information letter (see Appendix D) was shared via paper and the school's online portal, a familiar communication channel, outlining the research aims, children's involvement, and ethical parameters. Parents were made aware of the distinction between school-authorized activities and this research, clarifying that any materials used (including images or recordings) would be anonymised and used solely for academic dissemination, not for school or social media use. To build trust and co-constructed understanding, three parent workshops were offered during the study, with an additional dissemination workshop at year-end. These served as dialogic spaces for parents to raise concerns, ask questions, and actively engage in the research process, aligning with participatory ethics frameworks (Morrow & Richards, 1996). Parents unable or unwilling to attend were invited to contact me directly; full contact details were provided to ensure accessibility and autonomy.

This approach led to active engagement from ten parents, enabling deeper discussions around ethics, gender, and power. Of the thirty children, three parents chose to opt out entirely; one permitted only general observation after detailed discussions. This parent shared that their biologically female child had identified as a boy since age three. These conversations were not merely administrative but became part of the ethical fabric of the study itself (Renold & Ivinson, 2014), reflecting posthumanist and feminist ethical frameworks where care, consent, and becoming are entangled (Taylor & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2015). The workshops thus became not just procedural but an ethical act of relational accountability, attentive to the lived realities of participants and their families.

This research is grounded in the pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 1999), which recognises children as solution-seekers, capable of meaningful participation in learning and decision-making (Dunphy, 2012). Central to this is placing children's rights and voices at the heart of pedagogical practice. Embedded within the mosaic methodology, several ethical considerations were carefully addressed, including how to inform children of my role, respond to individual communication needs, and enable choice and agency throughout participation, ensuring children's right to voice and expression (UNICEF, 1989) was upheld.

Conducting ethical research with young children and securing consent is complex (Hodkin & Beauchamp, 2019), particularly when multiple, layered methods are used, requiring different forms of consent (Harcourt & Conroy, 2005). While the terms ‘assent’ and ‘consent’ are often used interchangeably and remain legally ambiguous (Gibson & Twycross, 2007), this study adopts the term consent for all participants, including children, as a deliberate affirmation of children’s competence to make visible decisions (Robson, 2011). This does not dismiss the importance of assent, but intentionally positions children as capable, rights-holding participants.

Ellis and Beauchamp (2012) stress the importance of adapting consent processes to children’s levels of articulation and understanding. Throughout data collection, information about my role and activities was regularly explained in age-appropriate, accessible language. Where children had additional or complex needs, adaptations were made, including the use of Makaton signing and my photo card on classroom visual timetables. In these contexts, consent functioned similarly to assent, honouring children's communicative modes as valid expressions of agreement (Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

Two key approaches supported children’s consent for participation. First, for one-to-one or small group activities such as drawing or photography, a visual consent process (Wilson & Milne, 2016) was used (see Appendix E). Children selected either a happy-face or sad-face stamp to indicate participation, repeating this process each time they engaged in or returned to an activity.

Second, for observational data, while parental and setting consent had been gained, children were still asked permission for my presence during emergent play episodes. If children invited me into play, consent was assumed through their initiation; otherwise, permission was requested, particularly for audio recordings, where the stamp-based method was again used (Kidney & McDonald, 2014). Throughout the research, children were consistently reminded that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time (Tsevreni *et al.*, 2023), and there was no obligation to take part. This ongoing consent process honoured their autonomy and ensured ethical participation remained embedded throughout.

As with any research involving potentially vulnerable participants, safeguarding was prioritised. While no issues were anticipated, the sensitive nature of gender as a topic required careful planning. Safeguarding protocols and potential risks were discussed with both the setting's gatekeeper and the classroom teacher, who initially held the role of Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) for the EY. Following this discussion, the gatekeeper assigned the Key Stage One (KS1) DSL (responsible for Years 1 and 2) as my safeguarding point of contact. Should any safeguarding concerns or disclosures have arisen, the setting's safeguarding policy would have been followed, with appropriate reporting to my research supervisor. This protocol reflects wider ethical guidance for research with children (Bertram *et al*, 2024), which emphasises transparency, pre-emptive planning, and the integration of institutional safeguarding procedures into research design (NSPCC, 2020; Aubrey *et al.*, 2000). As Greene and Hogan (2005) note, ethical responsibility extends beyond consent to include children's emotional and physical wellbeing, requiring researchers to remain attuned to potential risks and ensure support systems are clearly established.

Practitioners in the EY setting played a crucial role as key workers supporting children's holistic development, including emotional wellbeing (DfE, 2024). Their perspectives were central to this research, particularly in understanding the entangled nature of gender expression. As MacNaughton, Rolfe, and Siraj-Blatchford (2001) note, research in early childhood requires close attention to the relational dynamics between adults and children, as well as to practitioners' professional roles. Three adult participants contributed via semi-structured interviews, observations, and qualitative questionnaires. Each practitioner received a full information letter and consent form (see Appendices F and G), outlining the research aims, their role, and ethical considerations, including their right to withdraw at any time up to the end of the academic year (BERA, 2024). Ethical engagement with practitioners recognised their dual position as professionals and individuals with situated identities (Palaiologou, 2016). Anonymity was maintained by removing any identifying details. Written consent was obtained from all participants, supported by verbal confirmation at each interview and within the questionnaire process, in line with ethical guidelines (BERA, 2024; Miller, Cable & Devereux, 2013).

The use of research equipment and secure data storage were carefully managed throughout the study. A digital audio recorder captured one-to-one interviews with practitioners, as well as group and individual activities with children. Occasionally, children requested that conversations during play also be recorded; in these instances, the usual consent procedures were followed to ensure ethical participation. As part of the mosaic data collection, children used a digital camera to photograph elements of their environment. A blank SIM card was inserted for each use, and images were downloaded and deleted at the end of each day to ensure no previously captured content remained visible, following ethical child-led data practices (Clark, 2010).

All recordings and images were stored in accordance with BERA (2018) guidelines. Digital files were saved on encrypted storage devices, and physical documents were secured in a locked cabinet accessible only to me. In line with the Data Protection Act (2018), raw data was transcribed and will be deleted upon completion of the thesis. Participants' personal details were stored separately from research data to protect confidentiality and minimise identification risks.

Representation of participants was approached with careful ethical consideration (Denscombe, 2021). No real names are used in the thesis or any dissemination, and the research setting is anonymised. To acknowledge potential power dynamics between myself and participants, a differentiated approach was adopted (Brooks, te Riele & Maguire, 2014, p.104). Adult participants were offered the choice of how they wished to be represented; all chose to be referred to by their formal title and an initial, which is used throughout. However, this approach did not feel appropriate for representing children's voices. In Pilot Study 2, children selected their own pseudonyms, but many chose names resembling their real ones, raising concerns about their understanding of anonymity. Asking children to self-name was therefore considered ethically unsuitable.

Names carry significant cultural, social, and familial meaning (Charmaz, 2006). To protect children's identities while honouring their holistic presence, I chose not to rename them, avoiding assumptions about culture, ethnicity, gender, or heritage. This decision reflects a commitment to upholding children's voices while safeguarding their anonymity and respecting the ethical complexities of representation. In response to the

ethical and philosophical complexities of representing children in research, this study draws on colour theory (Birren, 1961) as an alternative to pseudonyms or numerical identifiers. Rooted in both scientific and symbolic traditions, colour theory attends to the emotive, perceptual, and energetic dimensions of colour as a communicative force. As Eiseman (2000, p. 12) notes in her work on colour's expressive power, "Colour is an energy without fixity, a vibration that speaks to feeling before it speaks to logic." In EY contexts, colour holds intuitive meaning for children, who often express emotion, identity, and affiliation through it (Vecchi, 2010). At the same time, colour can carry social and cultural connotations that are learned rather than innate, and various hues can evoke different meanings in different contexts. Acknowledging this, the colour selections in this study did not rely on simplistic or primary solid colours that are often socially coded (for example, blue for boys or pink for girls). Instead, I worked with a nuanced palette of shades precisely to avoid reinforcing reductive stereotypes. Colour thus becomes a non-verbal, affective mode of representation, gesturing toward presence without fixing identity.

Each child is represented by a colour selected through a reflective, relational process. Colours were chosen through an iterative triangulation of data: practitioner descriptive language about each child, observations of children's talk and play, and my own embodied sense of each child's presence at particular moments in time. The intent was to capture not a static label but a feeling or vibration of the child's expressive tone in that moment, recognising that as the children grow and evolve, so too might the colours that resonate with them. For example, a child radiating warmth and social energy may be represented by Marigold, while a quieter, introspective child might be reflected through Sage or Ivory. These choices were guided by psychological colour theory (Eiseman, 2000), artistic understandings of children's expression (Moon, 2002), and esoteric interpretations of colour as symbolic and vibrational (Bailey, 1951; Hanegraaff, 2012). Educational and therapeutic traditions that view colour as a relational language also informed this process (Vecchi, 2010; Malchiodi, 1998). In line with the study's NHM orientation, colour is treated as energetic and affective, resonating with presence rather than naming identity (Brennan, 1988).

Children are referred to using the first letter of their assigned colour (e.g., Child M for Marigold), with additional letters where needed. A visual mosaic of all 27 colours (see Image Eight) accompanies this, not as a code, but as a reflective artefact offering a sensory glimpse into the relational classroom field. Using shades rather than fixed primary colours also mirrors a connection to gender-flexible pedagogy, underscoring that identities are not binary or singular but exist in dynamic, interwoven tones. This approach aligns with posthumanist and materialist perspectives (Barad, 2007; Lenz Taguchi, 2010), where identity is emergent and relational, and colour is symbolic, vibrational, and energetically expressive (Brennan, 1988).

Though interpretive, this method reflects the thesis’s commitment to ethical sensitivity, non-reduction, and attentiveness to children’s lived experiences (MacLure, 2013). Colour becomes not merely a tool of anonymity, but a mode of affective recognition, a way of staying with each child’s presence without reducing them to fixed categories. These representations serve as a form of ethical approximation, open, entangled, and accountable to the complexity of children’s becoming (Hackett *et al.*, 2015).

Image Ten – Representing Child Participants through colour theory



Table One below presents each child's assigned colour, the sex recorded by the school, and descriptors provided by practitioners. These colours emerged through a layered, relational process involving practitioner insights, the children's own expressions, and my intra-active encounters with each child. Informed by both the language used to describe them and my affective, embodied sense of their presence, each colour was selected to reflect a vibrational tone, a resonance that captured something of that child at that moment in time.

I recognise that colours hold different meanings across cultures and contexts, and these associations can be learned, personal, and emotionally charged. The colours chosen here are not intended as objective facts or universal truths, but as situated, subjective interpretations, approximations that attempt to honour each child's presence without reducing them to a fixed identity.

Table One – Overview of child participants representations.

Child	Notes on Child	Comments from Practitioners
Ma	Biological Female	Happy child, keen to get involved, often found playing with the boys in the group and outside where she can. She goes above and beyond what is asked of her and is a strong reader and writer. Gaining confidence with math's.
Marigold – Warm, radiant, and motivated: this colour captures an outward energy and determination.		
Co	Biological Female	Confident, chatty and very sociable. Easily distracted but always wants to have a go. Very clicky in their friendship group.
Coral – Social, vibrant, and full of relational energy: this colour holds a chatty, connected presence.		
In	Biological Male	A very hyperactive member of the group. Suspected ADHD and SLCN. Requires a chew necklace for carpet time and often requires the teacher to sit with him to keep focused on task at hand. Can get very frustrated by not communicating self and lashes out. Can also be very sensitive and thoughtful when worried about others.
Indigo – Deep, emotional, and sometimes intense: this shade reflects a sensitivity and big inner world.		
Sg	Biological Male	A sensitive child, very thoughtful and logical in thinking processes. Takes time with answers and care over his work. Often found in small play, math's or construction areas.
Sage – Calm, thoughtful, and quietly wise: this grounded green evokes a logical and sensitive way of being.		
Ec	Biological Male	A quieter child, with lots of siblings, enjoys climbing outside but won't use their voice to join in. Often waits to be invited to play or asked to speak, this means often misses opportunities for play with children.
Ecru – Neutral and subtle: reflecting a reserved, wait-to-be-invited nature.		
Li	Biological Female	Quite reserved, enjoys the math's corner and reading. Struggles more with writing but enjoy drawing. Softly speaking and prefers to shy away from group conversation.
Lilac – Soft, dreamy, and bookish: this colour reflects a quiet reserve, and love of maths and drawing.		
Go	Biological Female	Confident, well-spoken and polite. Older child in the group. Very friendly, leader and happy to have a go.
Goldenrod – Warm and grounded: someone who leads gently but with clarity.		
Fi	Biological Male	Enjoys action games, superheroes and being the best. Motivated by winning and can get over enthusiastic where he doesn't think of compassion or the process of play. A happy child, lots of energy and often requires space to run and process. Very boisterous.
Firecracker – A vibrant red-orange, evocative of an energy bursting enthusiasm and loud joy.		
La	Biological Female	A very quiet child, softly spoken and often led in her friendships. Thumb sucks, which is an ongoing trait parents are keen to stop. Enjoys the quieter spaces of the classroom and learning spaces.
Lavender – Soft, quiet, and a little inward: captures their thumb-sucking and led-by-others energy.		
Bl	Biological Female	A sensitive child, often emotional at leaving mum, kind, friendly and caring to her friends. Enjoys dancing and will have a go although lacks confidence to speak up.
Blush – A sensitive, slightly withdrawn shade that reflects an emotional vulnerability and care.		
Ca	Biological Female	Confident, the socialite of the group, enjoys sharing her swimming celebrations and own stories. Enjoys dressing up and the arts corner. SEN diagnosis in process for understanding and processing delay.
Carmine – A strong pink, red that captures a performance energy and inner processing.		

Se	Biological Male	A very articulate child enjoys independent work and some creative tasks. Quieter member of the group, very polite but struggles to speak up in group activities. Enjoys 1:1 time with teachers and TA.
Seafoam – Quiet, calm, and softly creative: evokes gentle expression and 1:1 connection.		
Si	Biological Male	A creative child, often found in the messy area or sand pit. Often seeks reassurance and can be unsure about new instructions and people. Can sometimes struggle to fit in with the male friendship clicks as not as boisterous as some of the other boys. A good friendship click.
Silver – Reflective, somewhat outside of the main group, but bright in their own orbit.		
Sh	Biological Female	A friendly child, safeguarding issues in the past, quite a clingy child and emotional. In a tight friendship with child Bl and doesn't like to get dirty. Avoids outside play and craft spaces.
Shell – Protective, delicate, and emotionally attuned: captures a clinginess and caution.		
Cl	Biological Female	Enjoys getting stuck in, confident but often gets swept into being silly on the carpet. Has a good friendship with child Ve and can often take over games and conversations. Currently learning turn taking.
Clementine – Bold, zesty, and quick to lead: reflects playful confidence and impulsivity.		
Pi	Biological Female	A quieter child gets on well with everyone but often plays alone. Enjoys reading and has a tight friendship with child Co. Often found in the reading corner.
Pine – A quiet, enduring green that suggests solitude with strength.		
Ik	Biological Male	A more reserved child, high levels of reading and writing, top of the class for math's ability and has some good friendship groups. Very passionate about equality and fairness. Often has his hand up in group learning time.
Ink – Dark, precise, and articulate: a strong academic and ethical presence.		
Ve	Biological Male	A confident child, often distracted by others, especially at carpet time. Good writing and math skills. Enjoys playing outside, dressing up or in construction area. Enjoys performing for friends and is social with most children.
Vermilion – Bright and theatrical: performs, distracts, and connects across the room.		
Pa	Biological Female	Confident, outgoing and loud. Enjoys climbing and the outside space of construction. Likes to give pictures and draw with her friendship clicks.
Papaya – Lush and lively: full of warmth and creative energy.		
Sa	Biological Male	Speech and Language Needs. Minimal eye contact when started, suspected ASD. Loving, Kind and caring. Gentle characters often play alone or with quieter groups of girls. Loves the sand pit.
Sand – Grounded, sensory, and subtle: reflects play in soft textures and quiet care.		
Ta	Biological Male	A friendly and very energetic child. Struggles to sit still at carpet time and concentration span is minimal. SLCN. Forms very strong friendships but often gets frustrated within them. He has a chew necklace for carpet time and often has accidents by leaving it too late for the bathroom.
Tangerine – Energetic, excitable, and prone to spill over: captures big movements and joy.		
Wi	Biological Female	Quiet and reserved. Makes no attempt to talk with Mrs K but will speak 1:1 with Mrs R. Softly spoken, easily distracted.
Willow – Quiet, slightly withdrawn, but flexible and responsive when gently engaged.		
Mi	Biological Female	Identifies as a boy. Will not engage if assumed a girl. Quiet with speech delay but able to communicate clearly with expression and knowledge and understanding is strong. Child not given consent to be involved in 1:1 activities for the research.
Midnight – Quiet, strong, and self-defined: refuses to be boxed in, and speaks in presence, not volume.		

3.5 Pilot Studies

While pilot, feasibility, and small sample studies are often used interchangeably (Vogel & Draper-Rodi, 2017), each informed different aspects of this research's iterative development. The first pilot tested interview methods and sampling but was interrupted by the COVID-19 lockdown. In response, I conducted online interviews with four EYPs, incorporating participant-generated photographs to trial visual mosaic methods. This phase highlighted the need for extended engagement to explore gender as a complex, relational construct and demonstrated the value of practitioner-led photography for eliciting rich, reflective dialogue (Clark, 2011; Punch, 2002).

A subsequent one-month feasibility study in a post-COVID nursery tested consent procedures and child-led creative methods with pre-school children. While children engaged well, language limitations sometimes made expression difficult, and practitioner influence occasionally risked overshadowing children's voices. These observations reflected Tisdall, Davis and Gallagher's (2009) emphasis on developmental appropriateness and the time needed to ethically access young children's perspectives.

A final small sample study in a reception classroom with five-year-olds confirmed the importance of both age and duration. These children demonstrated verbal and emotional articulation, sustained engagement with creative methods, and reflective dialogue. This affirmed that reception-aged children were developmentally positioned to participate meaningfully in research exploring gender expression. These cumulative experiences shaped both the sampling strategy and the commitment to a year-long, relationship-driven methodology, allowing methods to evolve through ongoing practitioner-child relationships (Christensen & James, 2017).

This led to the adoption of a combined purposive and convenience sampling strategy. A local primary school was selected for its accessibility and prior connection, enabling the sustained presence required for in-depth engagement (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Purposive sampling was informed by pilot findings, which indicated that reception-aged children were best positioned to provide rich, expressive data on gender, identity, and relational becoming. As Patton (2002) notes, purposive sampling allows for the selection

of information-rich cases aligned with the research aims. This combined approach supported both ethical responsibility and methodological rigour, fostering deep, attuned relationships and responsive, child-centred methods.

3.6 Research Setting

A purposeful and convenience sampling method was used to select the research setting (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Following the logistical challenges of my second pilot study, I opted for a setting closer to home, allowing more time for in-situ engagement rather than travel. The research took place in one Reception classroom within a two-form entry primary school. During the data collection phase (2023), the school received an Ofsted rating of 'Good' overall, with 'Outstanding' awarded for its EY provision. The class was led by the school's EY lead, offering valuable insight into leadership and practice. Data collection spanned 11 months during the 2022/2023 academic year, with weekly visits of at least one full day.

The setting was situated in a predominantly White British community, and the class cohort broadly reflected this, with most children identified by the setting as White UK heritage, though a small number of children came from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, all three practitioner participants identified as White British. While race and ethnicity were not a central focus of the research, this demographic context is acknowledged, as it may shape how gender expression is interpreted and responded to in the classroom environment.

To protect participant privacy, all names and identifying details have been anonymised (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Photographs of the classroom, included with consent from the gatekeeper (Kay, 2019), were edited to remove any identifying features. The setting is referred to as Penguins Class, a fictional name chosen for ethical clarity and narrative consistency. While this research could be considered a form of case study (Denscombe, 2021), the focus remains on the unique experiences within this specific Reception context. The findings are not intended for generalisation, but it is hoped that the insights may resonate with others working in similar EY settings and contribute to broader conversations in practice.

3.7 Research Participants

The data collection in this thesis was both complex and non-typical. While the entangled mosaic approach layered multiple forms of data, St. Pierre (1997) reminds us of the value of transgressive data alongside more conventional sources. This study gathered children's voices, emotions, sensory experiences, photographs, drawings, and adult reflections, aiming to honour children's expressions in the ways they were offered. Central to this was the entanglement of both human and more-than-human co-participants, each contributing to children's intra-actions (Lien & Pálsson, 2021).

In keeping with EOE, both human and more-than-human contributors are recognised as active participants. Human Co-Participants (HCP) refer to adult participants, while more-than-human Co-Participants (MtHCP) include classroom objects, materials, and furniture, all of which shaped children's meaning-making processes.

Human Co-Participants (HCP):

Three adults participated in the study, each bringing distinct approaches to gender expression and engagement with children. These participants were identified through a blend of institutional structure and professional willingness. The Head Teacher initially approved the study for the reception class and nominated the team based on their experience, stability, and openness to reflective practice. Mrs K, the Reception class teacher, then voluntarily offered her class for participation. While this process involved both leadership and practitioner choice, the collaborative ethos of the school fostered dialogue and mutual respect (Aubrey, David, & Rayner, 2000), shaping participation as a shared, rather than imposed, decision.

Table two includes brief contextual information including each practitioner's biological sex, role, and involvement across the EY provision. Where referenced, PPA refers to Planning, Preparation and Assessment time, a period when class teachers are released from direct teaching, and YR1 indicates Year 1, the first formal year of primary education in England, directly following Reception.

Table Two- Overview of adult co-participants

Adult Participant (Pseudonym)	Adult's Role	Notes	Observations made through research by researcher
Mrs K	Class Teacher and Early Years Lead, SENDCo and E.Y DSL	Biological Female, Highly Experienced Teacher, has taught across all primary but specialises in E. Years	Approachable, Respected, Friendly but firm, good rapport with parents. Knows the children very well. Children's go to for problem solving.
Mrs R	Class TA	Biological Female, 4 years as TA, has worked in YR1 and reception.	Friendly, good relationship with children, fun, children's go to for comfort.
Mr S	PPA Cover Teacher (Qualified Teacher)	Biological Male, Qualified Teacher across primary, 2 years' experience teaching in E. Years. Now PPA cover across EYFS and KS1.	Described self as a "friendly grizzly bear". Long beard, tattoos and piercings. Approachable by children, fun, fair and very caring.

The language used in the table to describe each practitioner's expression reflects how they described themselves during our early conversations and interactions; these are not externally imposed descriptors. The two female practitioners spoke in relational and emotional terms, centring warmth, connection, and sensitivity. In contrast, and in line with Warins (2023) suggestion that male practitioners often demonstrated higher levels of self-awareness regarding their role and in gender, the male practitioner referred more to his appearance and presence in the space. This contrast reflects broader gendered expectations in early childhood contexts, where male practitioners often feel pressure to justify (Cameron, 2006) or explain their place in a feminised profession (Blaise, 2005;), and as such may develop a heightened sense of gendered awareness. Men in EY roles are frequently read through narratives of protection, novelty, or suspicion, often adopting symbolic roles, such as "grizzly bear" figures from children's stories, to navigate perceptions among children and adults. These embodied metaphors offer narrative armour, helping to soften or reframe their presence. Recognising these self-descriptions is important, as they illustrate how practitioners' gendered identities both shape and are shaped by their relationships with children, ultimately influencing which gender expressions are made visible, celebrated, or constrained within the setting.

Twenty-six Reception class children, aged four to five years, participated as Human Co-Participants (HCPs). The class included 14 biological females and 12 biological males. Their participation is not reduced to demographics; rather, they are recognised for the many ways they made themselves known, through movement, play, gesture, language, silence, and material intra-actions. These expressions were not analysed through normative developmental frameworks but were attended to as meaningful phenomena situated within the everyday rhythms of classroom life and the intra-active nature of this research.

More-than-human Co-participants (MthHCP):

Alongside the human co-participants, this research recognises the role of more-than-human Matter, both organic and inorganic, in shaping children's experiences and expressions of gender. The materials, objects, spaces, textures, and light were not passive backdrops but active participants in daily encounters. These more-than-human co-participants mattered in how gender was explored, enacted, and felt. Different aspects of the environment held significance for different children and adults, often in subtle or surprising ways. While not every element can be described in detail, Image nine offers a sensory glimpse into the EY landscape. This recognition of material agency draws on Barad's (2007) notion of intra-action, where human and non-human entities co-constitute experience, as well as Hackett (2017) and Nxumalo (2016), who foreground the role of more-than-human worlds in early childhood meaning-making. The materials that mattered most will be explored in greater depth within the discovery chapters, where their intra-active presence continues to speak through the data.

Image 11: EY Landscape



3.8 An Entangled Mosaic Methodology

A research methodology refers to the overarching strategy guiding the research process, shaped by the researcher's theoretical framework and questions (Hedges, 2021). This study explored how gender is expressed by children within EY contexts, attending to the entangled Matter that matters in their meaning-making. It asked how children express gender, what intra-actions contribute to these expressions, and how practitioners engage in reflexivity when enacting gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin, 2023). Recognising practitioners' roles (DfE, 2024), this research explored the entanglement between practitioner action, pedagogy, and children's gendered expressions.

Dockett *et al.* (2011, p.68) note that methodology and methods are often conflated in child research, yet their distinction is important. While adopting an entangled mosaic approach may seem complex, this study embraces that complexity. The mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001) provides a participatory framework that recognises children as co-constructors of meaning, using multi-sensory methods, drawings, photographs, interviews, and observations, to create a composite of children's lived experiences.

Adopting the mosaic approach in this thesis values children's voices and recognises their competence to express themselves through contextually relevant methods. Previous studies have used mosaic methodologies in participatory (Lyndon, 2019) and ethnographic (Kingdon, 2019) research, where researcher-child relationships are central (Gobo & Marciniak, 2016). The approach also engages with power dynamics (Rodgers & Boyd, 2020) and foregrounds children's active participation (Harcourt & Conroy, 2011, p.39). The integration of a New-Hermetic Materialist (NHM) lens extends this further, shifting from the child as sole centre to viewing their experiences as entangled in-with-through the Matter that surrounds them. NHM considers children's becoming as dynamically shaped through both human and non-human agencies. In this entangled adaptation, the mosaic's tiles are not discrete but relational, with threads that influence, interrupt, and shape gender expression.

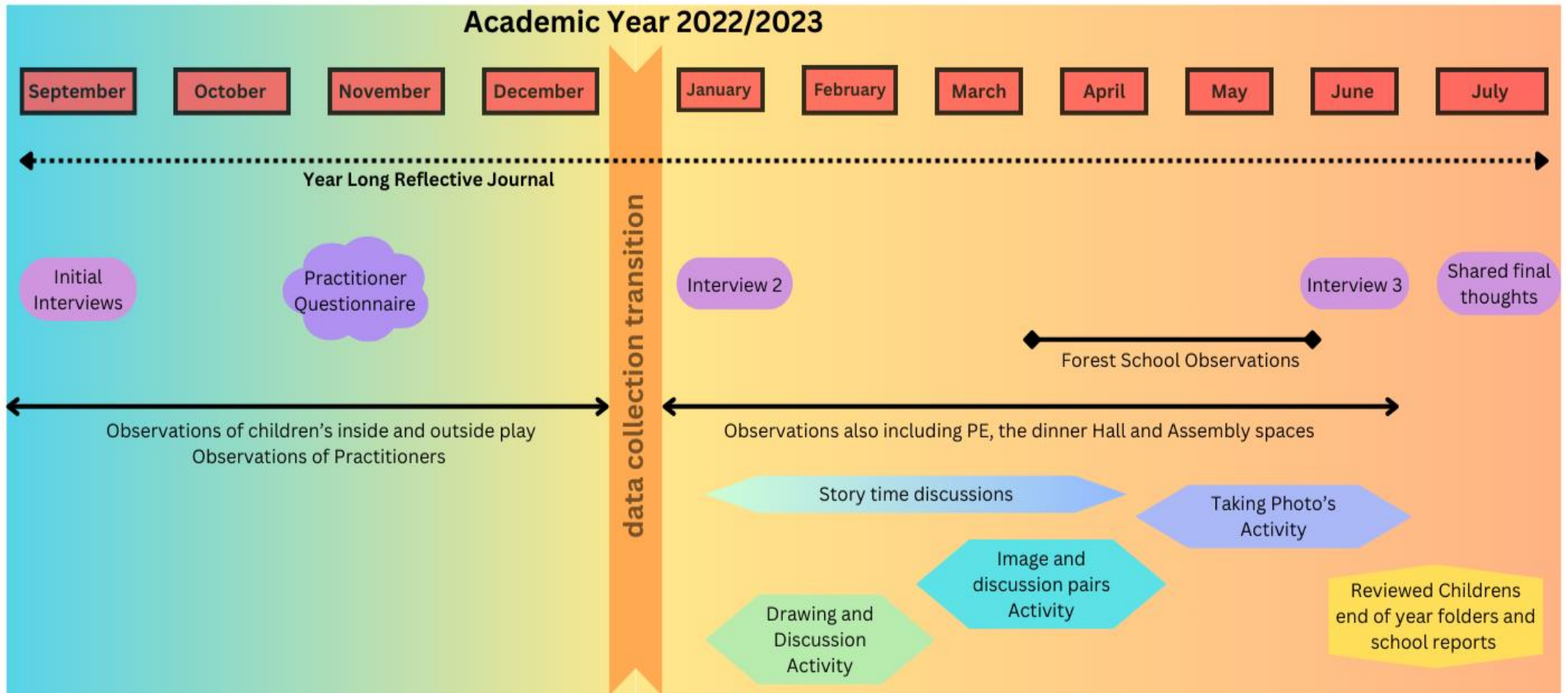
To this point in the thesis, the mosaic has already begun to take shape through metaphorical tiles drawn from my own positionality; chickens, towels, and the greenhouse, each representing affective and conceptual anchors for reflection. These metaphors, which emerged as part of my intra-actions with the research, continue to unfold throughout the thesis, offering generative frames for thinking with uncertainty, gender, and more-than-human participation. This section marks a shift in the mosaic, moving from personal-framing tiles to those representing the methodological journey, where the human and more-than-human come into view as co-creators of knowledge.

This attention to entanglement draws on Barad's (2007) agential realism, where boundaries emerge through intra-actions rather than pre-existing divisions. Affect modulators (Snaza, 2020) were applied as analytical lenses, agential cuts, focusing attention on three key dimensions: practitioners' diffractive praxis, enabling environments, and EY resources. These resonate with Warin's (2023) gender-flexible pedagogy, helping reveal how affective experiences emerge through material-discursive intra-actions.

To support this depth of interpretation, a multi-(con)textual method approach was adopted (Clark & Moss, 2001), recognising both human co-participants and more-than-human Matter as active agents within the research assemblage. Each method represents a tile within the mosaic, contributing to a holistic understanding of children's gender expression.

A visual timeline (Image Ten) mapped how methods unfolded across the data collection period. Rather than following a linear process, methods responded to the rhythms of the setting, including seasonal shifts and school activities like Forest School. Participatory timelines have proven valuable for reflecting the evolution of child-centred research (Clark, 2005), and here they help visualise how the entangled mosaic developed over time. The orange ribbon indicates the transition between December and January, marking the move toward more active, multi-modal data collection with children. The following sections explore each method in turn, considering both human and more-than-human contributions to children's gender expression.

Image 12: Timeline of Data Collection



Human co-participant methods

Adult Practitioners

This research involved three adult practitioners, each bringing a unique perspective and their own expressions of gender to the study. Their contributions offered invaluable insight, enriching the understanding of gender expression both for themselves and for the children within the classroom environment (Bath, 2021). An ethics of care was central to the research process, ensuring that power dynamics were thoughtfully considered and that the sensitive nature of gender was approached with openness, respect, and relational sensitivity (Goldstein, 2009).

Creating a supportive and inclusive environment was not treated as a procedural step, but as a continuously unfolding responsibility. This aligns with Braidotti's (2006) notion of nomadic ethics, an ethical stance that resists universals and instead embraces situated, embodied, and relational ways of responding. Time was taken to build trust prior to formal data collection, through informal conversations, collaborative planning moments, and shared reflective dialogue. These encounters were not separate from the research but were understood (Barad, 2007), as part of the apparatus through which meaning, Matter, and ethics intra-acted. Ethical practice, then, was not simply about safeguarding but about co-creating conditions in which practitioners could share their experiences, including personal reflections on gender with care, confidence, and mutual regard. In this way, ethics was enacted in-with-through the research process itself: not a static set of rules, but an ongoing responsiveness to the affective, material, and discursive relations at play. The following four sub-sections detail the specific methods used to engage with adult practitioners, illustrating how their contributions were integral to the entangled findings of this research.

Semi-structured interviews and informal discussions

Three, audio recorded, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the three adult practitioners, alongside ongoing informal discussions throughout the year. The initial interview, held in September at the start of the academic year, served as a context-building conversation. It provided an opportunity to begin forming relationships,

introduce the study in more depth, and gain initial insights into each practitioner's background, experiences, and approach to gender in practice. The second and third interviews took place in January and June, respectively. These were intentionally spaced to allow time for relational trust to develop and to give space for reflective engagement as the research unfolded (Hoffman, 2007). From the outset, informal discussions also formed a central strand of the methodological approach, echoing the participatory and co-constructed nature of the study.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as they offer a flexible yet focused framework for exploring participants lived experiences and professional reflections (Denscombe, 2021). Particularly suited to sensitive topics such as gender, this approach created room for practitioners to speak in their own words, follow tangents of meaning, and engage at a depth they felt comfortable with (Ruslin *et al.*, 2022). Informed by the relational ethics underpinning this research, interview questions were organised in response to the evolving relationships with practitioners (See appendix H). The initial set of questions drew on Alexander's (2010) work on dialogic pedagogy, focusing on practitioners' role, understandings of language and gender practices in EY. These questions intended to develop connection and an initial mutual understanding. The second, drew on the questionnaire responses, inviting more personal reflections on how practitioners experienced, and expressed their own gender within their role, and how this shaped their intra-actions with children. Finally, the third embraced a wider focus on gender within the setting itself, exploring curriculum, the environment, and practitioner support. The semi-structured format supported the emergence of unanticipated insights, allowing participants to shape the direction and content of the conversation in ways that felt meaningful to them (Kallio *et al.*, 2016). Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place in a quiet, private space outside the classroom, to preserve confidentiality and provide a safe space for open and honest dialogue (Denscombe, 2021).

Informal discussions were also an important strand of this data collection. These ad hoc conversations occurred naturally within the flow of practice, during planning discussions, reflective moments, or in-between routines. Often initiated by the

practitioners themselves, these exchanges included spontaneous observations of children, reflective comments on their own roles, and dialogue around decision-making. Such everyday talk plays a powerful role in professional meaning-making and identity negotiation (Adams, 2014) and is increasingly recognised as a valid form of data within participatory and practitioner-led research (Robson and Quinlan, 2022). These moments were recorded in a reflective research log throughout the year and captured the iterative, relational texture of professional thought-in-action. They not only enriched the dataset but demonstrated the participatory, embedded nature of the research itself. This aligns with what Bath and Kay (2021) describe as the “pedagogy of noticing”, a mode of professional reflection that emerges not in formal spaces alone, but through ongoing attunement to practice as it happens.

Qualitative Questionnaire

Although often considered a tool of quantitative inquiry, questionnaires can offer meaningful contributions within qualitative research when designed with depth and openness (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). In this study, a detailed, open-ended questionnaire was provided to the three adult practitioner participants early in the data collection phase. These were completed during October and November of the academic year, following the initial semi-structured interview, and informing the second. The use of a questionnaire at this stage was intentionally chosen over an additional interview to allow time for professional relationships to begin forming before engaging in the more relationally intense dynamics of formal interviews. It also acknowledged the realities of the school context, specifically the demands and intensity of the first few months of Reception class teaching and sought to offer participants a more spacious and flexible form of contribution.

The questionnaire was designed to invite reflection, enabling practitioners to pause, think-through, and articulate their ideas in writing, without the immediacy or pressure of an in-person conversation. As Creswell and Creswell (2023) note, open-ended questionnaires can yield impactful data when they are designed to support participant voice and allow for nuanced, interpretive responses. Questions were organised into two key areas. The first set asked about the practitioner’s perspectives on gender in EY

practice, how it was understood, navigated, and approached within their current setting. The second set invited more personal reflection, encouraging practitioners to explore how they experienced and expressed their own gender identities within their professional role, and how they felt this influenced their relationships and intra-actions with children. In this way, the questionnaire served as an initial mapping of both professional practice and personal positioning in relation to gender expression in early childhood education.

The questionnaires, (see Appendix J), were completed individually by each participant, and served as a foundational layer in the mosaic of data. The responses contributed to a baseline understanding of the practitioners' values, assumptions, and questions around gender, while also honouring their autonomy and need for reflective space at the outset of the study (Robson and McCartan, 2016). The questionnaires were then used to develop subsequent questions for interview two, to gain an understanding of the participants views and to meet them where they were at. This method supported the relational and ethical framing of the research by offering choice and flexibility in how participants could begin to share their thoughts and stories.

Observations of practice

Observations formed part of the data collection process, not as an assessment of practitioner competencies, but to explore the relational dynamics and intra-actions fostered between adults and children across the setting. The purpose was to notice how gender expression unfolded through everyday moments; gesture, language, space, tone, posture, and how practitioners' own subjectivities emerged in practice. As Payler & Georgeson (2013) have noted, observation in EY research can offer valuable insights into embodied experience and professional decision-making, particularly when used to attend to the subtle, affective layers of classroom life.

A blended observational approach was adopted, incorporating both naturalistic and more focused observations. Naturalistic observation, which enables the researcher to document events as they occur in real-life settings without manipulation or interference, is particularly valued in EY research for its capacity to capture children's and adults lived experiences authentically (Robson, 2011). Some observations were planned around

specific areas of practice or curriculum topics, such as child-led discussion or role play, while others emerged spontaneously as part of the daily rhythm of the setting. Observations were recorded through detailed field notes, with attention to language, non-verbal interaction, material engagement, and moments of professional or child-led reflection. These notes were later expanded and analysed through a reflective research journal to support interpretive depth and reflexivity (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). Appendix I provides an overview of the observation plan used to guide this process. Each of the three practitioners held a different role; teaching assistant, class teacher, and cover teacher, and had given informed consent to be observed throughout the setting. Observations were conducted across a range of indoor and outdoor spaces, always with sensitivity to professional boundaries and ethical considerations.

Children

The entangled mosaic methodology, rooted in a commitment to listening to and valuing the voice of the child, has guided this study from the outset. Children have remained at the heart of both the inquiry and analysis, reinforcing the centrality of their perspectives within every stage of the research process. Engaging children through a range of carefully selected methods provided multiple opportunities for expression, with each method designed to capture different facets of their lived, meaning-making experiences. This approach sought to honour the complexity of the holistic child, recognising their emotional, embodied, material and relational worlds and ensure that discoveries were deeply grounded in their authentic expressions and interactions. As Clark (2010) suggests, listening to young children requires not only attentiveness but methodological flexibility, allowing space for their ideas to emerge in diverse and often unexpected ways.

Observations of play

Observing children through play is a familiar and valued aspect of everyday practice in EY settings. It offers a powerful way to see, hear, and understand children's voices as they express themselves in action and interaction (Clark and Moss, 2010), and plays a role in supporting ongoing developmental understanding (DfE, 2024). Within this study, where children's expressions of gender and meaning-making were central, observation naturally became a key method for noticing the subtle, expressive details of their

experiences. This approach to observation echoes Sadowska and Ingham's (2023) laboratories of learning: rhizomatic spaces where meaning emerges through shared presence and responsiveness. Observations here mirrored their nomadic pedagogies, open, relational, and attuned to shifting dynamics.

Observations took place in a range of everyday moments, during group and individual play, while children moved through different spaces, and in their interactions with peers, adults, and materials. They were also carried out during more formal classroom activities. A mix of naturalistic and more focused observations was used throughout. Naturalistic observation is widely used in EY research for its capacity to capture children's lived experiences within the flow of familiar environments, without interference or instruction (Palaiologou, 2019). In some instances, the focus was guided by interests or areas of practice, while at other times, the approach remained open, allowing meaning to unfold through the flow of the moment (Robson, 2011). Notes were taken during or shortly after each observation, paying close attention to language, gesture, spatial positioning, and engagement with materials. Field notes offer a way to preserve the richness of the observed moment, while later reflective journaling helps to deepen interpretation and consider context and positionality (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018).

It was important to remain mindful of how the presence of a researcher might influence children's behaviour. The Hawthorne effect (Sedgwick and Greenwood, 2015) can lead to changes in how children express themselves, either by becoming more reserved or by performing in heightened ways. To reduce this, time was taken to become a familiar presence in the setting, gently building relationships and helping children feel at ease. This was informed by pilot study two, which highlighted that while children in reception are generally used to being observed as part of everyday assessment (Early Years Coalition, 2021), trust still takes time to grow. Creating this sense of ease and familiarity was an intentional part of the research process, helping to ensure that observations reflected the children's authentic ways of being.

Using cameras

The title of this research project highlights the importance of listening to, and seeing the world through, the eyes of the child. This commitment shaped the choice to include digital cameras as a significant research method, offering a way to promote children's authentic voices at their own eye level, and within the physical and material world in which they intra-act (Lloyd, Gray and Truong, 2018). As Ånggård (2013) suggests, visual methods can open embodied, child-led ways of expressing experience that may be difficult to capture through language alone.

The use of cameras offered children a familiar and playful way to document the spaces, materials, and moments that mattered to them. Each child was provided with a digital camera and invited to take photos of areas or objects within the setting that they liked, enjoyed playing with, or found interesting (Einarsdóttir, 2006). Following this, we sat together and looked through the printed photos, and children were invited to share stories, memories, and reflections connected to what they had chosen to capture. The intention was not only to collect visual data, but to explore the entanglement between what was photographed and the expressive act of recalling and handling those images. These moments offered insight into children's affective connections with space, material, and memory.

In addition to children's use of a camera to capture their voice (Sevon et al, 2025), I took some photographs of the EY environment, of some child activities (e.g. during forest school or play activities). These were taken during observations, to capture children's expressions, and to provide talking points with both practitioners and children during further discussions.

Using cameras with children is not a new approach. Clark and Moss (2001), in their development of the Mosaic approach, made early use of disposable cameras, though they noted the limitations of film and cost, which often restricted the number of photos children could take. While digital cameras have removed that barrier, they can also introduce new complications, such as children taking very large volumes of photos that exceed the scope of what can meaningfully be explored within the research (Kingdon,

2019). For this reason, and to support intentional engagement, children were gently encouraged to pause and think about each photograph before taking it. This was not about imposing restriction or judgement, but rather about fostering reflective attention, supporting children to act as thoughtful co-researchers. Importantly, children in this Reception class were already familiar with using technology such as cameras and iPads as part of everyday classroom life, and this familiarity helped to embed the method into practice in a way that felt comfortable and empowering.

Photo Talk activity

Photo-elicitation is widely recognised as a valuable visual method for enhancing participation in research with young children, offering familiar, concrete starting points for conversation and meaning-making (Cooper, 2015). It provides an accessible way for children to lead dialogue by responding to visual prompts that can evoke thoughts, memories, and feelings in ways that transcend more traditional, language-heavy methods.

In this research, photo-elicitation built upon the previous child-led photography activity but also took shape as a standalone method. Dockett, Einarsdóttir, and Perry (2017) highlight that while images can be powerful in research with children, there can be challenges when the images used are not rooted in the children's own experiences. To address this, the activity was carefully timed to align with the classroom topic of 'People in the World,' making it feel familiar and relevant within the flow of learning. Children were invited to take part voluntarily, most often in pairs, and were offered a selection of printed and laminated images of people from around the world. The images represented both biological males and females, with varying expressions of identity, culture, and gender. Some images were chosen in response to conversations children had already been having about Pride, RuPaul's Drag Race, and earlier comments they had made about what it means to be a boy or a girl. This ensured that the materials were not imposed or abstract but meaningfully connected to their prior thinking and lived dialogue.

Children were invited to pick up and explore the images, and to talk freely about what they noticed, thought, or felt (Pyle, 2012). These conversations were recorded through detailed field notes and, where consent allowed, through audio recordings. Notes captured both the verbal content of the discussion and the embodied, affective dimensions, such as tone, gesture, and engagement with the images. The intention was to create a space for children to reflect on and share their insights into gender expression as observed in others (Epstein *et al.*, 2006), while also honouring the entangled nature of their meaning-making across visual, relational, and affective planes.

Children's drawings

The draw-and-write method is an established empirical visual research approach in which children are invited to draw a concept or idea and then either write or talk about it, offering a multi-modal window into their thinking (Angell, Alexander and Hunt, 2015). In this study, children were asked to draw what it meant to be a boy or a girl, with the invitation to talk to me about their drawings either during the process or afterwards. A range of coloured pencils and both white and coloured paper were provided, but no further instructions were given, children were free to interpret the task in their own way.

This activity was first introduced in January, but rather than being a one-off moment, it became an evolving method across the term. For some children, drawing proved to be a meaningful and comfortable way to share ideas. Several returned to me later in the term with more drawings or reflections they wanted to discuss, suggesting that for these children, drawing became a chosen language of expression within our research relationship. The aim of this activity was not to closely analyse the content of the drawings themselves, something Alerby (2015) cautions researchers against becoming overly fixated on, but to open space for children to express their ideas through the act of drawing and the accompanying narration. The expressive process, the rhythms, pauses, decisions, and stories was given equal weight to the final image. Rapoport and Thibout (2018) note that girls often gravitate more readily to expressive arts activities such as drawing in classroom settings, so care was taken to ensure that the opportunity felt accessible and inclusive for all children, regardless of their sex-based gender. Drawing took place in a quiet, familiar corner of the classroom, but once consented, children

were free to move resources and bring them back to me if they felt they wished to draw elsewhere. This allowed children to engage at their own pace and comfort level.

More-than-human Co-participants Methods

More-than-human participants played an important role in this research, shaping meaning-making experiences for both children and adults. Grounded in an entangled, posthumanist perspective, this study recognises the agency of materials, spaces, and environments, not as passive or neutral, but as lively forces that co-produce experience alongside human participants (Barad, 2007; Snaza *et al.*, 2014). This view challenges anthropocentric assumptions and invites a more expansive understanding of pedagogy and research in EY settings, one in which materials, textures, atmospheres, and tools matter, in both senses of the word.

As Taylor and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2015) argue, early childhood spaces are vibrant Matterscapes, filled with relational possibilities that exceed human intention. In this study, the intra-actions between human and more-than-human participants were seen as vital to children's gender expression, offering both constraints and affordances that shaped how identity was explored, performed, or resisted. This section explores the presence and role of the more-than-human throughout the study, beginning with journaling as a method of reflective engagement, and then turning to two key areas observed during data collection: enabling environments and EY resources. These sub-sections consider how space and materiality acted as co-contributors to the mosaic of expression and justify their inclusion within the overall methodological framework.

Reflective journal

Reflective theory concepts, such as Schön's (1989) notion of reflection *in* and *on* action, Brookfield's (1995) use of multiple lenses, and Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1978, in Kitchenham, 2008), highlight the importance of intentional reflection in facilitating personal growth and meaning-making (Crawford *et al.*, 2021). In this study, reflective journaling was adopted as an embedded method, integral to the research process from the outset and sustained throughout the data collection period.

Journaling provided a dedicated space to trace my own entanglement in-with-through the research process. It included a combination of handwritten notes, typed reflections, and routine audio-recorded voice notes made after each setting visit (Hayman *et al.*, 2010). This process offered a way to observe the evolution of my own thoughts, challenge assumptions as they emerged, and remain open to being affected by the material, emotional, and relational dimensions of the research. Reflection provided space to attune myself to the affective flows of the classroom, to rethink planned methods, and to make responsive decisions about how to engage with participants.

The first four months of the data collection (September–December) focused solely on journaling and building relationships. No other data collection methods were used during this period. This slow start allowed me to build trust with children and practitioners, understand the rhythm of the setting, and begin to trace how power relations and assumptions surfaced in everyday interactions. As Malacrida (2007) notes, journaling can provide an essential foundation for understanding participants while also offering space to navigate the emotional and ethical tensions that arise in sensitive research. This was particularly important in a study focused on gender, identity, and expression.

In line with Taggart (2015), journaling also supported the disruption of fixed power positions between myself and participants, enabling more authentic and reciprocal relationships. It helped me consider my own positioning and expression, and how these might influence or intra-act with the setting and the people within it. Through this, I was able to make more informed, ethically attuned decisions about when and how to introduce additional methods, as well as the ability to understand the needs of the children I was working with. Journaling informed the development of these later methods, helping shape interview questions, adapt observation strategies, and identify moments of resonance or tension that later became significant in analysis. This practice of sustained reflexivity supported a more conscious understanding of my own entanglement within the data, and later, provided a valuable analytic thread. Extracts from the journal are returned to in the analysis chapters, offering a reflexive lens on the unfolding mosaic of children's and practitioners' expressions.

Enabling Environments

Children learn and develop best in environments that enable them to feel safe, confident, and free to explore their ideas and identities. In line with policy and practice guidance (DfE, 2024; Early Years Coalition, 2021), enabling environments are understood as those that offer children security, comfort, choice, engagement, and rich opportunities for learning through open-ended, accessible resources. From a New Hermetic Materialist (NHM) perspective, these environments are not simply neutral backdrops but active contributors to children's meaning-making. The Matter within and around the child plays a role in shaping, and at times re-gendering or de-gendering, their experiences (Warin, 2023). Recognising this, the spaces children moved through became a significant focus within the research. Observations explored not just what occurred within these environments, but how human and more-than-human intra-actions emerged in different material contexts.

The classroom and outdoor areas provided the main sites of everyday expression and interaction. Both environments were designed to promote autonomy and movement, and children navigated freely between them during most parts of the day. Free-flow observations captured how children used space, where they lingered, what they returned to, and how their play unfolded in relation to materials, peers, and practitioners. These spaces were not static; they invited movement, offered resistance, and responded differently to bodies, weather, and relational dynamics. The covered outdoor area afforded seasonal experiences and spontaneous sensory play, becoming a lively contributor to children's expressions of self and social relations. As Millei and Gallagher (2011) suggest, early childhood spaces should be understood as performative and affective shaping not only what children do, but how they come to be.

In addition to the classroom and outdoor areas, weekly forest school sessions offered a distinct shift in spatial and affective atmosphere. Situated in a natural area on the school grounds, this environment provided opportunities for children to engage with different textures, tempos, and possibilities. Forest school was often met with excitement and a sense of freedom; observations during these sessions focused on how children's expressions, verbal, embodied, and affective, shifted when surrounded by trees, mud,

and open sky. The materiality of the forest space held a different energy, one that invited risk, exploration, and more open-ended forms of expression. As Waller and Davis (2014) note, outdoor environments bring a dynamic material vibrancy to learning, shaping not only what children do but how they feel and connect with themselves, others, and the more-than-human world. More recent research by Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles *et al.* (2020) also positions nature-based learning as a site of ethical encounter, where children intra-act with lively Matter and develop attunement to relational ways of knowing. In this study, forest school introduced a shift in rhythm and relational tone; the reduced adult intervention and abundant sensory stimuli made space for new forms of play, social organisation, and self-expression that were distinct from the more structured classroom context.

Social spaces such as corridors and the dinner hall also became sites of interest. Often overlooked in discussions of EY pedagogy, these spaces revealed subtle but important differences in how children engaged with one another. Unlike the classroom, where adult presence and pedagogical routines were dominant, these spaces were typically supervised by lunchtime staff, and the perceived authority of the teacher was more diffuse. I was curious about how this shift might affect children's behaviour, and whether these spaces allowed for different forms of expression, particularly within friendship groups. Drawing on Foucault's (1978) concept of the panoptic gaze, I considered how the presence or absence of adult surveillance shaped the performativity of gender and identity in these spaces. Observations suggested moments of increased spontaneity, peer-to-peer connection, and even resistance to normative expectations, which were often less visible in more structured contexts. Taken together, these environments formed a constellation of expressive spaces, each contributing uniquely to the intra-active mosaic of the research. They provided diverse material-affective conditions that shaped how children expressed, explored, and negotiated identity, and helped illuminate how space itself participates in the ongoing becoming of the child.

Early Years Resources

In EY education, the resources available to children, whether play materials, dressing-up clothes, or structured teaching tools, play a crucial role in shaping their experiences and expressions (Van, 2007). From a New Hermetic Materialist perspective, which recognises the entangled agency of all Matter, these resources are not passive objects awaiting human interaction. Rather, they are vibrant contributors to children's intra-active worlds, shaping and being shaped by children's gestures, decisions, and imagination. Bennett (2010) describes this as Thing-power, the capacity of Matter to affect and be affected. Recognising this energy shifts the way we view educational materials: from neutral teaching aids to co-participants in the learning and expressive life of the classroom. Across this study, three key areas of material resources were closely observed for their entangled role in children's experiences of gender and identity.

Firstly, the pedagogical resources chosen by practitioners, planning documents, reading schemes, and topic-based materials, were considered. These resources shape what children are exposed to linguistically, socially, and culturally. As Wharton (2008) points out, many commercial reading schemes continue to present subtly gendered ideas of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing social stereotypes through character roles and narratives. Scorer and Vardy (2024) further argue that children must see themselves reflected in the texts and visuals they encounter at school, or risk developing a sense of marginality. In this study, attention was paid to the kinds of stories, characters, and roles depicted in the texts used, considering how these offered or constrained possibilities for children's self-recognition and gender exploration. While practitioners may not always overtly intend for these materials to influence identity, their presence nonetheless contributes to the landscape of what is seen, heard, and repeated. In this sense, the agency of planning and reading resources lies in their power to frame what stories are told, whose voices are present, and what norms go unchallenged.

Another material layer observed was the classroom displays. Long regarded as a marker of good practice in EY settings, displays are used to celebrate children's work, reinforce learning content, and visually enrich the classroom environment (Daniels, 1989). Boone (2008) advocates for the display of children's artwork to honour all forms of expression,

regardless of ability or outcome. However, Renkl and Scheiter (2017) complicate this view by suggesting that displays, whether intentionally designed or not, carry meaning and influence. In the context of this research, displays were considered not just for what they showed, but for how they participated in the visual culture of the classroom, what kinds of images, messages, and identities were represented, and how these may shape children's understandings of gender. Given the entangled view adopted in this thesis, the visual surroundings were seen as part of the affective atmosphere of the setting, generating moments of resonance, recognition, or resistance for the children who moved through them.

Finally, the broader range of settings resources was also observed, from large structural elements like drainpipes children swung on, to everyday play items such as bikes, sand, and pencils, and natural materials like grass, daisies, and mud. No single resource was prioritised, but rather attention was paid to what children chose to engage with, how they used it, and what meanings or expressions emerged through those encounters. These intra-actions were not viewed as isolated incidents of play but as affective entanglements, instances where material, movement, emotion, and identity came together. As Somerville (2016) notes, observing children's engagements with Matter through a relational lens opens new understandings of how meaning is made through touch, resistance, repetition, and joy. These moments are returned to in the discovery chapters, where objects and materials are considered not for what they are, but for what they did in the ongoing becoming of children's expressions.

Together, these methods formed an entangled mosaic, each offering a different way of listening and noticing. By centring both human and more-than-human participants, this approach stayed open to emergence, affect, and the mattering of children's gendered expressions. What follows is a weaving of voices, spaces, and moments, brought together through a mosaic thematic analysis of how identity is expressed in-with-through children's intra-actions.

3.9 Mosaic Thematic Analysis

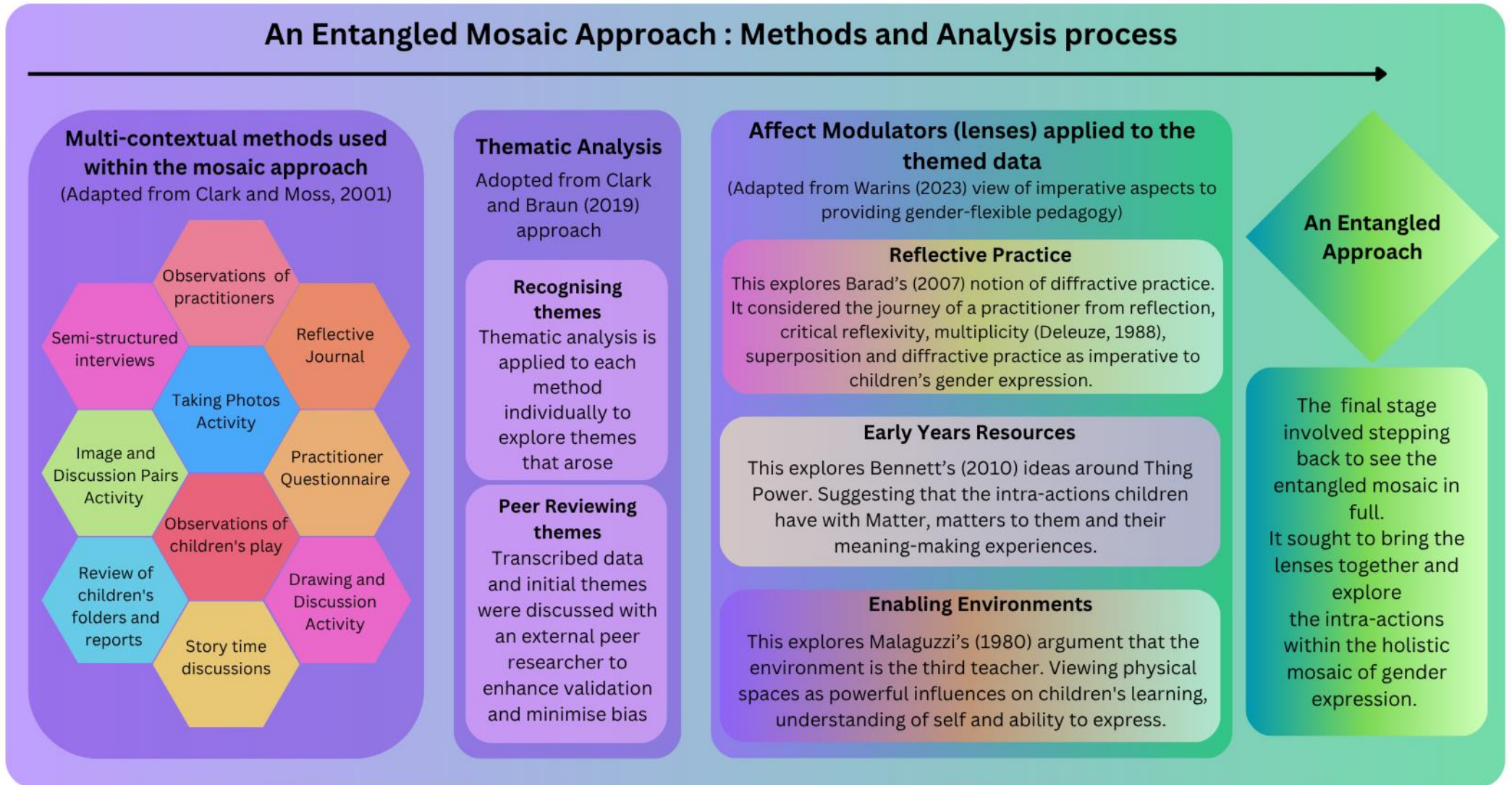
Thematic analysis, widely used in educational research (Peel, 2020), provided a systematic method for identifying and reporting patterns within the data, enabling “rich and detailed, yet complex accounts of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.5). Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise how themes offer insights into patterns of experience while supporting reflexivity and interpretation. In this study, a mosaic thematic analysis was adopted to reflect the multifaceted nature of the data, maintaining flexibility and depth when exploring the nuances of children’s intra-actions. Two stages of analysis were undertaken to ensure the data’s complexity was fully attended to (see Image 11).

The first stage involved analysing each method in the mosaic separately (11 data sets), recognising that themes might emerge differently across methods while allowing an overview of initial patterns. A hybrid coding approach (Brough, 2019) guided this phase, beginning with repeated readings of transcripts, reflective journal entries, and familiarisation with children’s drawings, photographs, and creative outputs. Open coding generated initial codes, with similar codes clustered into potential themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). Thematic maps were developed using MindMeister software to visualise relationships between themes (Smith, 2016). Once coherent themes were established, they were named to encapsulate their underlying phenomena and considered in relation to the literature, research questions, and thesis aims, producing a robust yet responsive analytical process.

In the second stage, a peer researcher with EY and doctoral experience was invited to bring an independent, practitioner-informed lens (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The peer worked with anonymised data from seven data sets (excluding observations due to transcription challenges) to ensure ethical transparency (Clark, 2006). While some themes were labelled differently, for example, my ‘practitioner multiplicities’ was framed as ‘practitioners layered stories’, the findings were substantively aligned. This collaborative engagement acted as a form of critical friendship, offering dialogue, challenge, and co-reflection, qualities widely recognised as enhancing qualitative rigour (Barbour, 2001), particularly in relational early childhood research.

Peer engagement supported validity by grounding interpretations in the data and strengthened reliability through coding consistency (Giorgi, 2002). As Peel (2020) notes, identifying themes is inherently subjective, and Braun and Clarke (2022) caution against unconscious bias. The peer analysis added reflexivity and transparency, helping ensure the analysis reflected the richness of children's expressions and the many threads woven through their intra-actions.

Image 13: An Entangled Mosaic Approach: Methods



3.10 Affect Modulators

In this research, I worked with the idea of affect modulators, shifting forces that shape how feelings move, settle, or spark within a space. Rather than treating emotion as fixed or internal, I draw on affect theory (Massumi, 2002), which emphasises affect as relational, embodied, and often sensed before it is spoken (Manning, 2013). In early childhood settings, this means attending not only to what children say or do, but to the atmospheres, materials, and relationships that support or constrain their expressions (Blackman, 2012). Affect modulators help trace these messy, fleeting conditions, never fully knowable but always felt. As Taylor (2016) argues, generating new understandings requires rethinking not only what we know, but how we come to know. These modulators offer playful, open-ended lenses to explore how gender expression is co-composed through affective, material, and spatial entanglements. Rather than tidying the data into clear answers, they invite us to stay with the blur, the ambiguity, and the becoming.

Building on Warin's (2019) work on gender-flexible pedagogy, I identified three affect modulators shaping my analysis: diffractive practice, EY resources, and enabling environments. These are not fixed categories but conceptual tools, flexible and attuned to the everyday textures of EY practice. They help reveal what might otherwise be overlooked and follow moments where gender is being explored, felt, or negotiated. Each modulator invites a distinct attention. Diffractive practice, drawing on Barad's (2007) notion of diffraction, turns the analytic gaze inward and outward, recognising how researchers and practitioners shape meaning-making through their own experiences and positionalities. Here, knowing becomes co-becoming (Lenz Taguchi, 2012), with practitioner reflexivity central to how gender is read, welcomed, or resisted in children's actions. EY resources, informed by Bennett's (2010) Thing-Power, are not neutral props but active participants shaping identity possibilities. A glittery headband, picture book, or construction set modulates affect, opening or consolidating ways of being. Enabling environments, building on Warin (2019) and posthuman pedagogies (Hackett *et al.*, 2020), focus on how space, rhythm, and relationality generate conditions where gender expression may flourish, or not. These environments are not passive backdrops but vibrant, affective forces.

Together, these modulators do not serve as coding categories but as lenses that stay close to the entangled, affective, and shifting realities of gender becoming. They help trace movements, intensities, and openings within the data, before reweaving them into the wider mosaic that shapes children's expressions of self.

This version of the entangled mosaic brings together more of the picture, not just the methods and participants, but my own place within the research too. These tiles are not static or complete; like everything else in this study, they shift with each new encounter. Some overlap, some contradict, some have not fully revealed themselves yet. The blank spaces and unfinished edges are not mistakes; they are part of the point. They leave room for the unexpected, for new insights to slip in sideways. As we move into the next chapter, the mosaic keeps evolving, with fresh tiles emerging through the data itself, shaped by the messy, affective and entanglement of this research.

Image 14: An Entangled Mosaic: Methods



3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the framework guiding this research, grounded in New-Hermetic Materialism (NHM), shaped by three core beliefs: life is entangled, Matter matters, and becoming is ongoing. Reality is framed as interconnected and agentic, with both human and more-than-human participants contributing. Positioned within an EOE approach, the research remains both methodologically grounded and ethically attuned.

The entangled mosaic methodology was introduced to explore the complexity of gender expression in early childhood. This multi-method, multi-(con)textual approach, using drawings, interviews, and observations, traces dynamic intra-actions between children, practitioners, materials, and spaces. By recognising the agency of Matter and relational encounters, this methodology offers a holistic understanding of gender expression, respecting the vitality of both human and more-than-human co-participants.

The integration of NHM and the entangled mosaic approach positions this study to offer new insights into how gender is lived and expressed in EY contexts. The following chapters move into the discovery phase, exploring themes through multi-(con)textual listening, considering practitioner reflexivity, and examining how an entangled NHM lens can support gender-flexible pedagogy, disrupt social stereotypes, and nurture more inclusive learning environments.

Chapter Four

Discoveries

This chapter dives into the wonderfully entangled world of children's gender expression, exploring how it is shaped by three powerful affect modulators: reflective practice, EY resources, and environments. Entwining with the quirky metaphors introduced in chapter one, to express these concepts (Steele, Baird and Davis, 2022); the chicken, towel, and greenhouse, this chapter unpacks these modulators as tools for understanding the intricate dance between children, practitioners, and the Matter around them. The chicken questions where understanding begins, teasing apart the dynamic interplay of influence between child and practitioner. The towel, both practical and symbolic, highlights the role of the often unseen but valuable resources that matter in nurturing expression, while the greenhouse invites us to think of environments as adaptable and nurturing spaces for growth. Together, these three modulators (Snaza, 2020) provide structure to the chapter, forming the backbone of three discovery sections. Through these, the data reveals the transformative potential of engaging with children's identities in ways that are attuned, reflective, and deeply responsive to the entangled nature of becoming. This chapter aims to present the voices of many participants, both Human and more-than-human through this research. The three practitioners' voices, where represented through direct quotations, have been identified using individual colours onto their chosen pseudonyms: Mrs K, Mrs R and Mr S to distinguish their voice.

4.1 Discovery One: The chicken or the egg

The focus of this section requires us to revisit the chicken coop, which in chapter one explored the entangled nature of self, in-with-through the research thesis. Returning to the coop in this chapter provides an opportunity to further explore the role of EYPs, their understanding of gender, and their entanglement with the children they intra-act with. It provides an opportunity to ponder the old age question; which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Although a seemingly anecdotal phrase, it has become very fitting within the exploration of how practitioners can enhance the provision of gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin, 2023) through a critical understanding of themselves as unique individuals, whilst reading through the needs of the unique child. The familiar question creates an

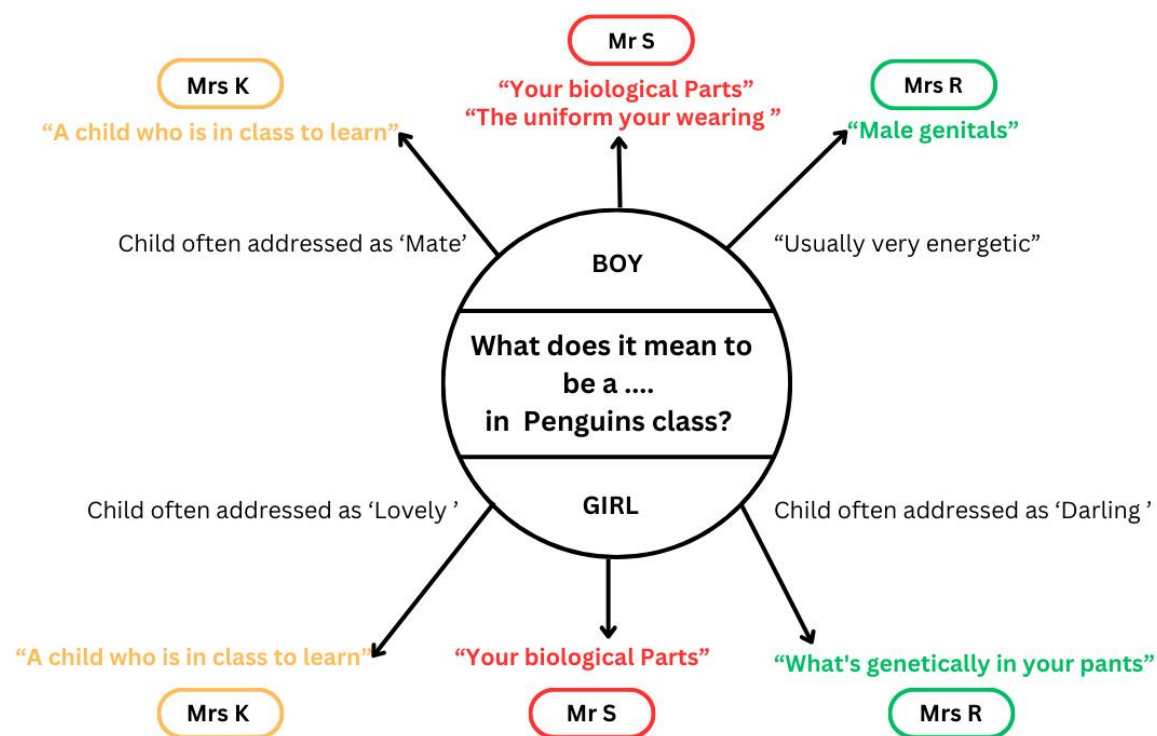
entangled narrative that one does not exist in greater importance than the other, neither can one exist independent of the other, or of the external influence of the surroundings. This section's discussion mirrors such an entangled narrative in exploring the role of EYPs within a child's life as fundamental to the child's becoming (DfE, 2024). Whilst EY policy recognizes the integral role of practitioners as key workers for children's development, it does not appear to do justice to how significant the implications are for practitioners' diffractive praxis, their intra-actions (Harris, 2021) with young children, nor recognize the systematic, gendered pressures within EY. This discussion, therefore, draws on strong threads that emerged throughout the data collection, challenging the common notion that practitioners have limited impact on children's gender development (Martin, 2011), but rather calls for recognition that the unique child is deeply entangled in-with-through the phenomena of unique practitioners, therefore troubling the idea that EY practice should start centered with the child. It explores the perceptions of the practitioners involved within this research, recalls their unique stories and navigates the complex multiplicities they recall of their own gender, whilst recognizing the effect they have on the children with which they work. This discussion draws on the works of Haraway (1992) and Barad's (2007) notion of diffraction; in suggesting that as practitioners evolve their thinking from critical reflection to diffractive praxis, they hold great responsibility in embracing a place of superposition.

Practitioners' awareness of gender

Language is a powerful tool that shapes and reflects societal norms, often carrying implicit assumptions about identity, roles, and expectations (Kroger, 2007, p66). Therefore, when exploring gender in the context of EY, it is vital to interrogate the language used, its social connotations and the unconscious meaning applied to practice. Terms like "boy" and "girl" may appear straightforward, shared language, but are deeply rooted in cultural, historical, and personal meanings that vary significantly (Norton, 1997). In this research, gaining clarity on the practitioners' understanding of these terms became necessary for meaningful dialogue. While I remained mindful of my own use of language, I recognise that complete neutrality is unlikely, researcher presence and word choices inevitably shape the co-constructed nature of dialogue (Sibbald et al, 2025). Nonetheless, by centering practitioners' perspectives and remaining attuned to

my own discursive positioning, I sought to minimise the imposition of predefined narratives. By centering their perspectives, the research provided space for practitioners to articulate their own understandings of gender, shedding light on how societal and personal frameworks influence their professional practice. The insights from these discussions reveal not only the complexity of practitioners' awareness but also the entangled relationships between language, perception, and practice (Olmos-Vega et al, 2023). These reflections are represented in the following mind map and discussions, capturing the understandings shared by the participants during the study.

Image 15: What does it mean to be a Boy or Girl in Penguins class?



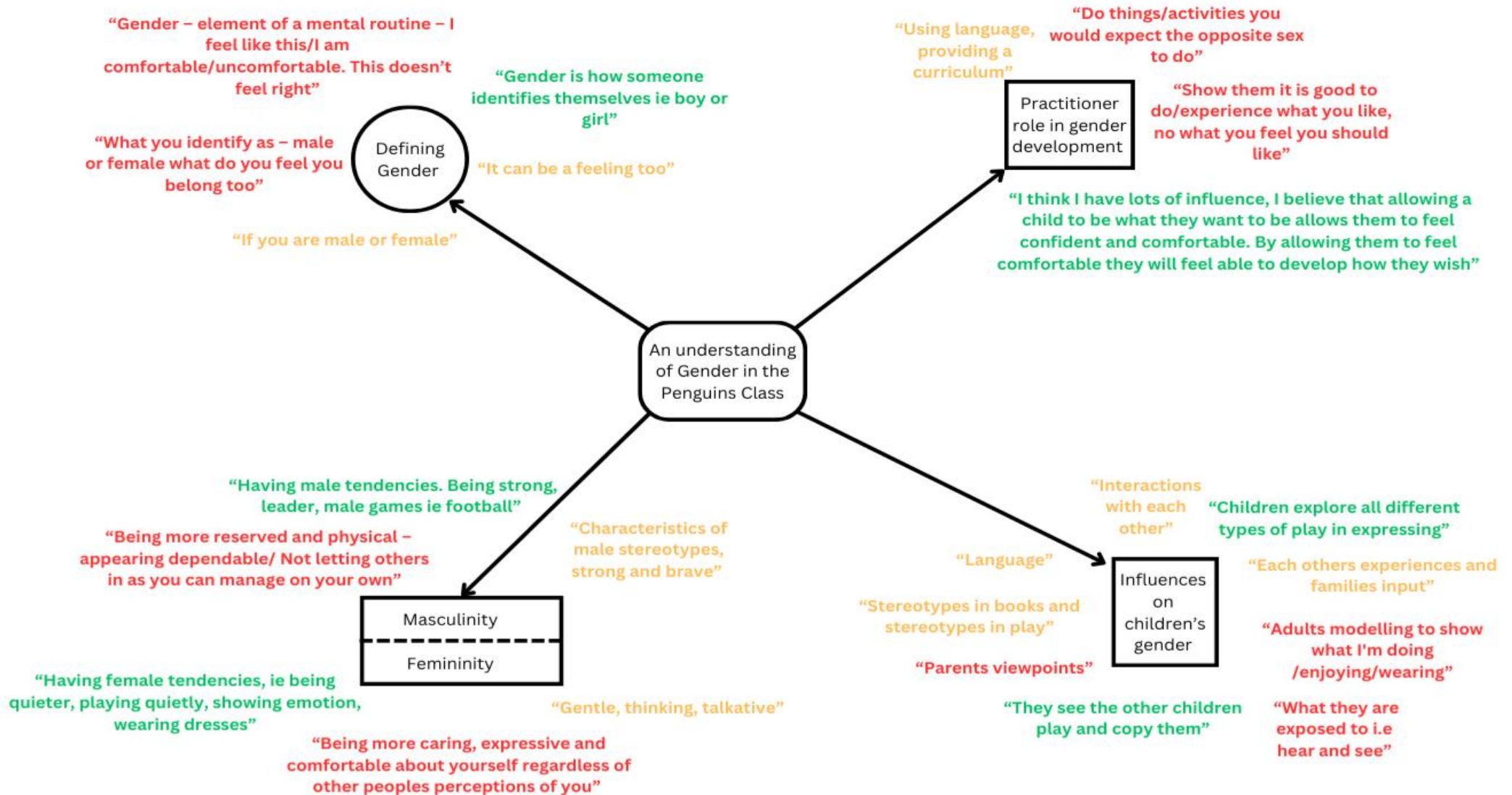
Whilst Mr S and Mrs R assign the language of Boy and Girl to the biological sex of a child, Mrs K demonstrated a certain gender blindness, stating that she saw no difference in the child as “all children are in class to learn”. However, whilst this suggestion could have been made to present the opinion that it did not matter if a child was a boy or girl in terms of their ability to learn, observations of children being greeted by Mrs K demonstrated a difference in how the children were addressed, suggesting that a differentiation was subconscious within her practice. The word ‘Mate’ was repeatedly used to greet boys as

they entered the classroom, both in the mornings and after afternoon play. In contrast, terms like ‘Darling’ and ‘Lovely’ were typically reserved for girls. This unconscious pattern of gendered greetings reflects wider findings in EY settings, where educators’ well-meaning but habitual language use often reinforces traditional gender roles without intent (Warin, 2023). These gendered greetings were rarely used interchangeably, even in cases where a child’s gender expression differed from their assigned sex at birth. For instance, child Mi, who was assigned female at birth but consistently identified and expressed as a boy, often indicating choices such as: “No, the spiderman pants are mine, I don’t wear girly ones”, or “I can only dance to the football song”, yet was still addressed with feminised terms like ‘Darling’ by some practitioners. This inconsistency in language use subtly revealed the tensions between practitioner habit, gender norms, and their responsiveness to children’s gender expressions. Martin and Ruble (2023) suggest that such patterns of early gender socialisation in schools can strongly shape children’s sense of identity, with even small differences in language use having significant implications.

The disparity in terms of address was also seen across Mr S and Mrs R suggesting that Mrs K, although not assigning a difference in boy or girl for the sake of their ability to be involved in learning, does subconsciously see boys and girls as separate groups of individuals based off their biological sex. This reinforces Martin and Rubles’ (2023) suggestion and is a prime example of why the nuances of language are important to clarify for individuals, as well as within a team of professionals. Across the first two interviews, and practitioner questionnaire, language continued to be explored to further understand what was meant by gender and its place within Penguins class. Image (13) below captures the four themes that arose and aims to represent the voices of the three practitioners.

Image 16 - Practitioners' thoughts on understanding the complexities of gender

Key: Mrs K Mrs R Mr S



All three practitioners spent longer working to articulate and explain what they understood gender to be, than they did for other terminology. Mrs R suggested in her second interview that:

“No training teaches us or explores children’s mental state of identity ... we don’t even have any theoretical stuff on it in our courses ... I assume [there is research] but wouldn’t know what it is. I’ll have to have a Google”

Both Mr S and Mrs K also shared that they had no awareness of theory or of gender from a developmental perspective and mentions that no policy existed within the setting around gender in EY. Both Mr S and Mrs K were aware of the 2023 Gender Questioning guidance for schools (DfE, 2023) but reported that there was no inclusion, nor guidance for EY, and that they were not aware of any internal discussions or policies made because of it. These practitioner reflections not only highlight individual uncertainty around gender theory and identity development but also point to a broader systemic issue within EY education: the notable absence of gender-focused training and theoretical frameworks. The lack of clear policy or guidance in these settings, including support for understanding gender development, creates a silent framework that shapes children’s gender expression by default, leaving practitioners unsure how to respond or support confidently. When left unexamined, this silence risks reinforcing binary norms and limiting the possibilities for how children feel able to express themselves, and leaves practitioners with fundamental gaps in child development knowledge. The As Osgood (2012) and MacNaughton (2000) argue, early childhood educators often operate within a professional culture that undervalues critical, theory-informed practice, particularly in relation to identity, diversity, and inclusion. Mrs R’s comment, alongside the uncertainty expressed by Mr S and Mrs K, reveals a professional landscape where educators are left to self-navigate complex topics like gender without institutional support. This aligns with Blaise’s (2005) findings that gender is often naturalised and left unexamined in ECEC environments, while Davies (1989) highlights how educators rely on intuitive sense-making when theory is absent.

This reflects wider patterns of de-professionalisation in the sector (Osgood, 2012), where EYPs are expected to take on increasingly complex socio-emotional and developmental

responsibilities yet are given minimal training or policy grounding to do so. Even the 2023 Gender Questioning guidance (DfE, 2023), while aimed at schools, lacks any meaningful application to the EYFS, leaving settings without clear direction or discussion frameworks (Miller & Cameron, 2011).

In the absence of structured training or access to relevant theory, practitioners in this study instead drew upon personal reasoning and intuitive interpretations to navigate questions of gender in practice. Despite recognising a gap in their awareness, all three participants described gender as an internal sense of self rather than an external image, aligning this mental understanding with a linguistic shift from 'boy/girl' to 'male/female'. Mr S suggested that:

“It’s hard to know more about male or female(ness) ... it’s more about what someone feels ... not something that can be seen or measured by us”

The internal state of mind, or feelings, as Mr S suggested, were clearly argued to be different to that of biological sex and therefore suggested to be more difficult to see, understand and support for children in Penguins.

Martin (2011) engaged with EYPs and highlighted the limited connection, influence and importance that practitioners attributed to their role in children’s gender development. In his research, gender was viewed as something children naturally progressed through or learned outside the classroom. In contrast, when Mr S, Mrs K and Mrs R were posed the same question, they identified themselves as key figures in modelling the developmental experiences of children. Mrs K highlighted that as an EYFS lead particularly,

“It is my job to oversee a curriculum that ... challenges gender stereotypes that limit children’s development ... the EYFS is minimal on how to do this, so it’s my job to figure it out”

This argument appeared to provide the understanding that in the provision of a curriculum; practitioners would naturally be role models. However, Mr S and Mr R provided a more personalised perspective reflecting on their role to:

“Show them it is good to do ... what you like, not what you think you should like ... gender can be from any sex” (Mr S)

Similarly, Mrs R described the importance of:

“My influence is to make them feel safe and comfortable ... by showing this ... they will feel able to develop how they wish”

These views still maintain the challenging of stereotypes as fundamental to their role yet acknowledge that the minimal guidance provided by the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2024) has meant practitioners have had to find their own ways of doing this. Leading by example in their own behaviours and expressions “**outside of the norm moulds**”, as Mr S suggests, was deemed more effective than just challenging children when they mirror stereotypical behaviour from the outside world.

Wider influences on the gender of children in Penguins class were mainly categorised as being influenced by the peer relationships children had with others, or the influence of adults (including parents) on shaping the experiences and exposure of the world to young children. The role of parents will be explored later in this chapter, as all three practitioners highlighted home life as significant, not only in shaping children's early experiences of adults, but also in mediating their exposure to the world through technology, language, and media, all of which contribute to their developing sense of gender (Chen, 2022). These observations reflect the layered nature of environmental influence, where gendered experiences are shaped through the interplay of home, school, and wider cultural forces (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Mrs K explained that:

“**What happens and is seen in the home ... is so important ... some parents are more concerned than others about what their children see online ... that can be tough if they have an older sibling**”

In a picture-sorting activity, designed to explore children's perceptions of gendered presentation through visual cues, 19 children were asked to describe a range of images of individuals. Nine of them recognised and described RuPaul, an American drag queen and host, as a man dressed as a woman, with comments such as “That's a man in fancy lady clothes,” “He's dressed up like a girl for fun,” and “I think he's a boy pretending to be a princess.” The other ten described the image as “a funny-looking lady,” “a lady dressed up,” or “a woman with lots of makeup.” Only three children identified the image of a female footballer as a woman, with the majority perceiving the short tied-up hair, football kit, and activity as “for boys,” therefore concluding the person must be a boy. Comments

included “She’s wearing football clothes so she’s a boy,” “Girls don’t have that hair,” “Only boys play football,” and “That’s a boy 'cause she’s got boy shoes.” The children who recognised her as female commented, “Girls can play football too,” and “She’s got girl eyes,” subtly pushing back against gendered assumptions. The activity was intended to gently elicit children’s understandings of gender beyond binary labels and to surface how visual and cultural cues inform their meaning-making.

Image 17 - Picture sorting activity



All descriptions verbalised the visible characteristics of the person, such as clothing, hairstyle, or makeup to assign gendered descriptors, suggesting that external appearance plays a central role in how children understand and interpret gender (Ling et al, 2018). Mr S explained:

“It’s strange the mix of expressions the kids recognise ... some could name RuPaul and understand that’s an expression of self ... but then, if a child puts on a dress, I’ve had parents, particularly fathers, not happy about it”

These reflections suggest that children’s ideas about gender are shaped not just by what they see, but by how those around them, especially parents, respond to that expression. Yet, they also reveal how practitioners can become the object of surveillance themselves, negotiating tensions between protecting the professional-self and supporting children’s evolving gender identities (Foucault, 1984). Alongside parental reactions, school uniform quietly played a regulatory role. Although presented as neutral, uniform policies normalised particular ways of looking “right,” subtly aligning tidiness, sameness, and compliance with expectations of respectability. At times, children were asked to remove large or brightly coloured hair accessories and place them in their drawers; on one occasion, a child was taken to change their socks as they were not the correct shade of black. Others were told to swap out their trainers for black PE pumps. These small corrections may seem inconsequential, but they carry affective weight, dimming expressive flourishes and quietly teaching that this is not a space to explore difference. Such practices reinforce the idea that appearance must conform to social expectations, limiting not only gender expression but also the broader forms of creative self-styling available to all children, regardless of sex.

Self-expression of what the participants identified to be “**how one feels about themselves internally**” (Mrs R) was understood to be influential through several external forces. However, it was then important for me to understand how practitioners observed expressions and the connections they made to stereotypes and the gendering of children. The practitioners were asked to explain their understanding of gender expression through the terminology of masculinity and femininity. Both were described by Mrs K to be “**characteristics belonging to either a male or female** (the language also used to describe mental gender, or feelings of self) **which are outwardly observed**”. Mrs R provided some examples connecting strength to being an expression of men and female

tendencies attributed to care, expression, and quiet. This was an example of the importance to exploring the nuances of language as although seemingly they hadn't intended on connecting masculinity with men and femininity with women, the limitations of language appeared to reinforce stereotyping. Mrs R and Mr S recognised that:

“Both men and women show these different characteristics ... they are expressions of feelings ... it's not like only men show masculinity”

“... there is no other language to explain it ... female characteristics are not female but a feminine expression ... it feels like an entrapment of language ... this is the depth of stereotyping and our subconscious”

Trodd and Dickerson, (2018) suggest that when observing and understanding children's development, it is important that practitioners are aware of and looking for the same understanding and interpretation of expressions so that development, as with any other area can be supported. It therefore became imperative to understanding what the practitioners each understood of the characteristics of masculinity and femininity so one could explore how they each viewed children's expressions, their own biases and stereotypes, and areas where subconscious expectations meant they looked for, overlooked, or missed children's expressions. This became paramount to begin unpacking where and why they held these views themselves.

Image 15 and table three represents the different characteristics, and language used by practitioners as an expression of masculinity or femininity. It was important that the language used was from the practitioners themselves, and as such, these words were taken from observations of practice and practitioners' terms of address when speaking to or describing children (Purdon, 2014). These words were also collated from language shared by practitioners through the questionnaire. The words in the centre of the Venn diagram are one's practitioners were unsure of how to characterise, and the table below outlines the words which the practitioners did not agree with.

Image 18. Practitioners' identification of characteristics

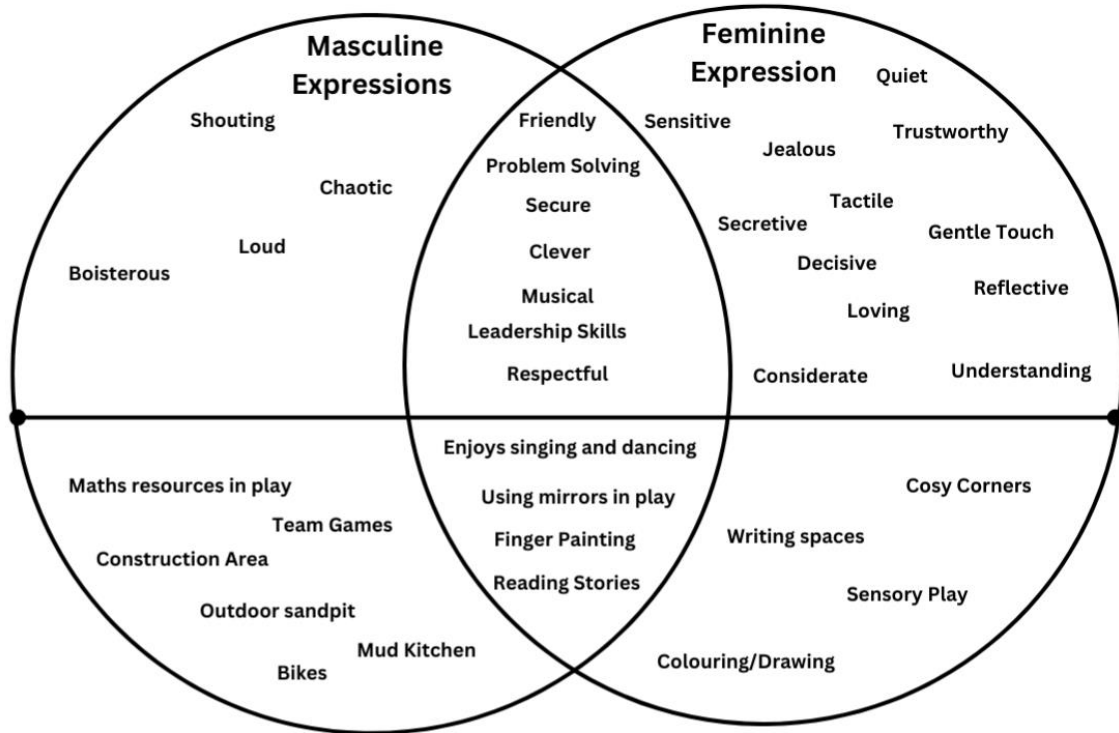


Table three – Practitioners identification of gender characteristics

Gender Expression	Mrs K	Mrs R View	Mr S View
Considerate	Both	Feminine	Masculine
Loyal	Feminine	Masculine	Masculine
Confidence	Masculine	Masculine	Feminine
Sympathetic	Feminine	Feminine	Masculine
Strong Willed	Feminine	Masculine	Feminine
Shy	Masculine	Feminine	Feminine
Enjoy Carpet Time	Both	Feminine	Masculine
Enjoys small world Play	Both	Feminine	Masculine

Table three suggests that while practitioners often aligned certain behaviours with either femininity or masculinity, this alignment was not consistent across all expressions. Several characteristics were categorised differently by each participant, highlighting not only a lack of consensus but also the influence of their individual experiences and perceptions. Notably, Mrs K identified three behaviours as both masculine and feminine at different points, suggesting either uncertainty in classification or the possibility that her responses were unconsciously informed by specific children she had observed expressing those behaviours. This blurring of categorisation reflects how gendered meanings are often entangled with lived experience rather than fixed definitions (Reddington, 2023). It also reinforces the notion that masculinity and femininity, while frequently positioned as dualities, are in practice experienced and interpreted along a fluid spectrum (Freeman, 2021). This may help explain why practitioners diverged in their responses, different expressions may resonate differently with each practitioner depending on their internalised understandings and prior encounters. These findings suggest that, despite growing awareness, subconscious stereotyping continues to link expression to biological sex rather than to the internal gendered self of the child.

Social and Institutional expectations of gender expressions was a further focus within interviews 2 and 3 for all practitioners. Each spoke very clearly to the pressures of the education system and as such the school expectations of conforming gendered stereotypes of themselves within the classroom. Mrs K explained:

“It’s a very masculine-dominated environment ... not so bad in the early years as we’re allowed to continue the element of care ... but that’s all squeezed out when you move up the school ... you’re expected to maintain order, ‘manage’ the classroom noise levels ... and fit into the mould of a teacher”

Mr S added:

“This is the limitation of expression ... in Reception we can still get away with dressing up, expressing self through play ... but once that’s gone from the curriculum and children are ‘school ready’, their expression opportunities are also gone ... unless it’s on accepted days like World Book Day ... we’re expected to fit the controlled, ‘sensible’, more masculine mould ... very limited femininity”

These reflections speak not only to gendered expectations but also to broader neoliberal discourses shaping education, where performance, conformity, and control are prioritised over care, creativity, and relational pedagogies (Sims, 2017; Moss, 2019). A sense of what we should do (Bourdieu, cited in King 2002) and what was expected as the right thing to do, was present within these discussions and some sense of frustration was aired by both Mrs R and Mr S about the confinements of this when showcasing positive gender expressions to the children.

“Challenging is one thing verbally, but it can only really be done if we show ... formal dress wouldn’t allow a teacher to be flamboyant or showcase piercings or body creativity ... I think that’s more allowed in some private nurseries ... perhaps it’s a school control thing”

“I can’t show boys that it’s OK to express through dance or dressing up if I can’t do that myself ... how is that being a role model? ... that’s reinforcing narrow-minded expectations of gender expressions, not enhancing them”

This reflects how cisnormative expectations are perpetuated not only through explicit policies but also via implicit surveillance mechanisms within educational institutions, leading educators to self-regulate their gender expressions due to anticipated scrutiny from leadership, parents, and inspection bodies such as OFSTED (Horton, 2022). The pressure that practitioners talk to here was described as both micro and macro from an internal management and higher government perspective in reinforcing cisnormativity (Mcbride and Neary, 2021) within schools, clearly starting from the very youngest of children and environments. This arguably calls for the interruption of gender stereotyping to stem from wider than just the practitioners but include the self-work, reflection and change of school leaders, wider governments and social inputs to reach children at every level of the education system.

The Journey to Diffraction

Compassion, care, and professional love are significant components that echo from all three practitioners in this research. Their conviction to allowing children space to grow, express themselves, and embed practice within the EY curriculum has been strikingly clear throughout the interviews, observations, and discussions. Both Mrs K and Mr S often reflected through the year that “children should be free to just be children, that’s

what's important to us", "We care about them as individuals, they are so impressionable at this age". This ethos was not only present in their words but became visible through their daily interactions and decision-making for children across the year. The importance of taking action (praxis) to ensure that children have opportunities for growth during their time in reception was articulated and observed on several occasions, with the view that adaptive change is a requirement to stay current and connected to changing narratives in practice, such as stereotypical gender norms. Mrs R summarised in her interview three that "the world is changing so fast, we need to be more responsive to give children a chance!" In this way, professional love was not static but shaped through an ongoing process of responsiveness and reflection (Page, 2018). Each of the three practitioners demonstrated their own shifts in personal views across this year long piece of research. From considering gender as not relevant when planning their curriculum, to reflecting on the role of resources, activities and spaces towards the end of the year, Mrs K reflected in interview three that:

"The space to be more aware, and ask the right questions, I think helps move beyond the usual narrative of gender as boy/girl or just stereotypes... so much more to it all"

Such shifts, while sometimes quiet or tentative, were part of a broader movement toward more ethically attuned and reflexive practice.

It was an honour to provide the space to initiate and hold conversations as often this stimulated the journey of change and diffraction. The process of diffractive praxis was observed from each practitioner as I saw them move through various stages of reflection, reflexivity, multiplicity, and superposition, resulting fundamental to the participants' role in the classroom. Pascal and Bertram (2012) highlight that for true praxiological pedagogies to be embedded within childhood practice, a requirement of reflection, ethics, and understanding of self-power is required. Arguably, therefore, this process calls for practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of themselves, the power dynamics within their relationships with children, and their ethical approach to practice before true praxis can begin to take form. The following discussion explores this journey across the yearlong research for the three EYPs involved.

Reflection

The journey through reflection and critical reflexivity requires an entangled mindset. Although discussed here in isolation, they are far from individual experiences or simple actions (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2016). Reflection often involves looking back in time, observing an experience, retelling a story, or recalling phenomena (Hill, 2017), unless a practitioner is sufficiently skilled to engage in critical reflection in action (Schön, 1983). However, Alejandro (2020) suggests that being critical and reflexive goes beyond recalling events; it involves understanding the affective forces at play within the entangled experience itself. Additionally, Warin *et al.* (2007) emphasise the need for opportunities, space, and strategies to explore the influence of self-power that practitioners bring to each situation. Reflexivity creates space to recognise this influence and fosters transformational awareness and change (Cortez *et al.*, 2013). This was echoed within the protective space provided for participant interviews, who reported that “its times like this (referring to the interview space) that allow you the headspace” (Mr S), “these questions I’ve never really thought about, I just show up and try to be what’s expected of me” (Mrs R). Such views suggest that finding the space to be present with our thoughts, understand ourselves and afford critical thinking space was considered beneficial, creating opportunities to explore self, their actions and ethical approaches to practice (Warin *et al.*, 2007). This resonates with Manen’s (1977) notion of critical reflection, where deeper engagement with one’s own values and assumptions can lead to transformative professional insight.

Reflexivity

It was through a revelatory “Oh.. I get it!” (Mrs R) moment, that the reason for her actions and approaches to practice landed within interview for Mrs R. Through a vulnerable discussion around her personal past, oppressive relationships, and restricted opportunities for self-expression, Mrs R articulated a moment of realisation that her subjectivity in practice had been influenced by her past relationships.

“I am often there to care for the boys in the class as a mothering figure ... but I think I find that difficult to do with the girls ... my conditioning is to tell the girls to stop being emotional and to build tougher resilience”

Mrs R expressed that her understanding of self, had changed across her journey since shifting through relationships and now having her own children. This seemingly highlighted to her that for the first time she could see how her own suppression of femininity in the past limits her intra-actions with some of the children she worked with. The realisation gained in this discussion for Mrs R is deeply rooted in Braidotti's (2006) idea of nomadic ethics. This way of thinking celebrates the changes and growth experienced as opposed to having fixed identities or beliefs. As such, nomadic ethics encourages individuals to see themselves as constantly in flux, shaped by and entangled with others and the material world. Barad (2007) further suggests that in this way, the auto-ethico-epistemological approach to practice becomes central. For Barad argues that one cannot separate how we know from how we act and therefore must take responsibility to the ethical implications of our intra-actions. Across the data collection period following this discussion, Mrs R began to share further moments of realisation during her practice as she began to embody her ethical subjectivity (Braidotti, 2006) through reflexive practice. This provided her scope to observe the implications of her own conditioning and its influence in-with-through the intra-actions she was having with those around her.

“I made a point today of allowing myself to enjoy the creative space with three of the girls ... I've always been in my guarded space to clean up, tidy and 'control' their learning ... what a difference it made to how the girls ... supported me and encouraged me to dance and be free in that space too”

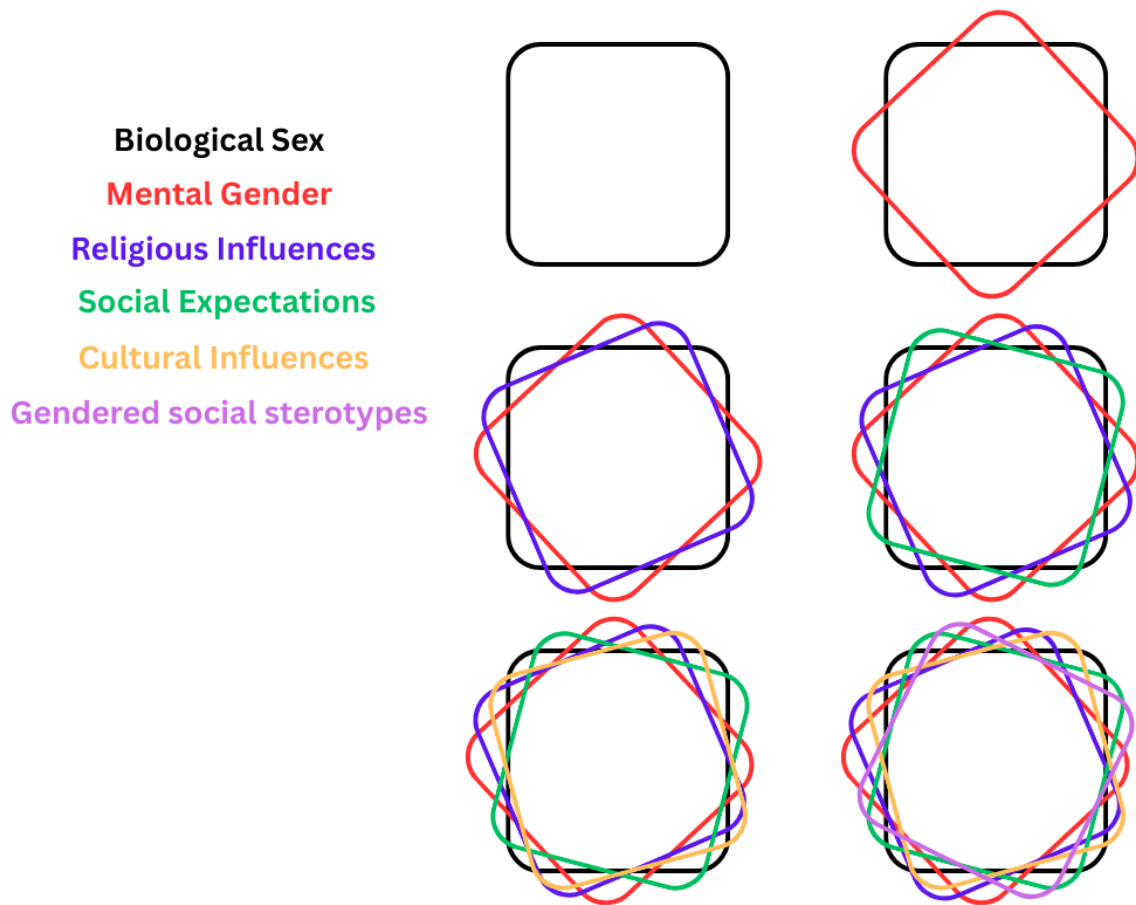
Yet Braidotti's ideas of nomadic ethics suggests a further, deeper integral shift beyond reflexivity is required: the awareness of multiplicity and superposition. In developing conscious awareness of her own layers of conditioning and expressions, Mrs R began to see the entanglement in-with-through her own multiplicities and how that intra-action had effect on a child's ability to express or develop themselves.

Multiplicity

Linstead and Thanem (2007) explore the original ideas of Gilles Deleuze's work by exploring the concept of multiplicity, which in the case of Mrs R builds upon her initial self-awareness of her own entanglements and intra-actions with the children. Multiplicity provides the understanding that our identities, thoughts and understanding are not fixed, singular or static (Larsson and Dahlin, 2012), but composed of many blurred, multifaceted parts which dance in fluidity in-with-through our own phenomena and that of others around us. In understanding both past and present intra-actions and conditioning, Mrs R began to realise the multiple layers of her gender identity and expression that influenced her practice, role of motherhood and expressions of self. The concept of multiplicity is therefore central to understanding both Braidotti's ideas of nomadic ethics and Barad's notion of superposition, where we acknowledge that we exist in multiple states simultaneously. Such recognition is crucial to the journeys of practitioners like Mrs R as engaging in her own multiplicities of gender expression provided opportunity to understand how and why she viewed children in the way she does as well as understanding the effect of her own self in the provision of gender-flexible pedagogy.

Across interviews with Mrs R, Mrs K and Mr S, a point of reoccurring discussion evolved around what influences or forms our gender identity and expression. Across the culmination of interviews and discussions within the year, six key areas were recognised by the practitioners as fundamental to their own understanding of gender identity (aspects of our multiplicities) and those influences that we should be mindful of for children's development (See image 16).

Image 19: Practitioners representation of the multiplicity of gender



Biological sex was the first of these.

“Hormones have a massive impact on us as we grow ... I know there are people born intersex ... but ultimately it comes to DNA and hormones as the building blocks of self that influences us” (Mr S)

This view was shared between all three participants as hormones being influential in the neurological development of young children, whatever genetic makeup a child had, it was seen to be fundamental to how we think and feel about self. This supports a wealth of research around brain programming, such as Rostori *et al*'s (2020) work exploring the role of hormones in development from utero, as they report the significant role they play in shaping not just biological development, such as genitalia, but also contributes to the awareness and feeling of identity one understands of self. The understanding of self, or one's mental gender, was also highlighted by practitioners as being a significant factor in understanding the complexities of gender:

“What we think and want in our heads isn’t always the same as maybe what we are perceived to be ... young children can’t cognitively understand this, but it doesn’t mean they don’t feel sense of self ... words don’t really help explain that do they” (Mrs K)

The consensus gathered around this understanding suggested that no-one, especially children, have the language or ability to totally explain the thoughts in one’s mind. As children’s phenomena are unique, it was suggested that:

“Headspace or thought cannot be assessed by schools ... this is where the, erm... not knowing comes in ... we don’t all express what we are thinking all the time else hell would break out and the ‘system’ wouldn’t work to manage behaviour and outcomes, would it” (Mr S).

The system, and use of air quotes here suggests Mr S was referring to the education system in more than its educational role and process but also to a more nuanced, possibly hidden agenda of conformity. Brody (2022) identifies 'the system' within early childhood classrooms as one of the initial major social institutions that normalize dominant cultural norms, including racism, transphobia, and patriarchal conditioning. He emphasizes the necessity of disrupting the heteronormativity and cisnormativity perpetuated through this 'system', particularly due to its significant impact on early development. This aligns with Althusser's (1970) theory of educational institutions functioning as ideological state apparatuses, which serve to reproduce the ideology of the ruling class by instilling dominant cultural norms in individuals from a young age. As Mr. S implied, such early indoctrination can profoundly influence one's internal sense of gender and its evolving expression.

The remaining four areas that were highlighted in being significant to children’s gender multiplicities were that of social expectations of gender expression, cultural and religious influences and the gendered social stereotypes embedded within a child’s life. Murriss and Kohan (2020) suggest that both culture and social expectations are entangled with the constructs of ‘time’ that ‘childhood’ is experienced. They would agree that each aspect of a phenomenon is integral to the complexities of how we experience the world, but suggest that different ‘time periods’ also matter, as they can offer important teachings, especially when read through one another and thoughtfully understood. For Haraway (2016), learning to be truly present allows for a noticing of self both past and present, entangling Matter with matter and time with other time simultaneously. In this

way, an understanding of the various layers from experience we have gathered and maintained provides a diffractive lens to examine one's gender multiplicity. Yet it is the entangled importance of the interrelationships between such layers of multiplicity that Warin's (2023) research highlights are crucial in promoting gender as a flexible, pedagogical practice.

Murris and Bozalek, (2019) argue that recognizing our own multiplicities is crucial because it highlights the entangled blurring of both our own identities in-with-through those of the children we work with. However, understanding multiplicity is just a step in the process. To truly engage in ethical practice, Barad (2017) calls for the need to step into a place of superposition, where we hold our own multiplicity adjacent to the child's and are then actively able to read through both simultaneously. Superposition can therefore be thought as the moment where the practitioner acknowledges their own multifaceted identity while also tuning into the child's multiplicity. For Mrs K, this appeared in one example with a young child at the start of the year who had grown up in lockdown with mum and two elder sisters. She recalled that:

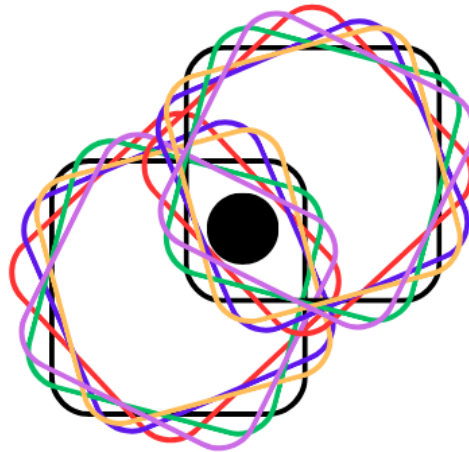
“In softening my voice and providing a caring space intentionally towards him, it became clear he felt safe ... he gradually became more assertive and embraced more of those masculine characteristics ... more rounded as a person ... more holistic, I suppose. That wouldn't have happened if I didn't check myself and expression to him to meet him where he was at” (Mrs K).

Superposition

In this example, Mrs K recognised the point of overlap whereby her observations of a child's experience could be enhanced through an acknowledgement of her own expression by making an adjustment. Such a place of superposition afforded Mrs K to practice flexible expression and in turn affected the ability for the child to express himself through a series of intra-actions. In this space, represented by the overlap and spot in image 17, we do not just reflect on, or react to one aspect of identity at a time; instead, we acknowledge the complexity of both, creating a deeper, more inclusive understanding of our intra-actions. Superposition, therefore, suggests that there is

power in the ability to exist in both states (Lehner, 1997. p192): our own and the child's, simultaneously. Warin (2023) argues that this, therefore is our responsibility to use this understanding to inform our practice through gender-flexible pedagogy.

Image 20- The point of superposition



Barad's exploration of superposition suggests that by standing in this place within intention, a practitioner's role is to navigate this complexity with awareness, care, and ethical sensitivity. Nomadic ethics can therefore be thought of as bridging the gap between reflexivity, superposition and diffraction as the shift calls for an awareness of how our perspectives diffract (change in response to new interactions) requiring an awareness to consciously adapt and reshape the ways we interpret and respond to children's expressions. To truly embrace a diffractive approach, practitioners must see through the entangled lenses of their own experiences while understanding that the child's voice, behaviour, or expression is not a static reflection of purely societal norms but a dynamic, ongoing becoming of self (Digby, 2024). By combining reflexive practice with a commitment to nomadic ethics, practitioners can engage in an ongoing diffractive, and ethical process that opens new possibilities for understanding the complex intra-actions between themselves and the children in their care.

Diffraction

Barad (2007. P30) emphasises that diffractive practice allows for the emergence of new insights to evolve by reading ideas and experiences through one another as opposed to comparing them. Doing so produces patterns in ways that help illuminate overlaps and differences as they emerge (Bozalek and Zembylas, 2016). Sidebottom and Carlyle (2023)

use the example of a pebble being thrown into water, a second pebble thrown will cause the waves to intersect and overlap with the first, in the same way, ideas can intersect when read through one another creating multiple differences which can forever emerge. To not simply reproduce or reflect what is already know, Haraway (1992) considers diffraction to look at the world through a lens emphasizing complexity, in which interactions and entanglements create ever evolving patterns of difference to be explored.

Diffraction practice therefore invites practitioners to explore the entangled nature of intra-actions between themselves and the children they work with whilst embracing a state of superposition (Barad, 2007). Observations of practice provided many opportunities to see the foundations of this at play. The privilege of observing the same group of children intra-act with three different practitioners, two of which identified as biologically female and one male, was insightful as they provided different approaches and expressions of self through their teaching. The most significant example of this was observing the children intra-act with Mr S who identified himself in interview as:

“I wear flamboyant shirts, have had long hair, a big beard and the tats ... we try and teach the kids that it’s OK to be different and ourselves, but potentially the problem is they don’t see enough difference ... you can’t treat them all the same ... some require a more firm, masculine approach ... others respond to softness, fun and jokes ... it’s like putting on many masks ... trying to recognise it, remember and adapt me to those masks to allow the children to best engage and learn”

The many masks described by Mr S echo the idea of entangled practice, seeing the many facets that make up a child’s multiplicity of experience and becoming (Crowhurst and Emslie, 2022, p145). In the putting on of the many masks he describes, Mr S is evidencing his ability to not only consider each child’s intra-action but appeared to be drawing on his previous knowledge of the child, their history, ability and personal sense of becoming to account for his ethical and conscious choice of a relational approach. In doing so, he can see the diffractive differences evolving between his expression and the child’s and be flexible with adapting his expression. The example given of providing firm, masculine boundaries for children who were loud and expressive created them a safe space, whereas a softer approach sitting on the floor next to children and adapting his voice and

body positioning, created space to lean into quieter children in a softer, feminine approach. Mr S considered this important as it “**allowed children to gain confidence and come out of their shell more**”. By acknowledging this entanglement, we begin to see that both the practitioner and the child are continually shaping and reshaping each other through their intra-actions (Arndt, 2020). In this way, diffractive practice calls for a deeper recognition of how the practitioner’s understanding of gender is intertwined with the child’s evolving self-expression.

However, Mr S states his ability to navigate the flexibility of his masculine and feminine expressions in response to children has been met with judgements within education, posing a potential limitation to its impact.

“It’s not always been welcomed, my expressions of self ... people observe and expect a certain thing ... I don’t think you should have to pigeonhole yourself for conformity ... I try to help [children] express what they want to and mirror them but also model different things ... my views and confidence of self-expression have evolved as I have”

The suppression of gender expression due to pressures of heteronormative and cisnormativity expectations in EY and schools is arguably therefore limiting the way in which practitioners can demonstrate a range of gender expressions to children (DePalma and Jennett, 2010). Mr S highlighted that this was imperative to challenge social stereotypes but also allow children to see the range of difference that expression can be as an empowering tool for development. The experiences of Mr S challenges Hill’s (2017) understanding of diffractive practice as they suggest that a practitioner’s perspective should always be adjusting based on their lived experience as diffractive practice involves recognizing and embracing that shift to better understand and respond to the child in front of them. Yet, arguably, if the pressures of conformity to social gender expressions is enforced on practitioners (Jackson, Bussey and Myers, 2021), their ability to embrace diffractively and provide flexible practice is challenged and therefore refuelling the binary expressions children observe.

Whilst Mr S felt a judgment of his full gender expression from others within the educational system, the contrasting experiences of Mrs R and Mrs K, seemed to reveal that rather than an external judgment of expression, there was an expectation of being

able to express fully both a masculine and feminine role within the setting. Both Mrs R and K expressed in separate interviews that

“The pressures of education definitely require a masculinity from you ... it’s too harsh to be soft all the time”

“The expectation of us is to care and nurture such young children ... but also be rigid and ... ensure children conform and meet their requirements”

Such a social dichotomy here reinforces social norms that men should express masculinity but also suggests that women should have the ability to manage and express both masculinity and femininity to mould into the pressures of society as well as maintaining a caring nature towards the children in their care (Walkerline, 1989). Through observations across the study, this duality of expectations on gender expression could also be seen mirrored within children’s role play of adult’s gender expression.

In one example from an observation taking place in the role play home corner. Child Sg a biological boy was laying the table for dinner as he was trying to attempt to tie up the pink cooking apron he selected from the pegs and stirring the pot placed on the cooker nearby. No other children were present during this moment, and he was humming a tune to himself. Upon seeing the table being transformed from the vets operating table to one for dinner, two children approached to confront him. Child Co challenged him for wearing a pink apron, remarking, “That’s not for boys. You’re wearing it wrong anyway.” She added, “You don’t know what you’re doing ‘cuz you’re a boy.”

While this interaction took place, the second of the two girls, Child Go, rearranged the kitchen pans on the stove and re-laid the table. In spoken word, but not directly to anyone, she said: “I’ll do it, it’s just easier. You sit down there or go fix something, I’ll sort the dinner and feed the kids as that’s what mums do, they do it all.”

Child Sg responded quietly, “But I can cook too... I was just making tea.”

Roleplay observation is key in observing a range of expressions and learnt behaviour in children (Martin, 2011), and in this example it is clear how the mirroring of gender expression from the adults around them is influencing the children’s exposure from people of different biological sexes, and in doing so reinforcing socialised gender

binaries. This suggests that as much as EY policy (DfE, 2024) requires social stereotyping of gender to be challenged, it seems there is an almost invisible but damaging self-perpetuating cycle creating an echo chamber for children. Arguably, whilst diffractive praxis can create opportunities for practitioners to not only challenge stereotyping, but also role model gender expression through intra-actions with children, this requires diffractive practice, the self-confidence to embrace our own full gender expression, and as Mr S put it “a very thick skin to know what you feel is right and lead with it”.

Diffractive praxis and gender-flexible pedagogy

To embrace Warin’s (2023) notion of gender-flexible pedagogy, which prioritises reflective practice and acknowledges the value of diffractive processes, it is important to highlight how such processes have played a central role in this research and how they contribute meaningfully to the provision of gender-flexible pedagogy. It has revealed the importance for practitioners to navigate entangled relationships as a way of seeing through and reading experiences in relation to one another. The stories of practitioners in this study demonstrate that doing so creates a powerful framework for addressing gender as a dynamic, multifaceted construct, and as such provide grounding for informed action (praxis). By reflecting on how their expressions and experiences shape intra-actions with children, practitioners have shown the power in both challenging unconscious biases and creating environments that celebrate diversity through the modelling of gender-flexible expressions. This integrated approach not only challenges restrictive gender norms, as instructed by EY policy (DfE, 2023) but actively disrupts fractious binaries by modelling fluidity and adaptability.

By valuing all forms of gender expression, practitioners have demonstrated that diffractive practice can provide opportunities for cultivating environments that celebrate diversity and foster a culture of inclusion. For example, using diffractive practice to observe the interplay of children’s behaviours and their own responses allows practitioners to better understand how their intra-actions shape the learning environment. For instance, Mrs R’s reflection on her own suppressed femininity revealed how her past conditioning shaped her current interactions with children, prompting her

to embrace more balanced approaches in her own expression and response to children, and in doing so provided greater experiences to foster inclusivity.

Similarly, Mr S's conscious adaptability, shifting between firm, masculine expressions and softer, nurturing behaviours to meet individual needs demonstrates how diffraction enables practitioners to read their own multiplicities through the lens of the child's experiences. The stories of Mrs R, Mrs K and Mr S demonstrate that diffractive praxis can also empower children to explore their identities in meaningful, self-directed ways, creating a dynamic space where all identities are valued and gender-flexible pedagogy becomes an ethical and practical reality. Yet, this raises an important question as to where diffractive praxis should begin. It provides opportunities to question if time for reflexivity should be a priority, promoting practitioners to first focus on themselves, examine their own gender expressions and multiplicities or should they centre the unique child's experiences and expressions as the EY policy suggests? This contemplation playfully connects us back to the age-old question of "the chicken or the egg", which comes first? Is it the unique practitioner's diffraction that enables an ability to provide gender-flexible pedagogy or is it through tuning into the child's meta-(con)textual expressions that the practitioner gains deeper insights into themselves.

The chicken or the egg? Which must come first?

The question of whether to begin with the child or the practitioner, the 'chicken or the egg' dilemma, is not a simple answer. Policy frameworks, such as the EYFS (DfE,2023), emphasize placing the unique child at the centre of practice, urging practitioners to prioritise their needs. However, as the participants in this research have shown, diffractive praxis as the process for practitioner's understanding of their own multiplicities is equally vital in the process for understanding and growth, as its apparent these do not flow in a single direction (Trodd and Dickerson,2018). Instead, we have seen through the stories shared, they emerge from the entangled intra-actions between the practitioner and child as a mutual shaping of one another occurs through a dynamic process of becoming. It seems therefore, fair to trouble the notion of the child being the sole focus of practice and instead recognize the mutual influence at play. As Mrs R demonstrated in her time in the creative space, practitioners cannot fully attune to the

child's needs without first undertaking the work of understanding themselves, their own multiplicities, biases, and expressions.

Diffractional praxis, therefore, seems to call for a dual commitment of practitioners: to deeply know oneself (Manen, 1977) whilst also remaining fully present to the child's voice, identity, and expression. By doing so, practitioners have evidenced the ability to be present in a state of readiness, aware of their biases, multiplicities, and the ways in which they shape the children they work with. Embracing self-growth and practice in this way, champions Braidotti's ideas of nomadic ethics as it provides opportunities for practitioners to embrace the reciprocal nature of their relationships with children in-with-through the provision of gender-flexible pedagogy. As Vicente Richards *et al.* (2024) suggest in their practice of writing "love letters" to students, sometimes the most powerful pedagogical acts emerge in the folds of connection and care, where feedback becomes felt, and presence becomes transformative. This therefore suggests that the power of diffractional praxis lies in its ability to hold space for both the practitioner and the child as unique, evolving individuals. It encourages a practice that honours the dynamic interplay between them, creating opportunities for deeper understanding and more inclusive, gender-flexible pedagogy. Perhaps the answer, then, is not about which comes first, the chicken or the egg, but rather more importantly about cultivating the in-between spaces and folds where these entanglements flourish and transformative possibilities emerge.

4.2 Discovery Two: ‘Tuning in’ to the hidden folds: Experiencing Thing-Power

The humble towel, often overlooked, becomes a metaphor for the layered nature of meaning-making. Soft, familiar, and full of quiet potential, it invites us to tune into the affective hum of early years spaces. Through its folds and textures, we glimpse how everyday materials hold thing-power (Bennett, 2010), subtle forces that shape play, care, and imitation. In the context of children’s gender expression, the towel isn’t just fabric; it’s a co-composer in the moment, helping us notice how identity is formed in-with-through materials, gestures, and relationships. Building on Bennett’s (2010) idea of Thing-power, which highlights the agency of objects and their capacity to influence human actions and interactions, this section explores how resources in EY settings participate in the entanglement of children’s expressions. From the materials children choose to the stories those materials carry, and even the power dynamics they subtly reinforce, resources are more than passive tools, they are active participants in the unfolding narrative of gender expression. This section is structured into three parts; the first, *The Matter that mattered*, focuses on the resources children gravitated toward for self-expression, revealing how seemingly mundane objects became mediums for their identities. The second, *stories within stories*, unpacks how external influences such as parents, schools, and cultural narratives, shape the availability and meaning of resources available to children. Finally, *Dynamics of Power* examines how the engagement with resources influences power relationships, shaping opportunities for expression and agency among children. Together, these sections dive into the folds, uncovering the hidden yet vital role of Thing-power in the entangled web of gender expression.

The Matter that mattered

The Matter that mattered to the children of Penguins class revealed a wealth of hidden expressions, stories and meaning-making experiences. Across the side of the classroom hung a washing line which by the end of the year was bursting with images, photo’s, drawings, postcards and much more that the children had willingly brought in to share with their teachers and peers in the class. Bennett (2010) calls for the recognition that Matter is vibrant and as children brought in their collections of visual stories, the things

(photos, postcards, drawings etc..) represented life outside the classroom, experiences and expressions. Whilst they may have looked like many objects pegged to a piece of string to any outside observer, my time spent listening and observing the children's expressions of themselves demonstrated the Thing-power of each pegged story and memory (Richins, 2020). Child Te, for example, broke his arm during the year which had meant he was unable to partake in his usual activities of football, climbing and playground activities with a group of his friends. After a few days off school, he returned wearing a cast and proudly carrying an X-Ray picture of his broken bones. One morning as he sat in the classroom during PE time, he started sharing his experience with myself and Mrs R.































“...but it's not all bad, see how cool the broken bits are ... I've never played with XX before because she doesn't come on the playground or like football ... now I can read with her and we've made a whole story world ... XX even showed me how to do that fold-y-ing paper thing ... we designed a boat for the castle moat ... Mr X said we could try it with card and put it in the big puddle outside.”

Children are typically looked after by lunch time supervisors during play time, to which neither Mrs K nor Mrs R always spent their time with them. Therefore, such expressions of Child Te's creativity, imaginative play, reading and creative thinking had not been observed or shared prior to him sharing the story of his X-Ray broken arm. The image of the X-Ray continued to unfold many stories of him expressing the kind doctors and nurses that had looked after him, his thoughts on how he might like to care for people and make them feel good too (Richins, 2020). Child Te was later observed in the construction area with child Wi building a hospital and role playing the X-ray experience he had been through. Mrs R shared that this had involved not only him embracing new feminine expressions of play but also permitting child Wi to engage in more masculine expressions which she had avoided in the past. The Thing-power of the Matter, in this case the X-Ray picture, was powerful to child Te in providing a space for story sharing, expressing his thoughts and the meaning-making experiences in the hospital that continued to shape not only his play and development but also those around him (Arndt and Tesar, 2018, p190). The washing line unfolded many more meaning-making stories for children in how they experienced the world.

Throughout the multi-(con)textual methods adopted within the mosaic of this research, children's voice remained at the centre. Listening to this meant more than just verbal stories and expressions, I was keen to look through their eyes at the Things that mattered to them in their day-to-day life and the opportunity for expressions this provided. Using a digital camera, children were invited to take photographs of the spaces in school (inside or out) that they enjoyed, places that were important to them (Tan, 2019). Children shared their stories with me as we did so.

Image 18 demonstrates a collection of five children's photographs. These were chosen to represent their views and only photographs which were not clear or were duplicates of their previous images were removed revealing the clearest six images from the children's choices. Each image is titled using the language from practitioners, and below it, the assigned gender characteristic they had previously given to that area of play. While the photographs reflect the perspectives and choices of the children, the practitioner language was purposefully applied to highlight how those same expressions were interpreted through adult pedagogical lenses. This dual framing supports a diffractive reading of the images, acknowledging both the child's view and the gendered meanings ascribed by practitioners.

Image 21. Children's photographs: The Matter that matters to Penguins

Child Fi	<p>Woodland Space</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Lego Play</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Infant Playground</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Outdoor Climb area</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Bikes</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Indoor Construction</p>  <p>Masculine</p>
Child Sg	<p>Home Corner</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Reading corner</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Coloured sticks from maths resources</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Outside sandpit</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Inside construction</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Creative writing space</p>  <p>Feminine</p>
Child Si	<p>Football Goals</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Outside music space</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Snack corner</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Outside painting</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Outside sandpit</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Dressing up box</p>  <p>Feminine</p>
Child Ma	<p>Creative space</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Shells as maths resources</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Dolls in home corner</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Outside construction</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Outside construction</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Reception playground</p>  <p>Masculine</p>
Child Li	<p>Climbing frame</p>  <p>Masculine</p>	<p>Designing a castle</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Creative area</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Dressing up box</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Small world play</p>  <p>Feminine</p>	<p>Coloured sticks from maths resources</p>  <p>Masculine</p>

It is important to bear in mind here that this lens of children's expression is just one within the entangled mosaic of their expression (Butschi and Hedderich, 2021). But an important one as some children display a clear dominance for their gender expression. By tuning into how children see the world, practitioners can explore the variety of preferences children provide of their intra-actions in-with-through the world around them. It is clear from Image 18 that each child displays a unique expression of their preferences ranging from completely masculine preference to a very mixed preference for expression. Child Fi for example chose all areas within the school that demonstrated a masculine expression. In the taking of picture one they explained "this is my favourite space before school as I like to hang here like this" (demonstrated and requested I took the image of him hanging). When asked why they explained "it shakes all the jibbles out before I go into school and mum says it helps me sit still and do the other things I have to do". It was clear from the images taken by child Fi that large expressive motor activities were their go to choices for expression in play time. However, when taking image two, the child explained:

"I like the Lego, I can see the shapes I want to make and build really cool stuff with it like houses and trucks and stuff but I don't like to sit down and have to write about it or tell stories then.. I just build it like".

The practitioners viewed Lego play as "more logistical and logic play" (Mr S) than creative. Child Fi's expression suggests that they are very practical and skilled at lots of large and fine motor control as an expression of their imagination. Yet, they struggle to enjoy or engage in the more feminine expressions of creativity and storytelling, indicating an area for further opportunities.

Child Sg on the other hand demonstrated an equal mix of masculine and feminine preferences exploring both physical creation through the sandpit, problem solving with maths resources and expressions of creative thinking, writing, reading and through enjoyment in the home corner. Upon taking image six, child Sg put on the cloak and performed the story map which was stuck on the wall. They used large movements and expressions performing the story map of Jack and the beanstalk. They expressed that:

"At home I have to be quiet a lot of the time because of XXX (their baby sister) so I like to play here because I can dance and be the different people in the books"

The shared stories behind children's preferences here can be helpful in then providing further opportunities for a child to build on this expression (Brostrom, 2007) and provide new opportunities which they might not have experienced at home. Celebrating the uniqueness of children's meaning-making experiences and expressions does not imply that any particular expression is right or wrong, nor am I suggesting that there should be an expected balance of masculine or feminine preferences. However, as seen with the shared experiences for child Li,

“They had ... only just moved to the area ... and hadn't experienced a safe outdoor play space until here ... it took a while until they found the confidence to climb, but they soon found their playground voice ... they had a lot of steam to let off and were really rewarded from it” (Mrs R)

By understanding the context that stories provide, practitioners can understand the meaning-making behind children's behaviour (Wajskop and Peterson, 2015) and as in the case of child Li, able to recognise that this child had not had the opportunities to express the masculine expressions of 'playground voices', shouting, running and taking risks. All paramount in the balance of children's play and expression.

Observing the Matter such as climbing frames, Lego, dolls, that children choose as their preference for expression allows us to understand how and where children may need to expand their experiences, gain new meaning-making experiences (Burcak and Etikan, 2022) with the view to explore a range of expressions and allow practitioners starting points for stories of meaning-making experiences to be shared.

Stories within stories

Children's toys are more than mere objects; they are storied Things entangled with meanings, memories, and the potential to reveal aspects of identity through imagination (Lockman,2021). This section, inspired by Bennett's (2010) concept of Thing-power, explores how the assemblage of items brought in by children during a show-and-tell activity 'Chatterbox time' revealed intricate layers of self-expression and influence. Each toy, chosen for this shared moment, carried a unique narrative, yet collectively, these objects told a broader story of the entangled relationships between children, their families, and the resources available to them.

Image 22- Chatterbox time



Image 19 shares seven pictures taken from Chatterbox times in Penguins. For some children, as per the fourth picture, this is an opportunity to be heard, to share their voice and express their preferences, such as favourite stories, hobbies, and for some, their family holiday memories (picture 3). A wide range of Things were brought into the sessions to facilitate discussion. Picture two shows an assemblage involving a toy car, a Rubik's cube, a pop-up ball, and a power-ranger style belt, all deemed "proper boys' stuff" by child Ve. Whereas picture five represents the shared experiences of children, containing a football trophy, a beany cuddly toy, a fidget spinner, pot of coloured beads, and a pot containing a jigsaw. The assemblage of picture five began a discussion from child Fr sharing a story of playing football. This narrative began with the story of winning the award and evolved into a group, imaginative story of attending football stadiums and the feeling of being free when running across large open spaces. Child Fr declared, "I was the fastest on the pitch, no one could stop me!" The beany toy quickly took on the role of a superhero footballer as the children began to describe what it would be like to fly, to be able to feel free and score an "air goal like they do in Harry Potter." Each of the four children contributed to the evolving narrative as the actions of flying, scoring, and being free were acted out using their bodies and the assemblage of Things they had sourced. The box of beads took on new life as child Bp carefully arranged them as people in the stadium or footballs to kick, saying "this one's the crowd and this one scores!" The fidget spinner became the noise used for the "whistle of the ref," and the jigsaw puzzle became a group effort in supporting the child to construct the pitch. In observing this imaginative play unfold, each Thing burst with vibrancy (Bennett, 2010) as it was forged into place within the story. The children became immersed within the plot and engaged in problem-solving, leadership, and group work, which were new expressions from them I had observed.

Whilst a fantastic opportunity to express their thoughts, shared experiences and imaginations, Mrs K noted:

"It's interesting to observe ... some children really utilise the opportunity to express ... but for a number of children, it's clearly just another part of the routine ... parents shove in any old thing, so they have something to talk about"

In her view of this, Mrs K suggests that for many children, parents played a significant role in curating their child's contribution to each group's assemblage, acting as both facilitators and gatekeepers of their children's expressions through the Things they put in their child's bags.

“You can see the ones that pull out a toy each week that parents deem ‘fit for sharing’ ... I’ve overheard a parent telling their male child not to bring in a Polly Pocket ... but to instead bring the Shrek figures”

These parental influences served as a filter through which children's self-expression was mediated, subtly shaping the narratives that emerged in the classroom. While some children eagerly shared beloved toys reflecting their interests, others hesitated, their choices constrained by what had been deemed appropriate or was purchased through the spending power of a parent. Renold (2024) argues that gender expression in schools is entangled with affective economies and relational power, what is seen as ‘shareable’ or ‘appropriate’ often reflects these entanglements rather than children's authentic interests. Picture 6, for example, shows a toy car, the child brought the same car in six times for show and tell during the sessions I observed across the year. On one hand it could be argued that the child has a favourite and that it was their expression, but in listening closer the child shared in conversation with another child

“Don't worry if you forgot your Chatterbox today ... my mum tells me to keep the car in my book bag all the time ... it's not even mine but Jacob's.”
(*pseudonym used for his baby brother*)

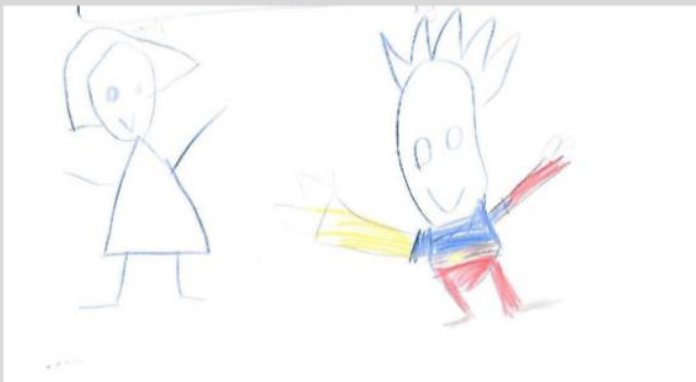
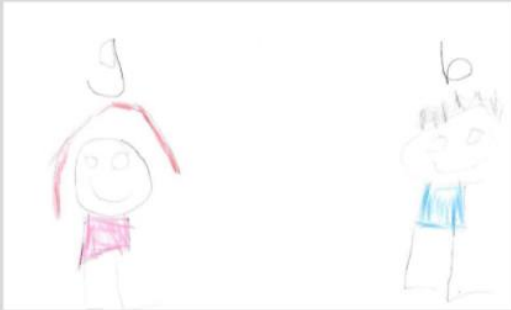
This dynamic underlines the importance for practitioners to observe and reflect on the stories behind the toys that arrive in the classroom. Each toy carries with it not just the child's story but also the narratives of the parents; their beliefs, values, and assumptions about what is appropriate for their child to share or express. These parental stories are woven through the Things children bring in, each shaping the ways children engage with and articulate their own identities. Eisen *et al.* (2021) found that parents' gendered beliefs about toys can influence children's play preferences, suggesting that the toys children bring reflect not only their interests but also parental expectations. Furthermore, Miller and Lossia (2017) demonstrated that the type of toy impacts the quality of parent-child

interactions, emphasizing the need for diverse play materials to support varied expressions of identity. By recognizing the power of these assemblages and the entangled narratives they reflect, practitioners can begin to uncover the ‘stories within stories’ and understand how parental influences subtly filter children’s expressions. Spaces like Chatterbox time become crucial in this context, offering opportunities to expand the range of resources available to children. Providing a diverse array of materials and Things ensures that children can explore, experiment, and express themselves beyond the boundaries of what may be permitted or encouraged at home. Such moments of collective play with unfamiliar resources allow children to craft new stories of expression together, enriching their experiences and fostering a deeper understanding of one another (Kangas and Harji-Luukkained, 2023). This practice not only highlights the importance of tuning into the layered narratives embedded in children’s choices but also reinforces the setting’s role as an inclusive environment that celebrates and supports all expressions of identity. Seeing and embracing these ‘stories within stories’ is essential to creating spaces that invite children to freely explore and articulate their selves, sharing their understanding of the world.

Within the hidden folds of our identities and gender expressions lie stories that are subtly but powerfully shaped by the media and cultural messaging surrounding us (Warin, 2023). From the earliest moments of childhood, these influences weave themselves into the fabric of how boys and girls are encouraged to perceive themselves and each other (Martin, 2018). Advertisements, television shows, and even the design of everyday objects like toys carry implicit messages about what is “appropriate” for each gender, blue for boys, pink for girls; short hair and adventure for him, long hair and nurturing for her. These stereotypes spill over into clothing, hobbies, and even the acceptable ways emotions are expressed, creating an often-unseen script that children absorb and reflect in their behaviours and self-perceptions. This aligns with Norman's (2013) assertion that design elements in everyday objects can influence user behaviour and perceptions, suggesting that the design of toys and other children's products may carry implicit messages about gender roles.

As children engage with media, they inherit fundamental narratives, embedding them, sometimes unknowingly, into their expressions of self (Draganovic, 2020). These narratives do not merely live in the external world; they are internalized, reflected, and reimagined in children's play, interactions, and creative endeavours (Wilson, 2008). As such, it is arguably the duty of practitioners to uncover the true 'stories within stories', examining how the media's portrayal of gender stereotypes influences children's understandings of what it means to be a boy or girl. Through an analysis of a series of drawings created by the children, my research attempted to uncover how these hidden influences surface in their creative work. By peering into these colourful windows of expression, we gain a deeper understanding of the entangled relationship between societal narratives and personal identity. For practitioners, it has become evident that recognizing and challenging these influences is crucial to fostering environments that celebrate and nurture diverse expressions of gender.

Image 23- Children's drawings of boys and girls



The artwork analysed in this study revealed a striking mirror to stereotypical gender norms (Karniol, 2011). Boys were typically depicted in dark colours, with short hair and often wearing trousers, or, the absence of skirt or dresses, whilst girls were often illustrated in bright colours, dresses, and long flowing hair. These visual cues reinforced traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity in connection to stereotypes of biological sex, suggesting that even in their unfiltered creativity, children often reflect the societal expectations they are exposed to (Liben and Bigler, 2002). Notably, boys' drawings closely echoed the school's uniform policy, dark, practical clothing, short hair, and minimal adornment, highlighting how institutional rules subtly shape children's visual self-representation. While girls' drawings included brighter colours and expressive details, in practice, even these were constrained; accessories like colourful bobbles were often removed, suggesting a broader push toward muted conformity that limits expression for all children. This contrast may reflect how creativity is more culturally permitted as a feminine mode of expression, allowing it to emerge in drawings of girls but remaining absent or subdued in depictions of boys. Language from the children further reinforced these norms. Comments such as "Boys are boys and girls are girls because God decided when they were born," (Child Iv) and "It's what's in your pants that makes you a boy or girl" (Child Ik) reflected a rigid understanding of gender rooted in biological essentialism which was then applied to the expectations children had of how men and women should present or express themselves. When presented with images of adults, the children grouped them according to stereotypical appearances, short hair and suits for men, dresses and makeup for women, even when the individuals in the photos subverted these norms, such as a man in drag or a woman dressed in football kits (Liben and Signorella, 1980). These findings highlight the pervasive influence of media and cultural messaging in shaping children's understanding of gender and how they view themselves and each other. This underlines the importance of practitioners critically tuning into these influences. By recognizing how deeply ingrained these stereotypes are, practitioners can challenge and expand children's perceptions.

Mr. S aptly noted that:

“Children’s exposure to diverse gender expressions is significantly limited ... they don’t see enough difference in people, resources, or classroom exposure to make a difference”

He reflected on how both media and educational environments often fail to provide a genuine and inclusive range of gender representations. This lack of diversity, he argued perpetuates rigid gender binaries, leaving little room for children to explore their expressions beyond the stereotypes they have been taught. To address this, he suggests that early year’s settings and wider educational institutions need to commit to creating spaces where children can encounter a broad spectrum of gender expressions in both men and women. This suggests there is a need for practitioners to intentionally curate resources, materials, and stories that showcase diverse representations (Chapman, 2020). Providing children with the opportunity to see men with long hair, women in suits, or individuals embracing nontraditional roles and expressions can arguably help dismantle the rigid categories they have been exposed to.

Through their drawings, children tell us what they have absorbed about the world (Walker, 2012) and this is evident within the drawings Penguins class did. These drawings reveal, as Mr S suggested that it is our role, as practitioners, to listen to these visual stories and use them as a call to action; to provide a richer, more inclusive tapestry of gender expressions in the spaces they occupy. Just as their art reveals the imprints of media and cultural expectations, the classroom mat became another canvas of expression, one that told its own story of how children’s expressions and interactions are moulded by their environment.

The humble classroom mat revealed itself as a patchwork of designated spots for tiny feet and curious minds, it became far more than a simple piece of fabric or functional object. A mat became the heartbeat of the Penguins classroom, a space where stories unfolded, friendships bloomed, and learning took place. Children gathered here for registration each day, group discussions, and playful interactions, each finding their place, both physically and socially. Yet, within its well-worn fabrics, the mat carries hidden stories of structure and expectation. Practitioners alluded to it as a site where the

invisible hand of "the system" begins shaping children for "school readiness". Sitting on the mat increasingly required stillness, attentive listening, and conformity, expectations that contrast sharply with the ethos of EY pedagogy, which celebrates movement, exploration, and self-expression.

Image 24- Carpet time



In its EY context, the mat is a vibrant space for boundless expressions of femininity through creativity and play, where movement and self-discovery were observed for all children. Children's joyful dancing during "wake up shake up" times was a daily example of this. However, as children progressed throughout the academic year, I was with them, especially as the pressures on practitioners built to get children ready for Year 1, the mat's role shifts dramatically. It became representative of a transition to a more masculine order, where the freeform energy of play gave way to discipline, routine, and the performativity of school readiness. This shift reflects broader neoliberal imperatives within early education, where child-centred practices are increasingly subordinated to measurable outcomes and standardised routines (Brown, 2015). Simultaneously, the behavioural expectations that emerge; stillness, control, silence, can be read as reinforcing patriarchal values that suppress emotional expression and devalue nurturing or relational modes of learning (Prioletta, 2019). Seen this way, carpet time becomes not just a pedagogical practice but a site where wider social norms are enacted, shaping the kinds of expressions that are permitted, and the identities children are encouraged to perform. I observed how the mat evolved into a space dominated by expectations of stillness and adherence to rules. Such a shift began to mirror a broader conditioning of the children's expressions to align with the institutional norms and expectations of a year

1 child. The shift is more than behavioural; it represented a narrowing of opportunities for children to explore and express their forming multiplicities, which in turn appeared to dull the vibrancy of their unique identities.

The mat, once a landscape of possibility, had begun to transform into a grid of limitation. This raises questions about the cost of this transition into 'school readiness' and the impact it has as children move from an expressive curriculum into one overshadowed by regulation. As Ball (2003) discusses, the culture of performativity in education can lead to a form of 'values schizophrenia' among teachers, where the pressure to meet performance metrics may suppress the nurturing of individual identities. Biesta (2023) further emphasizes the need to reconnect with the broader purposes of education, advocating for environments that support the development of autonomous individuals. Wiltshire (2022) highlights how educators, in coping with performative demands, may unconsciously reinforce norms that limit children's authentic expressions, including those related to gender. These views were echoed in Mrs R's explanation that:

“They do begin to lose themselves and it's sad ... we create safe spaces for children to figure themselves out ... but then it's all undone again as they're expected to sit still and not have the fullest range of expressions the national curriculum suppresses”

Mrs R's frustrations noted here were evident to see play out in the classroom and through wider observations into the assembly hall as children in year 1 and beyond would enter the hall in silence, often with fingers on their lips and sit in rows of formality. Such dramatic shift in expectations of children raise questions as to how practitioners can be expected to ensure the unique voices of children remain vibrant and valued amidst the growing pressures of conformity that they must evidence in children's behaviour and expressions. These observations not only highlight the urgent need to examine how EY education can maintain the perseverance of self-expression but also calls for wider review of the transitions into the national curriculum and key stage 1. It requires an exploration as to the impact this transition has on shutting down and limiting the gender expressions of children as they continue to be required for conformity within institutions.

Power dynamics

The climbing frame, with its sturdy bars and dizzying heights, emerged as a powerful focus of expression in the children's world, a structure brimming with Thing-power. Its magnetic pull was evident in the photographs children took during their explorations of Matter that matters, where the frame often stood tall as a recurring subject of fascination. More than just a playground fixture, the climbing frame seemed to offer a stage where children could test not only their physical limits but also the boundaries of their identities and at times, friendships.

Image 25- Climbing Wall



The introduction of risk and danger, whether in scaling its heights, hanging precariously, or navigating its narrow spaces, seemed to coax out versions of themselves that might otherwise remain hidden in the safety of the classroom. Here, expressions of self often transformed; timid children would summon bravery to ascend, while those embodying confidence or dominance would claim the space as their domain, weaving intricate power dynamics into their play. This aligns with Stephenson's (2009) findings that risky

play elicits a range of emotions, providing a platform for children to test boundaries and develop resilience. In one instance, a climbing frame became the stage for a key observation witnessed by Mrs R and I one lunchtime. Child Ec, a biological male, soft-spoken and seeking connection, encountered a biological female (Child Wi) peer whose assertive and commanding play disrupted traditional, bioessentialism expressions of gender. Sandseter (2013) notes that practitioners' perceptions of risky play are influenced by their own gender and personality, suggesting that the support and interpretation of such play can significantly impact children's experiences. The interplay of risky play and the structure's imposing presence created a unique space for these two children to renegotiate their relationships and identities, subtly shaped by the Thing-power of the climbing frame.

During the interaction, Mrs R drew my attention to the play taking place between these two children. Following previous classroom observations and discussions regarding child Ec, we had noted his quiet, reserved, and caring personality traits, (described by practitioners as feminine). Mrs K explained that she had been observing his interactions across various play situations, and this particular instance had become of interest to her. Child Wi was typically a very reserved child who would not engage with eye contact nor spoken word with Mrs K within the classroom. However, during playtime on the climbing frame Mrs R had noticed an evolving gender expression to which child Ec had fallen “almost victim to” (Mrs R) a shift in dynamic. During play on the climbing frame, child Wi had begun to give child Ec orders to ‘stand there’, ‘help me get up here’, ‘fetch me that’ enabling herself to climb higher and engage in more physically risky play, a form of play often culturally coded as masculine (Renold, 2016).

These instructions often came at the expense of child Ec, who appeared to be relegated to a supporting role. Yet, as Mrs R observed, there was a subtle reciprocity or conditional inclusion at play. Child Ec was “allowed” to be involved in Wi’s play, to sit beside her at lunchtime, but only if he followed her lead. Mrs R interpreted this as a form of social influence, which she associated with femininity (Thorne, 2024). Mrs R reported observing this behaviour only on the climbing frame. She speculated that the physical structure of the frame allowed for a different kind of play dynamic, one that enabled Wi to leverage

the environment to assert social power. This moment underscores how spaces and objects within the environment are not mere backdrops but active participants in the entangled dance of children's gendered and relational expressions (Hackett & Somerville, 2017).

Shifting power dynamics for gender expression was seen through multiple methods of play and circumstances in Penguins. Just like the climbing frame observation above, playtime offered many opportunities to observe children expressing themselves, and, how practitioners chose to, or not, engage with this to challenge stereotyping. The well-intentioned interruption of stereotypical gendered play by practitioners was evident on several occasions. However, a common one was that of halting a football game to ensure inclusivity, typically of biologically female children. This represents a commendable effort to challenge traditional norms tied to biological sex. Encouraging girls to join a traditionally male-dominated activity like football is an important step toward dismantling rigid expectations around play and essentialism. However, this approach, while addressing the surface-level gendered dynamic, often overlooked the deeper, more nuanced interplay of mental gender expression within such activities.

A typical afternoon playtime consisted of a football game involving six boys on the reception playground. The atmosphere was often charged with high energy, competitiveness, and physicality, expressions all three practitioners associated with masculinity. On this occasion, child Ma wishes to join in the game that's already started. She was a keen and active child who arguably is likely to possess the technical skills to play the game as well as her peers but prefers a less combative, more collaborative style, often avoiding physical tackles from the boys and engages in less competition. In discussing this scenario, all three practitioners said (and on separate occasions was observed) that they would encourage the boys to pause the game and state the girl could join the game as “everyone can play, it's not just a game for boys” (Mrs K). However, this often resulted in frustration. As Child Rb stated bluntly, “It's not fair if we have to stop just 'cos someone else wants to play, and we are, its us who has to change. it ruins the match.” This comment reflected a broader sentiment among the boys: that inclusion, especially

when prompted by an adult, was a disruption to their established dynamic, reinforcing the gendered expectations around space, play, and power.

The introduction of a less skilled child into their play was often met with frustration from the boys, seemingly not towards the child, but the expectation of their shift in expression and play, yet the same children had good friendship circles outside of this activity. This nuanced approach to inclusion was also evident in other observed practices where practitioners actively encouraged children to explore expressions of both masculinity and femininity, irrespective of their biological sex (Reddington, 2020). For example, a quiet, timid girl was encouraged to use her "lion voice," practicing projecting her voice and embracing an assertive, confident presence often culturally associated with masculinity. Conversely, boys were supported in experimenting with softer, calmer, and more gentle voices in various play contexts, challenging the idea that assertiveness or loudness must always characterise masculine expression (Solomon, 2016). These examples illustrate how practitioners can attune to individual children's affective and embodied expressions of gender. By doing so, they move beyond surface-level attempts to counter stereotyping and instead create space to affirm, celebrate, and enrich each child's unique way of being.

The exploration of Discovery two: Experiencing Thing-power has revealed the profound significance of the power of Bennets (2010) vibrant Matter in understanding children's expressions. By tuning into the various materials and objects that shape their world, washing lines laden with memories, children's photographs capturing meaningful Matter, chatterbox toys brought from home, their drawings, and the classroom carpet, this section has unveiled the intricate interplay of Thing-power in EY settings. These items, often overlooked in their everyday simplicity, become conduits for expression, holding within them layers of meaning and untold stories. Through the folds of these Things, we encounter a mosaic of understanding (Clark and Moss, 2011), an entangled glimpse into the ways children navigate their world and the ways that world, in turn, shapes them. From the power dynamics evident in resource use to the narratives within chatterbox toys or the symbolism of the classroom mat, each element tells a story within a story, revealing the interwoven nature of identity, environment, and expression.

Returning to the metaphor of the towel, this chapter highlights how the hidden folds of everyday objects carry the potential to shape and be shaped by children's experiences. These folds are spaces of becoming, where new expressions and meanings emerge. By attuning ourselves to these folds and the Thing-power they hold, we can better support children's unique and multifaceted expressions, creating environments where the richness of their identities can truly flourish.

4.3 Discovery Three: Early Years: A growing environment

The metaphor of the greenhouse offers a lens through which to explore the environments that nurture, constrain, or shape children's expressions of self. Spaces carry energy, embody cultural norms (Drake, 2019), and hold the potential to shape the ways masculinity and femininity flow through children's play and interactions. Like plants in a carefully tended space, children are profoundly influenced by the conditions surrounding them that facilitate or hinder their growth. Drawing from NHM, this section embraces the entangled relationship between self and surroundings, recognizing that environments are not passive backdrops but active participants (Ristinen, et al, 2022) in the expression of becoming. This section unfolds in two parts. The first, Spaces and Expressions, examines the role of the physical environment in EY settings, exploring how spaces enable or constrain children's exploration of gender through play. It considers how design, resources, and spatial dynamics create openings, or barriers, for fluid expressions of masculinity and femininity. The second, Exposure to Expressions, shifts focus to the representations of gender expression that children encounter, questioning what they see, hear, or sense in their environments. By examining the exposure (or lack thereof) to diverse expressions of masculinity and femininity, this section interrogates how environments condition children to express or suppress aspects of their identity. Together, these sections root the research into the greenhouse of EY education, exploring whether it provides a suitable growing environment for the full spectrum of gender expression.

Spaces and expressions

The environments children inhabit are more than mere backdrops to their play; they are dynamic participants in the unfolding narrative of self-expression. From playgrounds buzzing with high-energy pursuits to the focused creativity of construction areas, each space within the setting shaped and, in turn, was shaped by the children's gendered expressions. Observations across the year revealed a tendency for children to gravitate toward stereotypically gendered play within most of these spaces (Karsten,2003). Boys often dominated the physicality of the playground, running, climbing, and engaging in competitive games, while girls were observed in quieter, more socially connected play in areas like the home corner or craft tables. However, these patterns dissolved when the children entered the forest school (Loebach and Cox, 2022).

Image 26- Different spaces for gender expression

Opportunities and Spaces for Expression



Forest school offered a striking contrast. Here, amidst trees and open skies, the fluidity of gender expressions flourished. Masculine and feminine expressions intertwined seamlessly as children explored, built dens, climbed trees, and engaged with the unstructured opportunities that nature offered (Anggard,2011). Unlike the playground, which often echoed societal influence of competitive masculinity, or the craft area, which reflected nurturing femininity, forest school seemed to liberate children from these binaries. Garden (2024) suggests that the absence of conditioned expectations that forest school spaces provide, allow for expressions to emerge organically for both boys and girls. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of vibrant Matter (Bennett, 2010), which emphasizes the agency of non-human elements in shaping human experiences. In the natural environment, devoid of gendered toys or pre-constructed narratives, the children were free to engage with the vibrant Matter of the world in ways unmediated by societal expectations (Newson et al, 2018). The unstructured, neutral space of the forest invited a connectedness between expressions that was rarely observed elsewhere.

For example, one observation recorded a group of children collaboratively building a shelter. Child In, who typically embodied the physicality of masculinity in the playground and often struggled with hyperactivity was seen carefully weaving branches with child Fr who typically avoids craft spaces within the classroom, a task more often associated with feminine precision in other contexts. “This is like sewing but with trees,” Fr commented, as he focused on tucking the thinner twigs through the frame. Simultaneously, child Iv who tended toward quieter play in the classroom embraced the physical challenge of hauling logs and climbing to secure the structure. “I’m being strong like a tree!” she shouted, laughing as she balanced on the stump. The interplay of their expressions was not categorized by traditional gender norms, or their social hierarchies often found within the classroom dynamic, but by the shared purpose of their activity, “the best castle den in England” (Child Iv). These moments make visible how gendered expressions can fluidly reconfigure when children are unbound by conditioned school spaces. It also reminds us that what we currently define as masculine or feminine is neither fixed nor timeless. As Connell (2009) and Reeser (2023) argue, ideals of masculinity and femininity are historically contingent, shaped by sociocultural,

economic, and political forces. Within the forest school setting, we see echoes of this contingency, as children momentarily step outside inherited scripts and reassemble new ways of being together. Observing these experiences highlighted the fluid potential of gendered expression when freed from the conditioned spaces within the school.

The forest's lack of pre-assigned roles or tools for specific types of play provided a landscape where children's intra-actions with one another in-with-through their environment were governed by curiosity and creativity rather than societal expectations (Hackett & Somerville, 2017). The resulting expressions were not only fluid but also collaborative, as the natural environment fostered a sense of equality and mutual purpose. This highlights the significance of offering diverse spaces within EY settings to support children's multifaceted identities and expressions.

While spaces like the playground or home corner may unintentionally reinforce stereotypical gender norms through their culturally coded materials and structured affordances (Reimers et al, 2018), environments like forest school disrupt these patterns, providing fertile ground for children to explore the full spectrum of their expressions (Johnstone, Martin and Cordovil, 2022). The vibrancy of nature, its openness and neutrality, invites forms of play that are not pre-scripted by adult-designed expectations, therefore calling practitioners to reflect on how the design and use of spaces can either constrain or liberate a child's journey of self-expression. Drawing on new materialist thought, we might say that nature holds no symbolic demand over the child; it does not insist on femininity or masculinity, nor does it position the child as subject to a fixed social role. As Bennett (2010) suggests through her concept of Thing-power, materials, including sticks, mud, leaves, logs, exert their own agencies, inviting interaction without moral instruction or identity assignment. The lesson here is as simple as it is profound: when children are given the freedom to play without the weight of expectation, they reveal expressions as diverse and fluid as the world around them.

Exposure to expressions

The environment, much like a greenhouse nurturing diverse plant life, played a pivotal role in shaping the expressions and experiences of the children in Penguins class. As we have seen in the previous section, it offers both the subtle backdrop and vibrant Matter through which children can navigate their sense of self and their understanding of others. Yet, as observed in Penguins class and beyond, the spaces children inhabit often carry unspoken rules and limitations that influence the range of expressions they are exposed to and feel permitted to explore.

The shared toilet facilities were a prime example of this. Penguins class, like many other EY settings, utilised individual cubicles with shared sinks, spaces presumably free from the constraints of segregated gender norms. Yet, within these shared spaces, children's comments revealed an underlying conditioning of biological essentialism even at such a young age (Tchounwou *et al.* 2022). During observations of conversations between children and practitioners, typically during play times, there were several noted moments when girls expressed discomfort, citing boys who did not close cubicle doors or peered over the dividers at them. Whilst the boys in question, when asked, shared versions of curiosity, games and playing, the female children were at times quite distressed by the experiences. Similarly, in the parallel reception class, a biological boy with long hair who was often mistaken for a girl prompted other boys in Penguins class to hesitate in using the toilets when "she" was present (Children Te and Fi). These small, everyday interactions within the toilets became microcosms of broader gendered narratives at play, raising questions about comfort, belonging, and the subtle boundaries children navigate within the spaces they move (Timmons and Airtton, 2020).

Practitioners highlighted the stark shift in expectations as children transitioned to Year one, where toilets became segregated by biological sex. This shift introduced a new layer of conformity, potentially amplifying challenges for children whose expression of gender was seen as clashing with their biological sex. Mrs R reflected on the significance of this transition, remarking on the abruptness of moving from the relative fluidity of EY to the rigid binary norms of older year groups.

“We’ve been accommodating in allowing children to express themselves ... even down to the pants they want to put on ... now they’re being told the expectations of their gender is based on their bodies ... it’s so confusing for them”

The introduction of segregated spaces due to biological sex symbolized a departure from the inclusivity that early year’s settings strive to cultivate. This shift highlights the perpetuating of biological essentialism within the education system and called into question the preparedness of schools beyond EY to navigate children’s complex identities and the impact this might have on children’s sense of self.

Beyond physical spaces like toilets, the exposure, or lack thereof, to diverse gender expressions within the classroom environment was another theme that practitioners reflected on. Mr. S, whose personal style and expression provided a rare example of fluid gender presentation, noted the limitations placed on practitioners as they progressed beyond reception.

“The ways in which we ... can truly challenge stereotypes, through dress up, behaviour, or cultural stories, gets so much harder and more constrained as we move up the school”

However, even within the Penguins classroom, an environment often considered the "third teacher," lacked intentional representation of diverse gender expressions. There were very minimal dolls, images, or storybooks showcasing a range of identities, expressions and ways of being. There was evidence of intentionally good practice found in some stories such as the paper bag princess and little Red, for example, which were intentionally chosen to challenge gender roles and stereotypes, but this lacked the embodiment of such narrative beyond the realm of a story. This absence left a gap in the real-world narratives children were exposed to, unintentionally reinforcing binary norms.

This limited exposure highlights the need for practitioners to rethink how classroom environments can serve as catalysts for challenging stereotypes by broadening children’s exposures to different gender expressions. From the artwork on the walls to the stories read aloud, every element of the environment contributes to the stories children internalize about who they can be and how they can express themselves to the world. A classroom intentionally filled with diverse representations can act as both

mirror and window: a mirror reflecting children's own identities and a window offering glimpses into lives and expressions beyond their immediate experience. Ultimately, this section underscores the call for practitioners to embrace the environment as a living, dynamic participant in EY education. Just as the greenhouse nurtures life by providing varied conditions, so too can the classroom cultivate a space where children are exposed to a rich tapestry of gender expressions, freeing them from rigid narratives and enhancing an expressive becoming.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter unfolded as a tapestry of discovery, weaving together the metaphors of the chicken, towel, and greenhouse to illustrate the intricate dance of children's gender expression within EY settings. At its heart it was an invitation to move beyond surface observations and delve into the entangled intra-actions between practitioners, children, resources, and environments revealing the dynamic, co-constructed nature of gender expression. Starting with the chicken, the chapter questioned which comes first: the practitioner's self-awareness or the child's unique expressions. This playful but profound reflection troubled the notion that the child must always be the focal point of EY practice. Instead, it revealed the transformative potential of practitioners embarking on their own journeys of reflection and reflexivity. Through these processes, Mrs K, R and Mr S uncovered the biases and influences they brought into their praxis, paving the way for deeper, more authentic connections with children. Notably, the data also illuminated a drive among practitioners to challenge stereotypical, gendered practices, a commitment tempered by the constraints of policy, institutional pressures, government expectations, and parental views. Yet, it was through their own diffractive journeys in this research that practitioners began to realize the importance of making change. This newfound awareness underscored the value of self-exploration as a catalyst for transformation, equipping practitioners with the courage and clarity to push against these boundaries.

The humble towel emerged next as a metaphor for the folds of life, calling attention to the materiality of resources and their role in children's gendered explorations. Objects, once thought to be mere tools, were revealed to be storytellers, collaborators, and agents of possibility. The materials children chose were not random but laden with meaning,

shaping and being shaped by the child's identity. These moments offered glimpses into the unseen power dynamics at play, where resources became conduits for both expression and negotiation among peers. Finally, the greenhouse nurtured the conversation on environments, emphasizing their active role in the entanglement of gender expression. Far from passive containers, spaces in EY settings shaped how children moved, played, and expressed themselves. The chapter uncovered how thoughtful design and intentional representation of diverse gender expressions could create conditions for children to thrive. Equally, it called out the limitations of environments that reinforced stereotypes or constrained opportunities for exploration.

Together, these sections not only unearthed the multilayered complexity of gender expression but also stitched together a mosaic of insights into how EY practitioners can better support children's unfolding identities. By embracing the entangled interplay of their own reflective journeys, the materials that Matter, and the environments they curate, practitioners can foster a richer landscape for children to explore their masculinity, femininity, and everything in between. This chapter leaves us poised for the next: an exploration of how these entanglements, when fully embraced, can transform EY practice into an inclusive, dynamic, and deeply thoughtful endeavour.

Chapter Five

An Entangled Mosaic

Unlike the popular image of a child piecing together a puzzle, this chapter does not seek to neatly complete or finalise an understanding of gender expression. Instead, it leans into the shifting complexity of entanglement itself. As Allen (2015) reminds us, producing a summary that attempts to fix meaning risks reinstating the separation between researcher and the phenomena of inquiry that new materialist ontology seeks to dissolve. Rather than solidifying conclusions, this thesis has worked with entangled mosaic methodologies, and experimented with Barad's notion of diffraction to resist fixing analysis into static interpretations (Davies, 2014). This openness has been essential in capturing the evolving nature of gender expression in early childhood, allowing space for ongoing inquiry rather than imposing rigid readings. In doing so, it aligns with St. Pierre's (2021b) call to unsettle traditional methodological approaches, loosening their authority over how we come to think, know, and respond to children in practice.

This thesis has woven through the intra-actions of children, practitioners, environments, and the Matter that matters, each shaping and being shaped by the others in a dance of becoming. Gender, as explored throughout, emerges not as a fixed endpoint but as a fluid process, as dynamic as the research itself. The discoveries shared across previous chapters have been guided by three affect modulators (Snaza, 2020; Warin, 2023): reflective practice, EY resources, and the environment, each offering different dimensions through which children's expressions of self-have been understood.

In coming to a provisional resting point, the entangled mosaic of this research can be glimpsed more fully, revealing the metaphors that have threaded through its journey: the chicken, the towel, and the greenhouse. The chicken unsettles assumptions about where practice should begin, revealing the mutual becoming of practitioner and child. The towel, folding and unfolding, illustrates the material-discursive layers that shape gendered expression. The greenhouse, with its shifting conditions for growth, foregrounds how environments nurture, constrain, and reshape possibilities for

becoming. Rather than static devices, these metaphors have moved alongside the research, supporting a diffractive engagement with gender expression in early childhood. More than conceptual markers, they have been integral to the research's own diffractive practice, evolving through the entangled nature of inquiry.

Continuing in this spirit, the research has not remained static or closed; it has been shaped through its engagements, including dialogues with supervisors and critical friends, which acted as further diffractive moments. Just as diffraction has guided the methodological approach, these exchanges have produced new patterns of understanding, showing how intra-actions extend beyond the fieldwork and into the wider relational networks of research practice (Bath, 2021). Such relational engagements align with calls within UK early childhood research for methodologies that remain open, fluid, and responsive to complexity (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). Rather than offering fixed conclusions, this thesis embraces the idea of 'next steps' familiar within EY practice, not as linear progression but as a generative movement, allowing ripples of inquiry to continue shaping practice, policy, and research. In this way, the work honours the relational nature of knowledge and the ongoing evolution of gender-flexible pedagogies.

5.1 Dancing in the cracks

Entanglement has always been at the heart of this research, an intricate constellation of moments, voices, materials, and intra-actions that resist separation. Like a mosaic of shimmering fragments, it refuses a singular, final picture. What holds the pieces together, the relational mattering of child and practitioner, the energetic pull of materials, the shifting conditions of environments, is as significant as the tiles themselves. Echoing Bennett's (2010) Thing-power, these unseen energies are not secondary; they are the research. They are the fleeting intra-actions between children and materials, the quiet negotiations of gender in play, the moments where practitioners begin to see differently. This study has been about tuning into what is not always spoken, tracing ripples of expression as they unfold. Mycroft's (2023) joyful practice reminds us to notice micro-moments charged with affect and ethical potential, where gender is quietly reconfigured in EY settings.

To see this research as a mosaic is to embrace the idea that knowledge is not fixed (Shannon and Hackett, 2024); it emerges in cracks and folds, in the shimmering spaces between things. These are where new understandings of gender expression form, not in binaries, but in fluid, relational movements. Practitioners are not outside observers but are deeply entangled in what they support. Diffractive praxis calls on them to examine their own biases (Moxnes and Osgood, 2018), as their intra-actions shape what is welcomed, overlooked, or constrained. Holloway (2010) speaks of cracks as spaces where alternative ways of being emerge. Similarly, EY cracks reveal possibilities, where children show us who they are, and where we are invited to respond with openness and joy (Mycroft, 2023).

Image 27 represents this entangled mosaic. Each tile reflects the methods, participants, and affective forces guiding the research. Just as important, however, are the cracks and spaces between them, the blurred, shifting borders of lived experience. evoke a weaving of relationships, materials, and affects. Foucault (1980) reminds us that the unsaid defines what can be said. Within these silences, negotiations of identity unfold, shaped by social structures, embodied experience, and relational encounters. These in-between spaces hold the invisible intra-actions that weave the mosaic: fleeting identity negotiations, material energies, unspoken social forces. Gender is lived and reshaped here, in-with-through materials, environments, and encounters. Understanding it requires noticing not only what is seen or said, but what is felt, assumed, constrained, or unspoken.

This mosaic is not fixed. It is fluid and incomplete, much like gender expression itself. Gender never exists in isolation but is always entangled with other dimensions of identity. This mosaic captures just one slice of that entanglement, held in time, space, and place, for the 27 children who participated in this study. Their expressions were shaped by the specific rhythms, relationships, and materialities of this setting. In other times, with other children, new mosaics would form, each with different tiles, different tensions, and different possibilities. Even with the tiles now laid, the methods, materials, voices, and experiences, there remain blank spaces. These unfilled tiles speak to the unknown, the yet-to-be-seen, and the ongoing, unfolding messiness of children's expressions.

If the greenhouse represents the EY environment, then what happens beyond its glass walls cannot be ignored. Every setting, whether the open expanse of a forest school or the structured familiarity of a classroom carpet, offers both affordances and constraints to children (Sandberg, 2016). Yet, these environments do not exist in a vacuum; they are shaped by wider socio-cultural, economic, historical, and political forces that determine what kinds of learning, expression, and becoming are valued or marginalised (Moss, 2014, p.5). The light that streams into the greenhouse is refracted through institutional pressures, school readiness frameworks, and policy discourses that influence what is nurtured and what struggles to take root.

This study has revealed that while EY pedagogy (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023) often celebrates fluidity, exploration, and child-led discovery, these freedoms are increasingly constrained as children transition into more structured schooling (Evans, 2025). The shift to Year 1, where the unspoken rules of sitting still, listening, and conforming take hold, reflects broader neoliberal logics that reframe education as preparation for productivity and compliance, rather than as spaces for flourishing and relational becoming (Roberts-Holmes, 2015, p.304). Institutional structures, policies, and expectations cast long shadows across children's lives. Although policies (DfE, 2024) may claim to challenge gender stereotypes, they often fail to disrupt the deeper architectures of cisnormativity and normativity (Horton, 2022), entrenching narrow visions of who and how children can be. The pressure to prepare children for formal schooling risks erasing the very gender-fluid possibilities nurtured in the EY. The question is not just how gender can be expressed in the EY, but whether these expressions can be sustained and defended beyond them.

Listening to children in this study has required more than hearing (Clarke, 2005). It has meant tuning into the multiplicities of expression, the micro-moments of identity negotiation, and the silent stories told through materials, gestures, and interactions. Mosaic listening (Clark and Moss, 2010), then, is not simply about amplifying children's physical voices but about recognising that gender expression is an entangled process, always in motion. To listen through the eyes of children is to see their identities as something they do, something that emerges in-with-through their relationships with the

materials, spaces, and people around them (Evans, 2025). It is an invitation to listen differently, to hear what is often left unheard, to notice what is often unseen, to remain open to the infinite ways gender unfolds. Sustaining this depth of attentiveness was both enriching and, at times, emotionally demanding. As Cook (2009, p.280) reminds us, participatory inquiry asks researchers to be fully present, emotionally engaged, and willing to be unsettled. There were moments when listening differently, to what was not said, to gestures, to materials, felt overwhelming, as children's stories and expressions stayed with me long after the research encounters had ended. Yet, this way of listening has stretched and strengthened my practice, both within and beyond EY spaces. There is power in the small things: in the fleeting moments, the overlooked gestures, the quiet attentions where meaning gathers. As Taguchi (2010, p.122) suggests, it is often in these micro-moments, the seemingly insignificant intra-actions, that new possibilities for understanding and becoming take root.

5.2 Contribution to new knowledge

Doctoral research exists to push the boundaries of existing knowledge, offering new insights that challenge, extend, or refine what has come before (Sarrico, 2022). This study has built upon the foundations laid by scholars such as Warin (2023), whose work has been instrumental in framing gender-flexible pedagogy, and Wingrave (2020), who identified a reluctance among practitioners to acknowledge their role in shaping children's gendered experiences. While these studies have been pivotal in opening conversations around gender in EY education, this research has taken these ideas further, engaging in a deeply entangled, multi-(con)textual exploration of gender expression that foregrounds the voice of the child, the role of the practitioner, and the vibrant materialities (Bennet, 2010) that shape intra-actions. In doing so, this study contributes new knowledge by demonstrating that gender expression in the EY is not only a social construct to be challenged in policy, but an unfolding, material-discursive phenomenon that emerges through the entangled relations of children, practitioners, environments, and the Matter that matters. A key aspect of this has been the introduction of a New-Hermetic Materialist approach, which provided a unique way of thinking-with

these entanglements, one that acknowledges not only the material forces at play but also the energetic, affective, and unseen currents shaping children's becoming.

Understanding a child's gender expression has shown to require more than observing isolated moments; it demands a multi-(con)textual approach to listening, one that attends to the lived, meaning-making experiences of children as they unfold across different spaces, materials, and intra-actions. Through a mosaic approach to listening (Clarke and Moss, 2001), this research has revealed the depth of meaning-making embedded in children's everyday expressions of self. Unlike traditional methods that seek to capture a singular 'truth' about gender expression, this study embraced a framework that tuned in to the many ways children communicate their identities, through language, play, movement, resource choices, and embodied interactions. This was further enhanced by a New-Hermetic Materialist perspective, which recognises that knowledge is not purely constructed through discourse but emerges in-with-through the dynamic interactions of bodies, materials, energies, and environments (García-González & Deszcz-Tryhubczak, 2020). In doing so, it also disrupts adult-centric hierarchies of knowledge, affirming children's embodied, relational ways of knowing and making space for marginalised epistemologies to be valued and heard (Nxumalo, 2016). The findings suggest that listening must be more than hearing; it must involve an attunement (Sullivan and Lewis, 2003) to the materials, spaces, and relational dynamics that shape children's expressions. Practitioners, therefore, must expand their understanding of observation to include a diffractive lens, one that acknowledges that gender expression is not simply spoken or performed but emerges in entangled intra-actions, influenced by both seen and unseen forces. This study has demonstrated that by reading children's expressions through multiple contexts, deeper insights can be gained into the ways gendered possibilities are shaped, challenged, and reimagined in EY spaces.

For EY practitioners, supporting gender-flexible pedagogy requires more than an openness to children's expressions; it necessitates a commitment to diffractive praxis, a form of critical, self-reflexive engagement that recognises the practitioner's own entanglement in shaping the conditions for children's becoming. A central contribution of this research has been the articulation of diffractive praxis as an essential component

of gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin, 2023). While previous studies (Chapman, 2021) have highlighted the importance of gender inclusivity, this study has foregrounded the practitioner's role not just in providing space for expression but in actively engaging with their own intra-actions and entanglements. Diffractive praxis, as explored in this study, requires practitioners to go beyond passive reflection and step into an ongoing process of self-awareness, ethical responsiveness (Braidotti, 2013), and embodied practice. This aligns with a New-Hermetic Materialist understanding that practitioners are not separate from the world they observe but are always co-creating reality through their own energetic, material, and discursive entanglements. The findings illustrate that when practitioners engage in diffractive praxis, they become more attuned to their own unconscious biases, power dynamics, and the subtle ways in which their intra-actions shape the gendered experiences of children. This research challenges the notion that practitioners are neutral observers (Wingrave, 2018) and instead argues that they are active participants in the unfolding narratives of children's gender expression. It calls for EY professionals to embrace their role as both facilitators and co-inhabitants of children's gendered worlds, working with the complexity of becoming rather than seeking to impose fixed notions of identity.

Thinking through gender expression in EY practice requires a shift in perspective, one that moves away from individualised, developmental models and towards a broader lens of entanglement. This study has demonstrated that gendered becoming is always relational, always intra-acting with the material, social, and institutional forces that surround it. The New-Hermetic Materialist approach has been crucial in articulating this, recognising that intra-actions occur not only between human subjects and objects but also within a dynamic field of non-human materialities, energetic flows, and affective forces that co-shape meaning in unseen ways (Atkinson, 1908). The introduction of an entangled approach therefore marks a shift from individualised models of gender identity toward a recognition that children's expressions are co-produced with the environments, materials, and people they engage with. By attending to the pedagogical potential of the material world, the spaces children move through, the resources they encounter, and the images and narratives they are exposed to, practitioners can create more expansive opportunities for gender expression. The findings call for EY professionals to become

intentional in crafting environments that not only challenge restrictive norms but also foster a multiplicity of ways for children to explore and express who they are. In this way, the research offers a diffractive, materialist contribution to reimagining EY gender pedagogy as a dynamic, relational, and ethically responsive practice.

Listening through the eyes of children has revealed that gender expression is not static but an ever-evolving mosaic, shaped by intra-actions in-with-through the world around them. The New-Hermetic Materialist approach has been instrumental in capturing this complexity, offering a perspective that embraces the co-creative, relational, and affective dimensions of children's meaning-making. The methodology itself, an entangled mosaic approach, has offered a way of thinking-with complexity, embraced multiple perspectives, and resisted fixed conclusions. By attuning to the stories that unfold within everyday practice, this research has opened new pathways for understanding how EY settings can nurture gendered becoming in ways that are responsive, inclusive, and expansive. In so doing it invites the sector to move beyond rigid frameworks of gender inclusivity (Marshall, 2018) and towards a practice that is dynamic, relational, and ever in motion. As the ripples of this research continue to expand, its impact lies not in providing final answers, but in offering new ways of thinking, knowing, and responding to the vibrant expressions of children's gendered worlds.

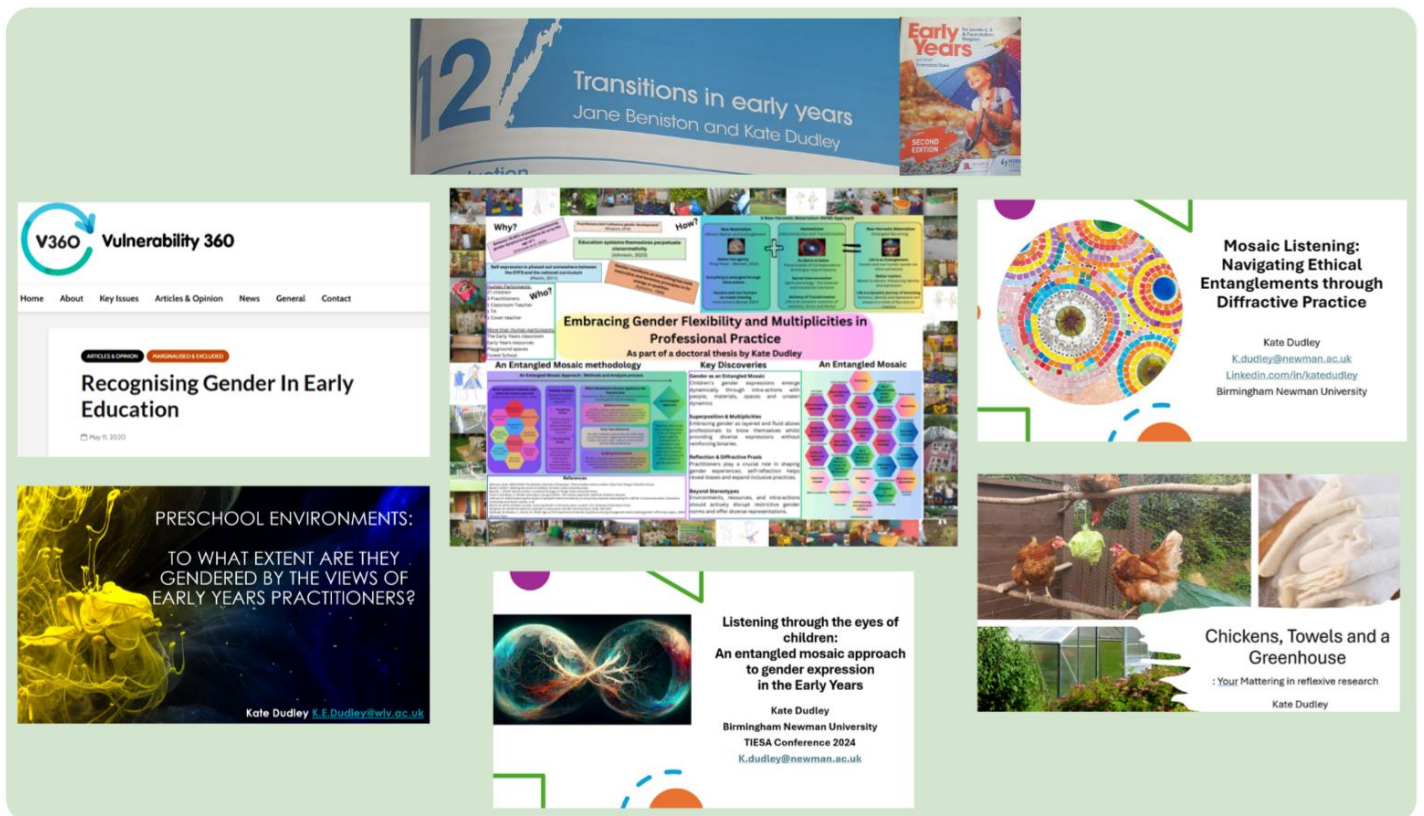
5.3 Dissemination

Dissemination has been a vital, relational thread running throughout this research, intended not as a set of conclusions but as an ongoing ethical commitment. Sharing emerging insights with wider communities has nurtured dialogue, extended practice, and honoured the co-productive nature of knowledge. Image 12: Dissemination Projects offers a visual representation of this journey.

Early dissemination began at the start of my journey in 2020, with a co-authored textbook chapter on gender and transitions and an article for *Vulnerability 360* exploring early ideas on gender in EY education. An initial presentation at the Education Observatory Conference for Wolverhampton University shared pilot study findings on preschool environments, followed by several creative methods workshops with undergraduates

and alumni students at Birmingham Newman University to showcase researching differently. In 2024, my work was shared internationally at the TIESA Conference, focusing on multiplicity and diffraction, and at the Newman MA Conference through a reflexive presentation titled Chickens, Towels, and a Greenhouse. Both opportunities provided rich discussions and feedback. In 2025, BECERA provided a space to explore ethical entanglements through Mosaic Listening, while the BSA poster conference visually showcased the research's embrace of gender flexibility and multiplicity. Dissemination will continue with a forthcoming book chapter on inclusion and gender which is due for publication towards the end of 2025.

Image 28 – Dissemination Projects



5.4 Next Steps

No research unfolds without limitations (Fletcher, Gies and Hodge, 2011), just as no EY setting is without its surprises of spilled paint, lost wellies, or an impromptu performance in the role-play corner. I do not see these as flaws, but natural dimensions of the research process. Acknowledging these boundaries allows for deeper reflection and highlights where future inquiry might step next. While this study is rooted in a specific EY setting, with its unique practitioners, children, and environmental conditions, this context-bound nature inevitably presents limitations (Denscombe, 2017). The intra-actions observed were shaped by the ethos of the school, the community it serves, and the specific practitioner–child dynamics at play, as well as my own entanglement in–with–through the setting and participants. While the study did not focus specifically on race or ethnicity, the setting’s demographic composition may have influenced how gender was expressed and interpreted. The classroom was predominantly White British, as were the practitioner participants, which may limit the transferability of findings to more culturally diverse contexts where gender and identity are shaped by different intersecting norms and values. However, the broader themes explored: the tensions between child-led learning and policy expectations, the material-discursive forces shaping identity, and the pressures of school readiness, are likely to resonate widely across EY practice. Practitioners in more diverse settings may recognise parallels in navigating regulatory constraints, fostering gender-inclusive spaces, and balancing institutional structures with child-centred pedagogy. While this study does not claim universal applicability, it offers insights that can be critically engaged with and adapted across different EY environments.

A key commitment of this study was to centre children’s voices and expressions (Sun et al, 2023), recognizing them as active participants in meaning-making (Sudarsan et al, 2022) rather than passive subjects. However, working within ethical and time boundaries made fully accessing the complexities of children's diffractive expressions challenging. Practitioner interviews and observations provided rich insights, yet my role as a researcher remained practically distanced. Unlike practitioners embedded in daily classroom life, I could not capture the micro-moments of gender expression unfolding in

the fluid, everyday rhythms of play and interaction. My structured observation periods offered only glimpses into this process, while practitioners had ongoing access to children's shifting expressions, to which I relied on their interpretation of many events. This highlights a key tension between ethical research boundaries and the depth of access needed to observe naturally occurring gendered intra-actions.

Focusing on the reception classroom provided valuable insight into how gender expression unfolds in the EY. Reception is a unique transitional space that balances play-based learning with early expectations of school readiness, making it an ideal site for exploring shifts in gendered expression. However, this specific age range also introduced limitations. Because the study followed children within a single academic year, it was not possible to trace how their gender expressions evolved as they moved beyond reception, nor the learnt expressions they brought with them. Observations suggested a narrowing of self-expression as children transitioned into Year one and encountered increasing institutional expectations, but without longitudinal engagement, the long-term impact of this shift remained beyond the study's reach.

As a researcher, I was not separate from this study but deeply entangled in its unfolding. The playful metaphors of the chicken, towel, and greenhouse were not merely conceptual tools but active participants in the research, shaping how I navigated and understood the data. However, these metaphors did not emerge solely from my analysis; they were woven into the very fabric of my research journey, intra-acting with the material realities of my own life. The chickens I cared for, the regular folding of washed towels between writing provided moments of reflection, and the greenhouse became a site of both nurture and controlled growth for my thoughts. Each played a role in shaping the energetic, embodied process of writing and thinking with this research. The Mattering of this thesis, then, was not just an academic exercise but a lived entanglement, where Matter became vibrant (Bennett, 2010) and shaped both the study's findings and my evolving perspectives. Yet, this entanglement also presents a limitation. My own diffractive journey inevitably influenced how the research unfolded, just as each reader's entanglement will shape their interpretation of the data. The ways in which gender, childhood, and pedagogy are explored here are necessarily partial, filtered through my

own encounters and positionality. While diffraction resists the notion of a single, stable truth (Moxnes and Osgood, 2018), it invites a multiplicity of perspectives, meaning that readers may trace different patterns, uncover new resonances, or challenge the interpretations offered. This underscores the importance of ongoing inquiry, where meaning is never fixed but continually shifting through new intra-actions and ways of thinking-with the research.

These limitations do not mark an end point but rather a pause in an ever-evolving inquiry, much like the next steps we consider in EY practice, where learning is never fixed but continuously unfolding. Gender expressions, both children and practitioners in this study, did not conclude when my observations ended; they continued to shift, adapt, and take new forms beyond the boundaries of this research. Recognising children's continual becoming is essential in EY practice, not only for immediate growth but as the foundation for lifelong learning and critical reflection (Brookfield, 2005, p.2). In this spirit, the following next steps emerge not as final recommendations, but as invitations to continue exploring, questioning, and extending the conversations this study has opened.

My purpose to engage with educational research is to create meaningful impact on praxis (Walker et al, 2017); therefore, a core priority of praxeology is to consider how practice can evolve in response to new insights (Pascal and Bertrum, 2012). The following next steps emerge from the data to evolve EY practice:

- Making time for diffractive praxis is vital, as practitioners' gendered experiences shape their intra-actions with children. Dedicated space for critical reflection supports greater self-awareness and more inclusive, gender-flexible pedagogy. Though often undervalued in current systems, this study shows small shifts are possible, through reflective moments woven into routines like playground conversations, supervision, or shared planning.
- Embedding observational practices and discussion to understand and respond to gender expression enables practitioners to move beyond assumptions and engage with the ways children actively express and negotiate their identities. This research found that children's gender expressions often emerged in nuanced

ways through materials, spaces, and peer interactions, requiring practitioners to be attuned to these subtle forms of communication.

- Reflecting on how spaces and resources influence expression helps practitioners create environments that support rather than constrain gender exploration. This study revealed that different areas within the setting afforded varying levels of fluidity in gender expression, with nature-based spaces offering the most freedom from gendered expectations.
- Gender expression must be understood as a collective responsibility, embedded within a whole-school approach rather than left to individual practitioners. This includes consistent CPD to support staff navigating tensions between personal beliefs, policies, and parental expectations, and ensuring children are exposed to diverse gender representations, through images, stories, and role models, that disrupt limiting stereotypes and support inclusivity.

While this study has provided valuable insights into the entangled nature of gender expression in early childhood, it has also raised new questions and avenues for further exploration. Gender identity and expression do not emerge in isolation (Soloman, 2016) but continue to evolve across time, spaces, and relationships. To deepen our understanding and continue challenging restrictive gender norms, the following next steps for continued research are proposed:

- Exploring the transition from EYFS to Year 1 is essential, as this study highlighted how the shift towards school readiness and formal learning structures limits children's self-expression. Further research is needed to consider how a revised curriculum might extend the EYFS emphasis on personal and social development into KS1 and beyond, ensuring that identity formation is nurtured rather than constrained.
- Investigating parent partnerships in gender inclusion would provide valuable insights into how home and school environments collectively shape children's understandings of gender. This study revealed that children's gender expressions are often filtered through parental choices, yet little research has explored how settings might work with families to expand gender exposure and inclusivity.

- Developing practitioner-led or embedded methodologies could offer a more sustained, real-time engagement with children’s gender expressions. This study found that practitioners, due to their continuous presence, had greater access to micro-moments of gendered intra-action than the researcher. Future research might explore methods where practitioners themselves take an active role in data collection and analysis.

The discoveries within this study also call for meaningful shifts in EY policy, recognising that gender expression is deeply entwined with the regulated experiences of children and the professional expectations placed upon practitioners. If EY settings are to fully embrace gender-flexible pedagogy (Warin, 2023), then policy must also evolve to support and guide practitioners in this work. The following next steps highlight areas where policy development could create a lasting impact on practice and, ultimately, on children’s experiences of self-expression:

- Embedding reflective practice as a policy requirement would support practitioners to engage with their own biases and intra-actions. While structured reflection is expected in early teaching careers, it remains absent from the EYFS. This study shows that making diffractive praxis a formal expectation could strengthen professional development and foster more inclusive, gender-aware pedagogy.
- The EYFS framework must move beyond simply challenging gender stereotypes to actively supporting inclusive practice. This study calls for a deeper, intentional approach, beyond toy choices or role-play tweaks, to explicitly challenge cisnormativity. Policy should ensure all children’s gender expressions are seen, valued, and nurtured without defaulting to binary expectations.

5.5 Closing thoughts

This research has been fundamental in reinforcing my beliefs that the work of EY practitioners is not just about education. It is about shaping the very foundations of how children come to see themselves and the world around them. As such, this research does not end here; it extends outward, carried forward in the hands, voices, and interactions of those who read this thesis and engage with young children every day. The next generation will inherit the stories we tell, the environments we create, and the possibilities we make space for. The invitation, then, is not just to challenge stereotypes but to reimagine the possibilities of gender expression in early childhood. It is a call to create spaces where children are not confined by expectation but are free to explore, shape, and redefine who they are. To engage in this work is to commit to something far beyond policy or pedagogy, it is to consciously shape a future where every child's becoming is met with care, curiosity, and the courage to do things differently.

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Appendix A – Ethical Approval

I confirm that the proposal for research being made by the above student/member of staff is Approved.

Comments and Feedback: Thank you for your ethics submission, this is an interesting proposal and you have given clear consideration to the different aspects of consent within your study. It is good to see that you have acknowledged the importance of consent from the children and parents/carer.

Proposed Actions: Approved. Please make sure that you add the University statement to your consent forms as given in the email returned with this form.

For a student's proposal: Name of module leader or supervisor giving approval:



For a member of staff's proposal: Name of Head of Ethics Panel giving approval:



Signed (This form must have a valid signature):

Date: 31/03/2022

Subject: Application for the adoption of externally approved research

Dear Kate

I am pleased to inform you that your application to the Research Ethics Committee for the adoption of externally approved research has now been approved.

Approval has been granted on the basis of the information provided in this application. If it is necessary to change the research purpose, design, methods or participants in any way, then you are required to reapply for approval.

Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Best regards



Appendix B – Gatekeeper Information Letter

To the Head Teacher

RE: Doctoral research study into the expression of children's gender in a pre-school reception class. A study conducted by Kate Dudley as part of her doctoral studies at the [REDACTED]

Thank you for your interest in this doctoral research. I have included some information below explaining the focus of this study and data collection methods. If you are happy to provide permission for the research to take place in #####, then please sign and date this form below, returning it to [REDACTED] Thank you.

Research Focus:

The Early Years industry has grown through policy change and practice, to promote the unique child, and have emphasis on understanding a child's needs and development. Thus, equipping key practitioners with a holistic knowledge of the child and being able to provide stretching opportunities for them to flourish. However, my experience working in schools, nurseries and in the community over the years has highlighted gender as a significant missing part of policy and practice. This study, therefore, aims to explore the importance of gender within the reception class environment through listening to children's expression of it. It aims to consider how practitioners can enhance their understanding of children through tuning into the child's expressions and to what extent this allows them to broaden further opportunities for growth and development.

Participant Involvement:

This research involves the class teacher, teaching assistant and cover teacher, as well as the children in attendance of your reception class.

Valuing the knowledge and expertise of the teaching staff, I would like to work alongside them to co-construct this research using a multi-textual range of methods as listed below:

The research will involve 3 main phases:

1. Phase 1 (approximately September to December): Initial semi-structured discussions with the teacher and TA in the classroom. This phase will predominantly involve audio and audio-visual recorded observations (where appropriate) of the wider setting, play interactions between children and interactions between children and their key worker.
2. Phase 2 (approximately January to May): Child engagement focus: Several multi-textual activities to listen to children's gender expression. These include children taking photographs on a provided digital camera of their setting, drawing activity's, focused story time/ carpet time, focused discussion with each child about their photographs and drawing, and the use of vignettes in relation to their photographs and drawings.
3. Phase 3 (approximately June/July): Closing interviews with class teacher and TA, reviewing filmed footage with both practitioners and accessing children's observation files and progress folders.

Each member of staff will be both briefed and debriefed around each activity and given the opportunity to ask questions at each stage. Discussions with both practitioners and

conversations/ activities with children shall often be audio recorded using a Dictaphone, used for analysis purposes only.

Children's group play including both inside and outside of the classroom will often be visually recorded using a camera and will again only be used for analysis purposes.

Ethical Process

Ethical approval has been granted for this research study by the [REDACTED] School of Education Research Ethics Committee and ethical procedures will be followed throughout the process. Both the class teacher and TA will be provided with an information sheet providing information about the data collection methods and purpose of the study along with a written consent form (enclosed). They will have the opportunity to ask any questions and sign a consent form to opt into the research process.

Parents shall be provided with a full information sheet explaining the research activities. The information letter provided aims to build upon the already provided consent gained by the school in the 'consent for Photographs, Video recordings and Internet access' document. Therefore, it becomes an **opt out** process, rather than additional consent. It will be clear of the intentions of the research, data collection methods and highlight that no raw data of children shall be used within the write up, nor dissemination of the research. Parents shall be informed of their right to opt out and provided with my contact details to do so or encouraged to speak with the class teacher directly.

Furthermore, children at each stage of the data collection process (excluding general observations) will be asked (using a stamp on a consent form) to provide their consent to take part in the activities. At any point the right to withdraw that consent applies. This has been explained within the information sheets to practitioners and parents and will be explained to the children too.

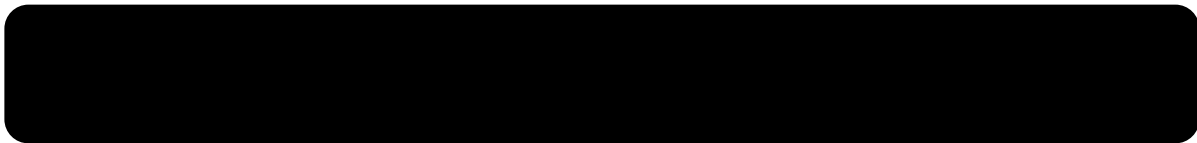
Risks and benefits of being involved

Involving Early Years Practitioners within the research allows for reflexivity in creating shared ownership of the research and its outcomes (Pascal and Bertram 2012). Reflection on practice is recognised as an important component in developing professional and pedagogical knowledge, and understanding practice (Miller, 2008 and Schon 1987). All of these are imperative when influencing the outcomes for children's care and education. This research aims to contribute to the development of early years practitioner practice in understanding the key children in their care. It aims to explore how practitioners can enhance their understanding around the role of gender and its influence within children's preschool development.

A research briefing and seminar of key findings from this research study shall be offered to yourself and both participants following the completion of the data collection period. All data will be treated with confidence and stored in a secure place. No information shall be shared with additional parties unless a concern for safety arises, in which case the researcher will be required to breach confidentiality and consult the safeguarding lead at the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] Pseudonyms shall be used to represent the setting and all participants involved within the write up of this research to protect their identities. Any photos taken by the children within this study that might identify the setting, or a child will not be used within the reporting of this research.

No audio-visually recorded data shall be used within the sharing of findings; this is for analysis purpose only. Any audio recorded data will be anonymised at the point of transcription. There are no known risks to your setting of partaking within this research study. However, if you wish to discuss this further, please find my contact details below.

Researcher details



Name of setting head teacher:

Signature of setting head teacher:

Date:

Many thanks,

Kate Dudley.

Appendix C– Gatekeeper Consent

Researcher details

If you have any questions regarding anything about this research, please don't hesitate to contact me on [REDACTED] or at [REDACTED]

Name of setting head teacher: [REDACTED]

Signature of setting head teacher: [REDACTED]

Date: 11/10/22

Many thanks,

Kate Dudley.

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Appendix D – Parental Information Letter

To the parent/carer of a reception class child in #####

RE: Doctoral research study into the expression of children's gender in a preschool reception class. A study conducted by Kate Dudley as part of her doctoral studies in Education at the [REDACTED]

Hello, thank you for your time. I am a researcher at #####, carrying out my doctoral studies. I have been given permission by #####, the school's headteacher, to carry out my research in the reception classroom your child attends. This research will span the academic year of 2022/2023 and has been ethically approved by the [REDACTED] School of Education ethics committee.

Research Focus:

The Early Years industry has grown through policy change and practice to promote the unique child and have emphasis on understanding a child's needs and development. Thus, equipping practitioners with a holistic knowledge of the child, therefore, being able to provide stretching opportunities for development. However, my experience working in schools, nurseries and in the community over the years has highlighted gender as a significant missing part of policy and practice. This study, therefore, aims to explore the importance of gender within reception class environment, through listening to children's expression of it. It aims to consider how practitioners can enhance their understanding of their key children through tuning into the child's expressions and to what extent this allows them to broaden further opportunities for growth and development.

Child Involvement:

This research study involves the reception class, their class teacher and teaching assistant. It will involve camera recorded observations of children playing, communicating, and working together, as well as audio recording of their conversations, interactions with each other and their classroom teachers.

Over the year, children will be involved in a range of activities specifically constructed for the research process. These include the children using a digital camera to take pictures of the setting and their play, drawing and colouring activities, focused carpet time and shared stories.

Your child will be involved in discussions with me and their key worker to reflect on their play and certain activities. They will be asked for their consent before doing so.

Confidentiality and anonymity

As a parent at #####, you will have already been asked to provide consent for your child on the '[Consent for Photographs, Video recordings and Internet access document](#)'. In providing consent via this [document](#) you have agreed to your child being video recorded and their voice recorded for the purpose of education within the school environment.

This research study continues from that consent, but any recordings made during this study shall only be used for the purpose of the research study and shown only to the classroom staff and my research supervisors if required. No images nor recordings of your child shall be posted online nor shared externally.

Children will be given the opportunity to consent before entering any structured activities for the research purpose. Using age-appropriate language, your child will be given the choice to participate indicating this choice using a stamp and a happy face.

Both you and your child have the right to withdraw your child's data from the research study up until July 2023 by getting in touch with me directly using the contact details at the bottom of this letter.

Your information and participation within this study shall remain confidential. The recordings and transcripts of data will only be accessed by myself and my research supervisors, if needed. Data will be stored securely in a password protected drive and any physical notes in a secure, locked container. Any audio and audio-visual files will be stored securely until the end of my doctoral studies (December 2024) and the anonymised transcripts for no longer than ten years following this. No visual, nor auditory data (recordings) will be used in the reporting of findings; these recordings are for the purpose of analysis only and will be transcribed anonymously and the raw data deleted following the completion of the doctoral study.

Anonymised data will be reported in seminars and conferences and in my doctoral thesis. In these documents, pseudonyms will be used to replace your child's name and no identifying information will be used. This will also apply to the setting. Any photos taken by the children that might identify the setting or children themselves won't be used in the presentation of findings.

A research seminar will be offered to the parents at the end of the academic year. This will be an opportunity to share and discuss the key findings with me should you be interested.

If you would like to opt out of your child's involvement or have any questions then I will be available at the school **Friday 23rd September from 2.30** before your child's collection time, or **Wednesday 28th September between 8.30-9am** before you drop off your child. If you wish to contact me outside of these set times, then please feel free to contact me using the details below. The class teacher would also be happy to pass on any questions you may have.

Many thanks,
Kate Dudley



Tel:

Email:



Supervisor details:

Director of studies: #####

Appendix E – Child Consent

1

Child's Name:



2



Drawing pictures



Tell me about your drawings



Appendix F – Practitioner information letter

To the reception practitioner.

RE: Doctoral research study into the expression of children's gender in a preschool reception class. A study conducted by Kate Dudley as part of her doctoral studies at the

Thank you for your interest in this doctoral research. I have included some information below about the focus of this study and data collection methods. The headteacher has already provided permission for this research to take place within your setting.

Research Focus:

The Early Years industry has grown through policy change and practice, to promote the unique child and have emphasis on understanding a child's needs and development. Thus, equipping key practitioners with a holistic knowledge of the child and being able to provide stretching opportunities for them to flourish. However, my experience working in schools, nurseries and in the community over the years has highlighted gender as a significant missing part of policy and practice. This study, therefore, aims to explore the importance of gender within the reception class environment through listening to children's expression of it. It aims to consider how practitioners can enhance their understanding of children through tuning into the child's expressions and to what extent this allows them to broaden further opportunities for growth and development.

Participant Involvement:

This research involves the class teacher, teaching assistant and cover teacher, as well as the children in attendance of your reception class.

Valuing the knowledge and expertise of the teaching staff, I would like to work alongside you to co-construct this research using a multi-textual range of methods as listed below:

The research will involve 3 main phases:

1. Phase 1 (approximately September to December): Initial semi-structured discussions with the teacher and TA in the classroom. This phase will predominantly involve observations of the wider setting, play interactions between children and interactions between children and their key worker.
2. Phase 2 (approximately January to May): Child engagement focus: Several multi-textual activities to listen to children's gender expression. These include children taking photographs on a provided digital camera of their setting, drawing activity's, focused story time/ carpet time, focused discussion with each child about their photographs and drawing, and the use of vignettes in relation to their photographs and drawings.
3. Phase 3 (approximately June/July): Closing interviews with, reviewing filmed footage with both practitioners and accessing children's observation files and progress folders.

Each member of staff will be both briefed and debriefed around each activity and given the opportunity to ask questions at each stage. Discussions with both practitioners and conversations/ activities with children shall often be audio recorded using a Dictaphone, used for analysis purposes only.

Children's group play including both inside and outside of the classroom will often be visually recorded using a camera and will again only be used for analysis purposes.

Confidentiality and anonymity

Your information and participation within this study shall remain confidential. The recordings and transcripts of data will only be accessed by myself and my research supervisors, if

needed. Data will be stored securely in a password protected drive and any physical notes in a secure, locked container.

Data will be reported in seminars and conferences across my studies and contribute to the final thesis. It is also likely to be reported within research briefings, seminars and conferences, following the completion of the doctoral study. In these documents, pseudonyms will be used to replace your name and information to anonymise any identifying features to your identity. This will also apply to the setting, any photos taken by the children that might identify the setting or children themselves won't be used in the presentation of findings.

No visual, nor auditory data (recordings) will be used in the dissemination of findings, these recordings are for the purpose of analysis only and will be transcribed anonymously and the raw data deleted following the completion of the doctoral study.

You have the right to withdraw your consent at any point during the data collection period with no repercussions. The visual recording shall be used alongside auditory transcripts to analyse interactions with the child and their key person. They will not be shown, nor used within any further part of the data collection. You will have the right to review any recordings including yourself within the data collection period of the school year. You can also withdraw your personal data from the research study up until one month post the data collection period.

The audio and audio-visual files will be stored securely until the end of my doctoral studies and the transcripts for no longer than ten years following this.

Risks and benefits of taking part

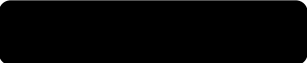
Involving yourself as an Early Years Practitioner within the research allows for reflexivity in creating shared ownership of the research and its outcomes (Pascal and Bertram 2012). Reflection on practice is recognised as an important component in developing professional and pedagogical knowledge, and understanding practice (Miller, 2008 and Schon 1987). All of these are imperative when influencing the outcomes for children's care and education.

A research briefing and seminar shall be offered to feedback key findings and provide an opportunity to ask any questions. There are no known risks of participating in this research. However, should you wish to discuss this further before deciding whether to take part, please find my contact details below. There will not be any repercussion, nor disadvantage if you choose to not participate in this research project.

Consent process:

If you are happy to consent to being involved within this research, please complete and sign the practitioner consent form attached.

Researcher details:

If you have any questions regarding anything about this research, please don't hesitate to contact me on ##### or at . Thank you.

Supervisor details:

Director of Studies: #####

Appendix G – Participant (Practitioner) consent

8. I understand that extracts from the audio recorded data collection will be used anonymously to illustrate themes in research outputs'

9. I agree for the activities and methods outlined in the information sheet to be audio and audio-visually recorded where stated, for the purpose of this study.

10. I understand that the audio and audio-visual recordings will be transcribed into an anonymised written version which will be stored securely, any recordings shall be deleted at the end of the doctoral study. I also understand that the anonymised transcripts of the data collected will be destroyed once all the outputs of the study are completed. No more than ten years after the end of the research period.

11. I agree to be a participant within this research study.

Name of Key Worker:

[Redacted]

Signature of Key Worker:

[Redacted]

Date:

8/7/23

Many thanks,

Kate Dudley.

Tel.

[Redacted]

Appendix H – Interview Questions

Initial Interview (September):

1. What is your role in this setting?
2. How long have you been working in this position?
3. Looking at the definitions sheet, what are your personal thoughts on them? Would you make changes to any of them?
4. In your opinion, what is, or what makes up our identity?
5. What is your understanding of the phrase the unique child? What does that mean for your practice?
6. What thoughts come to mind when you hear the phrase gender development?
7. How confident would you be in explaining any theoretical development ideas around gender? I.e the stages of gender development?
8. How do you think the EYFS, and other early years policy explore gender?

Interview 2 (January):

1. What influence do you feel you have on children's gender development?
2. What is the wider schools' policy or methods to explore gender and inclusion?
3. In what ways do you feel you express your own masculinity and femininity?
4. To what extent do you consider gender when planning for children?
5. What ways have you observed children reinforce gender essentialism in their thinking and understanding?
6. To what extent do you think the classroom environment and curriculum have a role in children's gender expression?
7. In your opinion, how do children navigate power dynamics between masculinity and femininity?
8. In what ways do you feel children's meaning-making experiences are observed in reception?
9. What do you think we can learn about children through observing their masculine and feminine expressions?
10. Do you feel it is important or useful to see and understand a child's gender expression? Why?
11. Can you think of an example where you have interrupted, or challenged gender stereotypes in children?
12. How much do you feel parents influence children's gender behavior? Why? Any examples?

Interview 3 (June):

1. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being very inclusive), how inclusive are the resources used in the classroom inclusive of gender and challenge gender stereotypes?
2. In reflection, are there any ways in which you feel you reinforce gender essentialism
3. What training or external support do you feel you would benefit from to support children's gender in the classroom?
4. How confident do you feel in supporting, challenging, or perusing children's expression of masculinity and femininity? I.e lions' voices?

Appendix I – Observation Plan Schedule

Month	Observations Planned	Notes
September	Welcomes A.M Carpet time	Getting to know the children, being a friendly face and part of morning routine is important. Children's attachments forming Learning 'listening skills for carpet time
October	Welcomes A.M Carpet time Activities	Continue morning observations and building relationships with children. Observe how children begin to navigate the expectations of them, forming friendships and navigating power dynamics as a new class.
November	Morning activities Outside Play/ Free flow Home-time	Outside play space – children's use of the space, equipment and preferences for play Home-time observations – behavior transferring caregivers.
December	Phonics interventions Inside play Break playground play	Relationships with TA on a 1:1 basis Play spaces within the classroom – choice of play and friendships evolution
January	Welcomes A.M Story time discussions PE	Concentration levels, engagement with stories characters and expressions PE – Use of spaces and physical expressions, movement and engagement with a range of activities, i.e. dance, sports and games.
February	Morning activities Inside play - Home corner Dinner Hall spaces Home-time	Dinner time as an addition – children's relationships with different members of staff and social shift in expectations.
March	Assembly Phonics interventions Forest School	Assembly as additional focus – Behavior expressions in a space with tight rules and requirements. Forest school observations to start – different spaces, rules and opportunities.
April	Lunchtime playground Forest School Home-time	Lunch time playground – opportunities for shared/new friendship groups and experience with resources and equipment.
May	Welcomes A.M Pet corner (stick insects) PE Forest School	Additional space added in to the classroom due to book themes and planning. Stick insects added and opportunities to handle, change the tank and interact with them.
June	Welcomes A.M Forest School Outside PE Lunch time Playground Inside Play – Free flow	Final month of observations – Where possible to be shared with TA, class teacher when available too. Reflecting on how the children have grown and evolved during their time in reception. Discussions/ observations of what the shift to yr1 looks like in terms of spaces.

Appendix J – Practitioner Questionnaire

Thank you for your time reading through this document and answering the questions with thought, honesty and reflection. Please note the answers you provide are confidential and will not be identifiable back to you in the write up of this research.

If you have any questions, Please don't hesitate to ask:

Please answer each question in as much detail as you feel able:

- ★ What does it mean to be a 'boy' in [REDACTED] class?
 - ★ What does it mean to be a 'girl' in [REDACTED] class?
 - ★ How do you define the term gender?
 - ★ How does gender differ to a child's biological sex?
-

Research focus and intention.

Thank you for taking part in this research. For clarification purposes, it's important to explore the nuances of language at this point.

For the purpose of this study, there is a significant separation between gender and biological sex.

Biological sex is referring to the genetic DNA made up of one's physical identity, typically measured by the genitalia of an individual.

Gender is connected to one's individual connection to self. We each represent masculine and feminine characteristics at any one given moment through the way we present ourselves, interact, make choices and communicate.

For some these characteristics are balanced. For others they can seem stuck, or mainly dominated by either masculine or feminine.

For the clarity of this study, gender has no connection to biological sex, other than the stereotypes and expectations society has on the expectations of a 'biological man or woman.'

Please continue to answer the questions below in as much detail as you feel able:

- ★ What influences do you feel you have in a child's gender development?
- ★ What does the term masculinity mean to you?
- ★ What evidence of masculinity do you see expressed in children's play and development?
- ★ What does the term femininity mean to you?
- ★ What evidence of femininity do you see expressed in children's play and development?

- ★ What do you feel influences how a child explores/ develops their unique expression of masculinity and femininity during their time in ■■■■■?

Masculine and Feminine expressions

The unique expression of gender differs and is influenced by a child's surroundings. Please could you indicate on the following table if you feel the list on the left is an expression of masculine or feminine. (There is no right or wrong answer, I am just interested in your perceptions)

	Masculine (M) or Feminine (F)
Shouting	
Playing on the Outside Bikes/ Trikes	
Secure	
Carpet Time	
Friendly	
Playing in the sandpit	
Colouring/ Drawing	
Reading stories	
Construction area	
Being 'good'	
Being a 'mate'	
Finger paining	
Being Tactile	
Decisive	
Being 'clever'	
Leadership Skills	
Sympathetic	
Being musical	
Gentle touch	
Shy	
Strong willed	

Reflective	
Outside construction	
Team games e.g. playing football	
Trustworthy	
Quiet	
Being chaotic	
Writing activities	
Using Mirrors	
Sensitive	
Maths area	
Jealous	
Loyal	
Considerate	
Understanding	
Secretive	
Small word play	
Being addressed as 'darling'	
Playing in the Mud kitchen	
Cosy corners	
Sensory play	
Dancing	
Respectful	
Problem Solving	
Singing	
Confidence	
Boisterous	
Loud	
Loving	

Appendix K – Examples of Interview Transcripts

Initial Interview – Quotation lifted from part of the discussion about identity and gender.

I think it's like.. who we are.

No training teaches us or explores children's mental state of identity. I wonder why that is, it's like... we don't even have any theoretical stuff on it in our courses either. Is there research and theory of this type of development? I assume so but wouldn't know what it is. It have to have a google. I suppose it shouldn't be left to the teacher though.

These questions I've never really thought about, I just show up and try to be what's expected of me.

I think, maybe, gender is what we are or maybe show. Like, both men and women show these different characteristics as they are expressions of feelings, it's not like only men show masculinity but then its seen wrong if us women are living that way too. And God forbid men show femininity. I suppose that's the problems with the stereotyping and language.

Challenging the stereotypes in Early Years is one thing verbally but can only really be done if we show, but formal dress, for example wouldn't allow a teacher to be flamboyant, or showcase piercings or body creativity in their work with children, I think that's more allowed in some day nurseries that are private, perhaps it's a school control thing then.

Now I think about it, I am often there to care for the boys in the class as a mothering figure if they hurt themselves or want a cuddle, but I think I find that difficult to do with the girls as I've always been told I'm too emotional and to build tougher resilience. So maybe I am different in challenging stereotypes... hmm I'm not sure.

Interview 2 – Quotation lifted from discussion around Mrs K’s reflection on her role in children’s gender development and expression.

Oh... I get it!

I realise I have more of maybe an impact that I thought on the gender development, you know, that conversation we had the other day. (Referring to a classroom informal discussion about who was going to lead PE or the craft area, who defaults to which through comfort).

I made a point today of allowing myself to enjoy the creative space with three of the girls who love to make their own dress up clothes. We made dresses from the big paper sheets and then, I think because I was giving myself permission to be present and enjoy it, they seemed to light up. We got all the, you know, the scraps of fabric from the draw and they made me a headscarf to wear too.

I’ve never really thought that in this space I could be free to express myself too, when I’ve been “put on” (she used air quotes) craft table I’ve always just defaulted to where I’m in control, like, to clean up, tidy and ‘control’ their learning and expression. But WOW (she raised her hands in a surprised expression) what a difference it made to how the girls... erm, challenged themselves and it felt almost supported me and encouraged me to dance and be free in that space too.

Interview 3 – Quotation lifted from part of the discussion around how the wider school and curriculum differ to the Early Years.

They do begin to lose themselves and it’s sad, we spend so long in nursery and then reception creating safe spaces for children to figure themselves out, learn confidence in who they are in their skin and stuff. I do think we manage to begin undoing some of the social conditioning that they might see or hear, but then it’s all undone again as they are expected to sit still again when they leave us. From my time in upper years the children are not allowed to have the fullest range of expressions because the national curriculum, and how it’s, like, prioritised suppresses it.

I’m not sure how they are going to handle it when (Child Mi) has to move up... Like, we’ve been as accommodating as we can in allowing children to express themselves and wear what they choose in reception, even down to the pants they want to put on. But now all of a sudden, in the space of the summer holidays, they are being told the expectations of their gender is based on their bodies, the toilets they can’t use, what they are allowed to wear. It must be so confusing for them. It’s quite unfair isn’t it.

Appendix L – Meeting schedule for theme gathering

17

Date	Points of discussion and reflections	Actions or points for thought
30.8.24 In person	<p>Initial discussion regarding critical friend and benefits of initial theme developments with a peer.</p> <p>The benefits of critical view and professional opinion on children's expression from the transcribed data</p>	<p>KD to explore with the team the logistics of this and if it would be suitable for thesis.</p> <p>Question its ok for the transcribed data to be shared in this way – not to include raw data for participants but happy to share my own reflective journal.</p>
27.9.24 In person	<p>Discovery 1: Reflection/ Reflexivity – or diffraction?</p> <p>The journey of practitioners here is too much to ignore. The stories show growth and movement – investigate multiplicities and the influence of their expression. How practitioners read through their own experiences influences how they show up to children (i.e. masculinity and femininity), a reoccurring theme through all 3 practitioners in their own way.</p>	<p>KD to look at how I could thread these stories into the first discovery section to take the reader on a journey showing how the practitioners evolved through discussions and then recognized practice differently.</p> <p>Discussion thread: reflective, reflexivity, multiplicity and superposition maps the evolution seen by the practitioners – something to think about further in the writing of this section.</p>
11.10.24 On teams	<p>Discovery 2 and 3 – What is the more-than-human telling us?</p> <p>Resources and the environment as my affect modulating lenses have thrown up several themes; things that stood out included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of the carpet as central to the evolution of children's experience - Power dynamics between play – not based off sex but M and F expression. - The different spaces in the setting and expression, i.e. forest school provides something different. - Parental influence on resources, clothing etc. - What the children see, hear and read for expressions, is this part of the problem? 	<p>Themes very similar that came out for us both. KD is going to begin rough structure from these but check for narratives and photo evidence from the data again to check assumptions not mine but can be evidenced with quotes.</p> <p>Think about how to tie the three discoveries together, going to need some form of entangled mosaic after the separation of agential cuts to examine them. Think about creating an image or visual to showcase this – Canva might be useful.</p>
17.2.25 In person at conference	<p>Discussion about presenting children's voice – don't want to use names as culturally weighted but numerical allocation feels like datafication – the opposite of what I'm trying to achieve.</p> <p>Other practitioners have used random letters in research assigned to child – but this doesn't feel any better than a number – impersonal to the child's voice and expression.</p>	<p>Struggling to find a way to represent the children's voice – names are loaded with gendered and cultural stereotypes, but numbers take away identity too.</p> <p>Discussed looking for words or phrases the children used in their discussions to represent them. – concern this will look odd in written forms.</p> <p>Perhaps use a letter from these words? Ie instead of using the word colorful, child becomes child C.</p> <p>I will take my next supervision to explore with supervisors.</p>