

**Practitioner Perspectives on the  
Enactment of Article 12 of the UN  
Convention on the Rights of the Child  
with Babies and Toddlers in Early  
Childhood Education and Care Settings  
in England**

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## **Abstract**

This doctoral study explored practitioner perspectives on participation rights of the youngest children (aged 0-3) in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings in England. Participation rights are informed by Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), highlighting the rights of children to express opinions about matters that impact on their lives and for these views to be given due consideration. Exploring understandings of the youngest children as competent beings, or vulnerable becomings, the study draws on sociological theories of childhood and developmental theories rooted in psychology to consider the capabilities of the youngest children as holders of participation rights.

The qualitative research design is underpinned by an ethical commitment to listening to the voices of leaders of practice working with the youngest children. Framed within a narrative inquiry, perspectives of ten graduate practitioners working with babies and toddlers in ECEC settings in the south east of England have been gathered. Using individual narratives as a “catalyst for the movement of thinking,” analysis has identified themes across the data that expose understanding about the ways in which practitioners conceptualise young children and how these constructs relate to the enactment of participation rights (Macintyre Latta and Kim, 2011, p.685).

Findings highlight the dual construction of the young child as both capable and dependent. Young children display competency as active social agents, able to voice preference in their learning and care experiences. However, they equally demonstrate interdependence with attuned practitioners who provide responsive care-giving, acknowledging the vulnerability of babies and toddlers. Through relationships of attunement the world of the baby is known to the practitioner, thus providing the conditions necessary for participation rights to be realised. Whilst the study did not originally aim to explore barriers to participation rights, resulting narratives present a complex picture detailing the multiple challenges facing practitioners as they embed listening pedagogies.

Practitioners are grappling with the emotional demands of their work, within contexts where participation rights are not always consistently understood or enacted. The wider policy context presents additional constraints as practitioners are directed towards practices informed by accountability regimes that prioritise standardisation and measurability over responsive relationships that underpin listening pedagogies so central to ECEC.

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that the research contained in this thesis is the original work of the author. The thesis has not been previously submitted to this or any other university for a degree, and does not incorporate any material already submitted for a degree.

Signed: Erica Evans

Dated: 24 January 2022

## **Glossary**

CWDC	Children’s Workforce Development Council
DfE	Department for Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYITT	Early Years Initial Teacher Training
EYPS	Early Years Professional Status
EYTS	Early Years Teacher Status
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
TSEY	Teachers Standards (Early Years)
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

## Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this research project, the following terms will be applied:

- **'early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting'** refers to any Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) registered setting providing care and education for children aged birth to five, following the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017a) in England.
- **'practitioner'** refers to early childhood education and care pedagogues who support young children's learning and development in early childhood education and care settings.
- **'participation rights'** are discussed within the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12 (part 1), which protects the rights of all children to freely express their views in matters that impact on their lives and that these views must be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (UN, 1989, p.5). Participation rights are understood in relation to voice, listening, agency and influence. Further exploration of participation rights, and how these apply in early childhood contexts, is considered in the introduction (1.2.2) and literature review (4.2).
- **'beings' and 'becomings'** are terms used to explore the positionality of young children as capable *'beings'*, engaged in their communities as active citizens, and/or as vulnerable and dependent *'becomings'*, on the way to becoming fully formed humans. These ideas are considered in relation to sociological perspectives, drawing on the work of authors such as James and Prout (1997), Qvortrup et al (1994) and Uprichard (2008), discussed further in the literature review (4.4.1).

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# **Chapter One: Introduction to the Study**

## **1.1 Introduction**

My doctoral research examines practitioner perspectives on the participation rights of the youngest children in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings. The study explores participation rights within the context of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989) and subsequent guidance established in the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comments no.7 (UN, CRC, 2005) and no.12 (UN, CRC, 2009). A wide body of research has examined the participation rights of children in educational contexts, however, the focus has predominantly been with school age children (for example, Alderson 2000; Wyse, 2001; Robinson, 2011; Robinson, 2016; Graham et al, 2018). Where research has explored participation rights in early childhood, the focus has been with pre-school age children (3-5 year olds) (for example, Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson, 2001; Cremin and Slatter, 2004; Harcourt, 2011; Pettersson, 2015). This doctoral thesis contributes to the currently under-researched area of participation rights of the youngest children (0-3 year olds) within ECEC settings. The research is situated within the discourse of childhood studies. Drawing on sociological constructs of childhood, consideration of young children as beings and/or becomings is explored. Theoretical understanding from the field of developmental psychology is used to understand children's development and how this aligns with, and presents challenges for, the participation rights of young children.

## **1.2 Rationale**

In this section of the thesis, I present a rationale for the research. This includes exploration of my professional context and experiences that instigated an exploration of participation rights with the youngest children in ECEC settings. I situate my study within the field of research relating to participation rights,

presenting justification for studying participation rights within ECEC contexts. This includes discussion about the value of participatory practice, highlighting gaps in knowledge about how such rights are perceived and enacted with the youngest children. I explore existing tensions within this field and consider how my research seeks to contribute to the discourse of participation rights in early childhood education contexts.

### *1.2.1 Professional Context*

At the outset of my doctoral studies, I held the role of Programme Leader for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) in a University School of Education. EYPS was introduced in 2006 by the then Labour government, partly in response to findings from the Effective Practice in Pre-school Education (EPPE) project (Sylva et al., 2004) and the Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) project (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002). The EPPE project found that maintained nursery schools, employing qualified teachers, demonstrated higher quality provision than settings without graduate leaders. To address the imbalance in staff qualifications between the maintained sector and the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, EYPS was developed as the graduate status to upskill the early years workforce, with the aim of having a graduate leader with EYPS in all PVI settings by 2015 (CWDC, 2006).

National standards for the award of EYPS were introduced (CWDC, 2006). As Programme Leader one of my main tasks was to develop and deliver a course that enabled work-based students to meet the standards and achieve EYPS. Through my work with practitioners, I became increasingly interested in debates around issues of children's rights. EYPS standard 18 required practitioners to promote children's rights (CWDC, 2006). This standard often led to complex discussions about the status of children's rights in early years, the abilities of young children to be holders of rights and the characteristics of practice that advocate for children's rights. Some of the expectations set out in the standards presented challenges for students and we would discuss these in great depth, exploring the wording and how the standard would apply to practice with young



children. Standard 22 included the expectation that graduate practitioners “provide specific opportunities for children to be responsible for their choices” (CWDC, 2008, p.41). Standard 27 highlighted the responsibility of EYPs to “listen to children, pay attention to what they say and value and respect their views” (CWDC, 2008, p.50). Practitioners more easily applied these standards to interactions with older children (aged 3+) but often found it challenging to understand expectations in terms of their work with babies and toddlers. I observed a tension developing between the promotion of rights-based practice for children aged 3-5, and the perceived resistance of some practitioners to afford the same rights to children under three.

Throughout my doctoral process, successive governmental review of ECEC policy in England has led to substantial changes to the graduate professional status in early years. A move from EYPS to Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) instigated new professional standards that have eroded a focus on rights-based practice. The changing status of children’s rights in ECEC policy has led me to develop greater concern for the participation rights of young children in ECEC settings in England and increased curiosity about the perspectives held by practitioners about the capabilities of the youngest children as holders of rights.

### *1.2.2 The Status of Participation Rights in Early Childhood*

My research stems from an interest in the application of participation rights in early childhood. Whilst a range of articles in the UNCRC can be applied to the examination of participation rights (Swadener, 2020), for the purpose of this research, participation rights are explored in relation to UNCRC Article 12, which protects the rights of children to freely express their views and for such views to be given due consideration (UN, 1989). Lansdown (2001, p.1) highlights Article 12 as a fundamental aspect of participation, establishing the “visibility” of children, and recognition of the contribution they make in sharing their “experience, views and concerns.”

Participation has been understood as the mechanism through which children's voices can be heard and acted upon and has been related to ideas of democracy and citizenship (Hart 1992; Moss, 2007). The application of participation rights within educational contexts has been explored with resulting understanding of the need to appreciate children as "democratic participants" and "active contributors" in their education (Lansdown, 2011, p.102). In school contexts, the promotion of pupil voice has been used as a vehicle to support participation (Robinson, 2018). Students in the United Kingdom have been encouraged to take an active part in their school communities through the implementation of the UNICEF 'Rights Respecting School Award', which has been a driver for promoting children's rights in school contexts (Sebba and Robinson, 2010). However, whilst primary and secondary curriculum documents have placed responsibilities to uphold human rights, the translation of this into practices in classrooms are often dependent on values and beliefs held by teachers, resulting in an inequitable experience of human rights education (Robinson, 2017). The status of human rights education for older children is far from resolved, potentially due to the lack of research exploring the ways in which underpinning principles of the UNCRC are implemented in educational settings (Lundy, 2012). In early childhood contexts the importance of listening to children and supporting them as active participants has been widely recognized (Miller, 1997; Clark, 2005; Lansdown, 2005; Williams, 2009; Lancaster and Kirby, 2010). However, research exploring participation rights with the youngest children (aged 0-3) in ECEC contexts has been less prolific (Wall et al, 2019).

The value of promoting active participation has been explored extensively (Hart, 1992; Miller, 1997; Lansdown, 2011; Percy-Smith, 2011; Fielding, 2012). Robinson (2018) highlights multiple benefits for children of promoting participatory practice in primary education. Children who are listened to and who take an active part in their school lives have increased achievement and attainment, are more confident and demonstrate higher levels of motivation, responsibility and engagement in learning. Drawing on participatory research methods with children, Dunhill (2018) explored children's experiences of a rights-based education programme in primary schools in the UK. Data revealed

that explicit rights education enables children to become active holders of rights and “practice, protect and promote the rights of others,” thus impacting positively on the school community (Dunhill, 2018, p.16). Participation promotes inclusive practice, as children who are actively consulted experience feelings of belonging (Nutbrown and Clough, 2009). Moss (2007) argues that early childhood education institutions offer the possibility to be places of democratic practice, where children and adults engage in joint decision-making. It has been argued that the promotion of democratic practice through participatory methods leads to greater resistance of systems of oppression and presents opportunities for children to develop understanding of democracy, laying foundations for greater social engagement and responsibility (Fielding, 2012). The creation of democratic spaces in education contexts rests on a commitment to a participatory approach, placing relationships, listening and an ethic of care at the forefront of practice (Fielding and Moss, 2011).

Alongside the benefits of participatory practice, consideration must also be given to the potential dangers of rejecting such approaches. Nutbrown (1996) warns that non-participatory practice can result in feelings of frustration and powerlessness. Boyden and Ennew (1997) argue that children who are supported to engage as active participants are less likely to be victims of abuse as they possess the skills and confidence to voice their concerns. This has been reflected in the outcomes of serious case reviews following the abuse and death of children. The inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié found that she had been “abandoned, unheard and unnoticed” (Laming, 2003, p.2). Similarly, the serious case review following the death of Daniel Pelka reported that “Daniel’s voice was not heard” with tragic consequences (Lock, 2013, 14.9). Updated safeguarding guidance requires professionals working with children to treat them as “competent” and insists that adults should consult with children, “listen to what they say; take their views seriously” (HM Government, 2018, p.9), reflecting the aims of Article 12 of the UNCRC. Likewise, statutory guidance for professionals working with children with special educational needs and disabilities highlights the necessity to consult with children and involve them in decision-making, stating that “children have a right to receive and impart

information, to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account in any matters affecting them from the early years” (DfE and DoH, 2015, p.20).

There is growing appreciation that participation rights are afforded to all children with acknowledgement that consideration must be given to enable the voices of the most vulnerable children to be heard:

Children’s participation is especially important for children who are vulnerable, ‘excluded’, have specific needs, and whose needs and circumstances might otherwise go unrecognised or misunderstood. (Percy-Smith, 2011. p.42)

Young children may be considered a vulnerable group as they have unique ways in which they communicate their perspectives and as such are dependent on adults who are able to find creative ways of listening. Without such consideration, young children may be “powerless...voiceless and invisible” (UN,CRC, 2007, p.5). Limiting opportunities for young children to experience active participation and decision-making may reduce the capability to lay the foundations for later engagement in democratic citizenship.

Greater understanding about the ways in which participatory rights can be enacted with the youngest children in ECEC contexts is needed. Bae (2010) highlights the lack of research exploring practitioner understanding of participation rights, particularly when applied to the youngest children. She suggests that a “holistic and relational” appreciation of participation is lacking within the context of ECEC (Bae, 2010, p.214). Opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their own beliefs and consider the ways in which participatory practice can be a joint endeavour with young children may provide the stimulus for greater understanding of the positionality of young children as participatory partners. There exist problematic tensions between conceptualisation of young children as “fragile”, in need of adult support and supervision, or as “competent” beings who can actively engage as co-constructors of knowledge with adults (Kalliala, 2011, p.238). These tensions are magnified by the curriculum policy context in England, which is dominated by a developmental approach that

arguably positions the youngest children as vulnerable, in need of adult direction and not yet able to be active decision makers (3.2). The intersection of the young child as both capable *and* vulnerable, and how this position might inform values and practices relating to participation rights, is the focus for this research. My study contributes to this discussion, exploring practitioner perspectives on the participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC contexts in England.

### *1.2.3 The Doctoral Journey*

This thesis is the fourth and final piece of work submitted as part of the Professional Doctorate in Education. The thesis builds on previous assignments that formed stage one of the Professional Doctorate, and thus can be understood as the culmination of a wider body of study that has supported the development of my thinking both in relation to methodological issues and in terms of the field of study (appendix 1).

## 1.3 Research Question and Aims

In seeking to understand the ways in which participation rights are understood and realised in ECEC settings with children aged 0-3, the study considers the perspectives of practitioners. The research has employed narrative methodology to examine the values and beliefs of graduate practitioners working with the youngest children in the south east of England, and driven by the research question:

***What beliefs do graduate practitioners working in early childhood education and care settings in England hold about the participation rights of young children (aged 0-3), with specific reference to Article 12 of the UNCRC?***

This research aims to:

- Develop understanding of the perspectives of graduate practitioners working with the youngest children (aged 0-3) in relation to participation rights as set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC.
- Use a narrative methodology to explore practitioner perspectives relating to young children as 'beings' and/or 'becomings' and how these perspectives influence beliefs about participation rights.
- Explore how values and beliefs influence the ways in which practitioners interact with young children as holders of participation rights.
- Contribute to the wider discourse around participation rights of children, with a specific focus on the capabilities of very young children as holders of participation rights.

## 1.4 Outline of Thesis

Having established the rationale for the study and stated the research question and aims in this introduction, the remaining chapters of the thesis provide an account of the research study. The following chapters consider my own positioning within the research project, the underpinning literature that has informed the study, the methodological approach, analysis and key findings, concluding with a discussion of the findings and a reflection on the contribution my study makes to wider understanding about participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC settings.

Chapter two includes a biographical context, exploring my own narrative and how my personal and professional experiences have led me to an interest in children's voice and participation rights. Researchers are closely connected to their research as they bring their own experiences and understandings to the research endeavour (Sikes and Goodson, 2003). As a qualitative researcher using a narrative methodology, I appreciate the significance of my own positionality in the research process and the value in adopting a reflexive approach. Through

reflexivity I have acknowledged the influence of my own narrative on the research question, methodological approach and analysis.

Chapter three provides an overview of the policy context within which this study has been undertaken. The chapter considers the status of participation rights in ECEC curriculum policy in England and provides an international comparison, illustrating the contrasting ways in which the young child is constructed in differing contexts. Policy governing graduate qualifications for the ECEC workforce in England is explored with a focus on national professional standards for the ECEC workforce. The chapter concludes with a discussion about emerging policy priorities including the positioning of care, education and the young child in early years policy.

Chapter four is a critical review of the literature relating to my field of study. I consider the underpinning theoretical framework that has informed my research, acknowledging the contribution of developmental psychology and the sociology of childhood to understandings about the participation rights of young children. The review examines the field of existing research relating to the participation rights of children and identifies gaps in the existing body of knowledge that I aim to address in my study. Specifically, the literature review is driven by an aim to explore how participation rights might be understood and enacted in ECEC settings with very young children.

Chapter five sets out the methodological approach underpinning the project. The chapter includes a discussion of narrative inquiry and why this was chosen as the most appropriate approach to respond to the research question and aims. Details about participants and methods provide an overview of the study, how data was gathered and the techniques employed to capture participant narratives. The chapter concludes with a thorough discussion of ethics, both in relation to actions taken to meet ethical requirements to gain institutional consent and the ethical regard given to participants throughout the research process.

Chapter six is an account of the approach to analysis and presents key findings from the data. Analysis of individual participant narratives is included, acknowledging the unique context within which each of the participants work and their own interpretations and experiences of participation rights in ECEC settings. These individual narratives are then connected to reveal overarching findings from the data. These are captured and examined through four core themes: the vulnerable, dependent child; the capable, independent child; the enabling practitioner; the overwhelmed practitioner.

Chapter seven begins with a discussion of key findings, relating my study to the wider field of research explored in the literature review. The discussion draws out the contribution to knowledge my research has made in relation to the participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC settings.

Chapter eight is the concluding chapter of the thesis. Reflections on the strengths and limitations of the study are examined with consideration of potential future research emerging from my findings and in respect of my own development as a researcher. Policy implications are highlighted, with reference to the current status of young children's participation rights in ECEC curricula in England. Additionally, the significance of my findings in relation to ECEC graduate qualifications is explored. The chapter, and thesis, end with closing reflections including an acknowledgement of the current global context of the Covid-19 pandemic.



## Chapter Two: Biographical Context – My Story

### 2.1 Introduction

In establishing the purpose and rationale for my study I feel it is pertinent to share part of my biographical story. Exploration of my story has been included to provide context for my interest in the field and to reveal my positionality in relation to children's rights. It has been through an examination of my biography that I have been able to understand why I have been driven to explore children's participation rights. Part of the rationale for studying this aspect of early years pedagogy has come from my professional role and the experiences I have had working with graduate work-based students (1.2.1). However, through a reflexive approach I have come to understand that my positioning and interest in the subject matter has a more complex history, embedded in experiences over my life span. Whilst I am not conducting an autoethnographic study, I am nonetheless influenced by my own story as a qualitative researcher. Reflexivity helps us to understand the ways in which experiences, values and beliefs influence and drive our own research process (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). Mauthner and Doucet (2003, p.425) argue that researchers require a "profound level of self-awareness and self-consciousness" to successfully navigate qualitative analysis. Underlying beliefs and assumptions are revealed through an understanding of the influences that impact on our research. Inevitably my story is connected to the narratives explored with my participants, as narrative inquiry can be viewed as a "relational research methodology" (Lessard, Caine and Clandinin, 2015, p.201). The story of the researcher is connected to the ways in which the narratives of participants are heard, understood and examined.

I am interested in narratives. Sikes and Gale (2006, p.1) remind us that humans are "storying creatures" and as such we make sense of our experiences through stories. We use narrative to examine "who we are, who we have been, and who we are becoming" (Huber et al, 2013, p.214). It would be impossible for me, as a qualitative researcher, to claim complete objectivity in my research approach, as

my research question has emerged from my personal and professional history. Indeed, complete objectivity is unobtainable because as the researcher I am embedded in the research context and thus bring my subjective positioning to all aspects of the research process. Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p.65) argue there is an “intimacy” between a researcher and her research, and as such qualitative studies cannot be “sanitised” in an attempt to gain unachievable objectivity. Burr (2015, p.172) argues that no researcher can “step outside of their humanity and view the world from no position at all” and thus researchers must honestly acknowledge their own “intrinsic involvement in the research process,” with consideration of the values and beliefs that inform the research questions, methods and analysis. Whilst I have attempted to use a reflexive approach to maintain a degree of awareness about my own bias, it is important to acknowledge my values and beliefs and how these align with and influence my research. Reflexivity provides the space for me to examine how my “background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour” influence my research (Roulston, 2010, p.116). An aspect of reflexivity requires consideration of my narrative and how it bumps up against the research study. Critiques of reflexivity have questioned the methodological value of self-exploration, contending that it is potentially “self-indulgent, narcissistic, and tiresome,” particularly when conducted without thorough interrogation of “uncomfortable realities” (Pillow, 2003, p.176;193). However, Downs (2017, p.468) argues that qualitative research is a “human enterprise, one that is integrated with a range of researcher and participant identities and activities.” Inclusion of my narrative has provided a reflexive space to locate my history and values within the research process. I do not aim to share my complete life history, but rather extracts that relate to my interest in this field of study and aspects that have emerged whilst on this doctoral journey.

The sharing of my biography within the context of this research project has presented unique ethical dilemmas. Sikes (2012) reminds us that methods involving autobiographical elements pose ethical challenges as the identity of those connected to the story are often identifiable. Family members can rarely be afforded the level of anonymity that is commonplace for research participants. With this in mind, and my overarching sense of maternal responsibility to my

children, I have in places been cautious about the detail shared, treading a fine line between sharing elements that feel relevant and pertinent in terms of my reflexive approach to the project, but ultimately putting my relationship with my children first.

## 2.2 My Early Experiences

I was born in Canada in 1970, as the youngest of four daughters. I think I was fighting to have my voice heard in a busy household from the moment I was born. My mother was a writer and gave me the gift of a book written about her life and my place in the history of our family. In the book she writes:

As a baby you were lively, no doubt because you were living in a household so full of kids and dogs and teenagers and music and general confusion. Your voice was high-pitched and loud, I think developed so that you could be heard amid the din.  
(Setterfield, 2001)

The importance of feeling heard is something I have always felt quite deeply. My parents were socialists and my mother taught me to be a proud feminist. Although I would define my mother as a feminist herself, this is not an unproblematic label. In many ways she was a strong woman, standing up for the rights of women. However, whilst her own voice appeared strong in public arenas, her more private voice was not always visibly strong in her personal intimate relationships and she often struggled to listen to the voices of her own children. This is a challenging aspect of my own story and one that doesn't feel appropriate to explore in this context. This is compounded by the fact that my mother passed away in 2016, possibly the most significant personal event to happen to me during my doctoral studies. My relationship with my mother has undoubtedly influenced my own route to finding my voice and understanding the complexities of voice in personal relationships.

During my late primary/early teen years in Toronto in the early 1980s I attended an alternative school. This experience had a profound impact on the way I

understand education and what it means to learn. The school was modelled on A.S. Neill's philosophy of education, placing freedom and child agency at the forefront of learning (Neill, 1968). As students we shared responsibility for the organisation of the school with our teachers, who we called by their first names. We started each day with a communal meeting, led by students. These meetings were in the main teaching room, which had no tables but many beanbags, sofas and rugs. Our lessons were not compulsory. People often assume that this means students wouldn't bother going to school, but this wasn't my experience. I loved this school and rarely missed a day. We had some lessons that might resemble traditional subjects, but my favourite lesson was 'discussion'. During this lesson small groups would come together to discuss current issues. Students were encouraged to bring something to the session as a stimulus for discussion, for example, a newspaper article or book. I found my voice at this school and learned how to be confident in sharing my ideas. On Wednesdays we had independent learning which meant we could choose where to learn (at school, at home, at the library, and beyond) and were encouraged to spend the afternoon on field trips, organised by us and unaccompanied by adults. I discovered the city of Toronto during those Wednesday afternoons and developed a range of valuable life skills. I don't think I came across the term 'pupil voice' until my 30s, but I certainly developed a depth of understanding of what authentic voice looks like through my early school experiences in Toronto.

As an undergraduate student at the University of Sussex I studied Law. The modules relating to land law and contract law were of no interest to me, but I thrived when studying the law in relation to human rights. For my final dissertation in the early 1990s I researched the rights of surrogate mothers. Surrogacy was a relatively new phenomenon in England at the time and the ethical issues raised in relation to mothers and babies fascinated me. I think this was my introduction into the complexities of 'rights' and how human rights might play out in complex human encounters.

Whilst I completed my undergraduate degree, I volunteered in the university nursery. During this time, I increasingly realised that a career in law was not the

path I wanted to take. I looked forward to my time volunteering at the nursery each week and this influenced my decision to pursue a career as an early years teacher. I have many positive memories from my time at that nursery, however, something that puzzled me at the time, as an inexperienced volunteer with very little understanding of ECEC, was sleep time for the babies. All of the babies had their naps at the same time. On many occasions I observed babies wide awake in their cots, or babies being put down for nap time when they didn't appear to be tired. I couldn't understand why the babies all had to be put down for naps at the same time and wondered about the ethics of leaving wide awake babies in cots, with no interaction from practitioners. This is an aspect of baby room practice that has stuck with me and illustrates some of the questions I've had about the status of babies in terms of the influence they have over their lives.

## 2.3 My life as a teacher

Following a Postgraduate Certificate in Education I became an early years teacher in an infant school in Brighton. Whilst I reflect on my years in the classroom and remember the many mistakes I made, I do believe I was good at creating an environment where children could be heard. Of course, I didn't always get this right and I know there were children who I let down, often the most vulnerable children who were difficult to listen to. I remember many of these children and their names and faces are still clearly present in my mind. Perhaps my determination to support student teachers to engage with ideas relating to pupil voice in my current role stems from a desire to encourage them to be better than I was.

Following the birth of my second daughter I left classroom teaching and became an Ofsted registered childminder, working with children aged 3 months-5 years. My pedagogical approach was very much directed by the needs of the children, which contrasted with the structured school environment I had been used to. Childminding led me to an advisory role with Brighton and Hove Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership, (EYDCP) where I was part of a team

responsible for supporting childminders to implement the new Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008a). It is through my work as a childminder and subsequent role in the EYDCP that my passion for early years developed. During this time, I gained EYPS and through my studies developed greater understanding of underpinning theoretical perspectives in ECEC. I was drawn to the work of Loris Malaguzzi (1993) and the early childhood programme in Reggio Emilia, inspired by a philosophy for early childhood rooted in listening and participation. This has informed much of my own practice with young children and early childhood educators.

## 2.4 My Life in Higher Education

I began my career in higher education (HE) as an associate lecturer at the Open University in 2007, teaching a reflective practice module for part time undergraduate work-based learning students studying for a Foundation Degree in Early Childhood. It was through this role that I developed an understanding of how social constructivist theories can be applied to practice in early childhood contexts. I embarked on my Masters in Education and began to focus my research on social constructivist approaches to learning and teaching, with consideration of the child as an active agent in their learning. With a specific focus on early childhood, I examined the ways in which the voices of the youngest children could be heard through methods such as the Mosaic Approach, a participatory framework for listening to the perspectives of the youngest children (Clark and Moss, 2001).

As programme leader for the EYPS programme at the University of Brighton from 2008-2013 I worked with leaders of practice in ECEC settings. In order to achieve the status, students were tasked with providing evidence of their ability to understand and demonstrate the professional standards for the graduate level award of EYPS. Many students struggled to understand how the standards could be applied when working with the youngest children (0-3), particularly in relation to children's rights. Whilst practitioners more easily recognised how

participation rights could be realised with pre-school age children (3-5) there appeared to be a lack of consideration of the youngest children as able, active participants in their own learning and care. This experience reflected research in Norway that highlighted the lack of ability of practitioners working with young children to apply understanding of participation rights to children under the age of three (Bae, 2010). A key part of my professional role at that time was supporting practitioners working towards EYPS to develop greater understanding of the ways in which the youngest children can be active participants. Often this involved challenging common practices that reduced opportunities for babies and toddlers to be active decision makers. For example, discussions around care routines often focussed on tensions between the voice of the individual baby and the organisational routines and structures of the setting.

As programme leader for Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT, leading to the award of EYTS) from 2013-2017 I became increasingly concerned about the lack of opportunity to explore issues relating to children's rights with students (1.2.1). To meet DfE and Ofsted requirements, EYITT became focussed on developmental outcomes for children, children's progress against normative milestones, curriculum content to support early maths and literacy, and specifically systematic synthetic phonics. Spaces for discussion around children's voice, rights, and listening to babies and toddlers became marginalised. This felt increasingly problematic and raised questions about the status of young children's rights in ECEC in England, and how participation rights might translate into practice in the absence of clearly articulated commitments to children's rights in ECEC policy.

Alongside my work on EYITT I have taught undergraduate students on the BA Early Childhood Education and Care. This course is designed within the framework for Early Childhood Studies, an interdisciplinary field of study that seeks to understand the ecological context of childhood, drawing on a range of disciplines including sociology, psychology, history and education (QAA, 2019). Through my work with undergraduate students, I have explored concepts

relating to children's participation rights and how these apply to the youngest children, drawing on participatory pedagogy in early years such as the Reggio Emilia approach and the work of Loris Malaguzzi (Moss, 2016; Rinaldi, 2006). As a module tutor on the BA Primary Education with QTS (3-7) I have supported education studies modules and have drawn on my interest in pupil voice as a mechanism for inclusive practice to support trainee teachers to develop their own pedagogy, taking inspiration from Percy-Smith (2011), Robinson (2018) and Florian and Beaton (2018). Through these roles I have found spaces to explore participatory practice as a central aspect of work with young children, with emerging early years practitioners.

## 2.5 My Life as a Mother

This is one of the most challenging aspects of my own story to tell; possibly because I am 'in it', as a mother of two daughters, aged 17 and 20 at the time of writing. I have struggled with the ethics of including my daughters in this story. There are aspects of my life with them that have presented challenges in terms of my philosophy around listening and voice. These experiences have highlighted the complexities of voice and participation and have made me think about capabilities, development, and childhood vulnerabilities. They have forced me to put a mirror up to myself and question some of the belief systems that are embedded in who I am as a person, a mother, and a teacher. However, these are sensitive stories that cannot be told without exploring personal experiences shared with my daughters. I have gained their consent to discuss these stories – but of course am plagued with uncertainty about the ethics of asking them for permission in the first place. My daughters are not my research participants but I have felt a similar level of ethical responsibility to them – perhaps more so as they cannot be afforded the same degree of anonymity. I have questioned whether my daughters are genuinely able to say 'no' to me but have used previous experiences with them to conclude that they do have a strong voice in our family and would be able to withdraw consent for me to share these stories. I have shared this writing with them for final approval.



As a mother I felt from the outset that it was my responsibility to listen to my children. I wanted my girls to grow up to be strong, confident people with agency. When my eldest was born she had a real presence. Emily made determined efforts to communicate from day one and was saying recognizable words from a very young age. My youngest daughter, Alice, had a very different entrance to the world. She was less vocal, but much more physical in communicating her desire to stay close to me. I have always been amazed by babies and their capacity to captivate audiences and connect with people. From birth I talked to my daughters, telling stories and reading books well before they had complete understanding of my words. I sought opportunities for both girls to be decision makers from their earliest experiences and have tried to resist the temptation to make choices for them. For example, even as toddlers I encouraged them to make choices about what they would wear and what they would eat. I hardly remember a time where I selected their clothes for them. My eldest daughter was always hot and never wanted to wear coats. I let her make these choices, knowing she might end up being cold, but believing that giving her the choice would ultimately allow her to learn for herself about good choices, bad choices and consequences. I am sure there were times of frustration and of course I was not always successful in awarding them influence over their lives. There were times when I said - we are doing it this way because I say so. We did have some 'rules' that were non-negotiable, mostly related to safety. However, more often I laid out what I perceived to be the options and possible consequences and encouraged them to make their own decisions.

Although exhausting and often frustrating, I had a degree of confidence in parenting young children. Being a mother to teen daughters has been a completely different experience and I have had to grapple with my own beliefs and values and how they have impacted on daily decisions as a mother. Where I found it relatively easy to allow my toddlers a degree of independence over their choices, I have found it much harder to relinquish control over decision making in the teen years. The experience of being a mother to teenagers has coincided with the years spent on this doctoral journey and there have been times when

events in my personal life have presented challenges in the development of my thinking during the doctorate. My commitment to voice and listening became tangled up with the complexities of listening to the voices of teenagers and finding the balance of decision making and control.

I began to question my approaches to parenting, as previous decisions unfolded in particular ways. During the period of data collection for my doctorate we experienced a traumatic event as a family. It would not be appropriate for me to expand on the details of this event as it involves the lives of people closest to me and this event is not just mine, but theirs as well. However, it was a significant moment in my life that happened during my doctoral journey. The balance of protection and participation rights that I had often talked about with students came into sharp focus in my own personal life. It was a moment of crisis for our family. I found it difficult to continue with data collection but had a timetable to work towards and knew that I had to proceed. I believe this experience impacted on my thinking as it knocked my confidence and made me question underpinning values and beliefs. I listened to the interview recordings with different ears. I was a different person to the student who embarked on the study.

Recently, teenagers across the globe have been inspired by 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, staging protests to raise awareness of climate change through out of school protest marches (Cannon, 2019). Alice asked me if she could leave school to join the protest. As someone who believes in the power of protest and the rights of humans to engage in peaceful protest, I was proud that my daughter wanted to participate in this event and exercise her democratic right as an active citizen. However, I was unable to accompany her due to work commitments and had an overriding fear for her safety. I struggled with this decision and shared my concerns with her. Ultimately, she decided not to attend. I felt a combination of relief and disappointment. Relief that she would be safe in school, but disappointment that I had not been more positive and encouraging of her wish to take part, which I feel ultimately influenced her decision. I was grappling with balancing my responsibility to protect her and my desire to

support her rights to participate. I can't help but feel that this reflects some of the daily dilemmas faced by practitioners working with children of all ages in schools and settings.

## 2.6 Summary of Chapter Two

Chapter two has explored my own narrative, highlighting personal and professional experiences that have shaped my understanding of children's voice and subsequently led me to an interest in researching the participation rights of young children. Making visible my own positionality as a researcher has been part of my reflexive approach, through acknowledgment of the attitudes and values that are brought to the research question, methodological approach and analysis.

Chapter three will now consider the policy context within which my doctoral study is located, examining ECEC curricula and early years workforce qualifications in England from 2000-2021.

# **Chapter Three: Early Childhood Education and Care Policy Context in England**

## **3.1 Introduction**

This section of the thesis documents and explores the status of young children's participation rights in ECEC policy in England between 2000-2021, with consideration of related international perspectives. In seeking to understand practitioner perspectives, it is prudent to acknowledge the policy context within which practitioners in England are working. The research question (1.3) emerged, in part, from reflections on the status of participation rights in ECEC policy in England, and early years trainee teacher responses to professional standards. One of the research aims is to contribute to the wider discourse around participation rights of very young children in ECEC settings. The policy perspective forms part of this discourse. Interrogating the status of Article 12 of the UNCRC in ECEC policy guidance reveals understanding about how participation rights are interpreted by policy makers for implementation in educational contexts. Exploration of educational reform can help us to understand how policy "translation and enactment" influence daily practices in education settings (Ball, 2015, p.308). I have set out to explore the development of ECEC policy in England, with particular focus on the construction of the young child and the implementation of participation rights.

ECEC has been the focus of policy reform both nationally and internationally over the past twenty years (OECD, 2001; UNESCO, 2006; G20, 2018). There is growing recognition of the potential advantages of investment in ECEC in relation to children's learning and development (Sylva et al, 2014) and economic benefits to families and wider society through increased parental employment (UNESCO, 2006). It has been internationally argued that investment in early childhood interventions has the potential to reduce social inequality and mediate the impact of socioeconomic disadvantage, (Heckman, 2006; Heckman and Masterov, 2007; Nores and Barnett, 2010; Allen, 2011; Heckman, 2011;

Melhuish, Gardiner and Morris, 2017; House of Commons Education Committee, 2019) although this has been contested. Moss (2013) argues that despite decades of investment in early interventions in the USA, social inequalities continue to be pervasive. Whilst the claim that ECEC alone has the potential to eradicate social inequality is problematic, nevertheless, evidence of the benefits of positive early learning experiences has been well documented (Sylva et al, 2010).

The emphasis on ECEC has resulted in extensive policy initiatives in England including the development of national curriculum frameworks for early childhood (QCA, 2000; DfES, 2002; DCSF, 2008a; DfE, 2012; DfE, 2014a; DfE, 2017a; DfE, 2020a; DfE, 2020e) and graduate workforce qualifications (CWDC, 2006; Teaching Agency, 2012; NCTL, 2013). Consideration of these policy documents in relation to the children's rights agenda will illuminate where national policy aligns with the aims of the UNCRC and more specifically the spirit of Article 12 (UN, 1989). Whilst the UNCRC is an internationally agreed treaty, it is left to individual countries to take measures to translate, promote and protect rights within national policy (Lundy, 2013). My aim is to analyse ECEC policy in England in order to identify whether it is centred on advocacy for children's rights, or alternatively is driven by the government's stated economic mission to "compete in the global race, by helping parents back to work and readying children for school and, eventually, employment" (DfE, 2013a, p.6). Through examination of the development of ECEC curriculum policy and graduate qualifications in early years I discuss the changing landscape and consider the burgeoning emphasis on accountability, surveillance, and contrasting constructs of the young child as active citizen or future investment for economic productivity.

## 3.2 ECEC curriculum frameworks

### *3.2.1 Perspectives in England*

The new millennium heralded the introduction of curricula specific to ECEC. The introduction of the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) provided the first education policy framework in England to establish early years as a distinct stage of learning. This initial document focussed on curriculum provision for children aged 3-5. Soon after this, Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002) was introduced as a framework for practitioners working with babies and toddlers. The document is structured around four key aspects, defining babies and young children as “skilful”, “competent”, “strong” and “healthy” (DfES, 2002 p.5). The construction of the young child as a capable being is seen throughout the document with multiple references characterising the youngest children as socially competent, autonomous meaning makers. For example, the key principles underpinning Birth to Three Matters articulate the image of young children as “social beings” and “competent learners from birth,” whilst also accepting that the youngest children have a degree of vulnerability and dependence on adults (DfES, 2002, p.5). The framework advocates for an approach where practitioners position young children as holders of rights, able to make choices and engage in decision-making:

Children learn when they are given appropriate responsibility, allowed to make errors, decisions and choices, and respected as autonomous and competent learners. (DfES, 2002, p.5)

Practitioners are encouraged to act as facilitators, enabling the voices of the youngest children to be heard, and responding by “adapting routines” in sympathy with the interests and needs of the young child (DfES, 2002). In harmony with the spirit of Article 12 of the UNCRC, Birth to Three Matters is underpinned by a rights based participatory pedagogy that highlights the importance of young children’s choice and voice (DfES, 2002). Alongside Birth to Three Matters, the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) established the framework for supporting learning with children aged 3-5, with a focus on guidance in supporting children to meet the early learning goals in six areas of learning and development.

The introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (DCSF, 2008a) replaced the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) and Birth to Three Matters (DfES, 2002), creating a single framework for practitioners working with children from birth to five years. This comprehensive document reflected many of the values underpinning Birth to Three Matters, maintaining the status of young children as active agents in their learning and care. One of the four underpinning principles of the new framework highlighted the “unique child - every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable, confident and self-assured” (DCSF, 2008a, p.9). The statutory framework was complemented with non-statutory practice guidance, providing support for practitioners to embed the EYFS (DCSF, 2008b & 2008c). Throughout the guidance, practitioners are directed to find meaningful ways to ensure children are “listened to and respected” as valued and active members of the group (DCSF, 2008b, p.6). Whilst the original version of the EYFS provided opportunities for practitioners to explore practice in relation to concepts of listening, the overriding lens was arguably one that focussed on learning and development. The EYFS, from inception, presented a particular approach to ECEC that focussed on the promotion of “technical practice” through a framework that established “predetermined outcomes” for young children, rather than a manifesto for democratic practice (Moss, 2007, p. 7-8).

Following a change in government in 2010 an independent review of the EYFS proposed changes to simplify the framework, suggesting that the original document was “burdensome and cumbersome” for practitioners to navigate (Tickell, 2011, p.3). This resulted in the publication of the revised Statutory Framework for the EYFS (DfE, 2012). This slimmed down version of the curriculum focussed on statutory requirements for early years settings. Supplementary practice guidance was removed from government policy documentation and responsibility for the non-statutory guidance was given to an independent organisation to write and publish (Early Education, 2012). In the transition to two separate documents, the revised Statutory Framework for the EYFS (DFE, 2012) presented an underpinning principle of the “unique child,”

however, explicit language celebrating young children as competent learners *from birth* was eliminated.

Further rewrites of the EYFS (DfE, 2014a; DfE 2017a) have omitted guidance relating to children's voice or decision-making capabilities. The current version of the statutory framework (DfE 2017a), supported by the non-statutory 'Early Years Outcomes' guidance (DfE 2013b), is underpinned by a developmental approach, highlighting normative milestones in children's learning and development to be assessed, measured and tracked. Whilst one of the underpinning principles of the EYFS maintains that "children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates," (DfE 2017a, p. 6) there remains a focus on stage and age-related developmental norms that children are expected to reach. Emphasis on safeguarding and welfare requirements presents a construction of the young child as vulnerable and in need of protection, with no mention of children as active decision makers or holders of rights to present a balanced representation of early childhood. This absence in wider structural policy frameworks for ECEC in England is unlikely to satisfy recommendations by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UN, CRC) periodic report, highlighting the need for UK governments to establish structures that enable children to actively participate in decision making, explicitly stating that "particular attention should be paid to involving younger children" (UN, CRC, 2016, p.7).

The most recent reforms to the EYFS have a proclaimed aim of improving outcomes for disadvantaged children and identifying ways to reduce teacher workload (DfE, 2019). The revised framework (DfE, 2020a), to be implemented across all schools and settings from September 2021, continues to dismantle remnants of children's voice and presents a "top-down model" of learning for young children (Stewart et al., 2020). Where the current framework requires practitioners to "respond" to children's interests (DfE, 2017a, p.9), the revised document places responsibility with the adult to "stimulate" children's interests (DfE, 2020a, p.16). This subtle change in language indicates a departure from a pedagogy that empowers young children as active participants in their own



learning, presenting the adult as the all-knowing master who must initiate interests for the child. Exploring recent ECEC policy provides the context within which practitioners are working, thus illuminating wider societal values and structural factors influencing practice.

### *3.2.2 International Perspectives*

The position of children's rights in early childhood policy in England can be contrasted with international approaches. The Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland (children aged 3-18) is underpinned by four capacities, one of which is the commitment to support children to be "responsible citizens" who are active learners, engaged in decision making (Scottish Executive, 2007). Additionally, the Early Years Framework in Scotland maintains a commitment to upholding the Rights of the Child as defined by the UNCRC (Scottish Government, 2009). Subsequent practice guidance for early years in Scotland presents an image of the young child as a competent, active learner, drawing on the European Commission working group on ECEC which positions the young child as a "co-creator of knowledge" and a citizen with rights (Education Scotland, 2020, p. 14). In March 2021 the Scottish Parliament passed a bill incorporating the UNCRC into domestic law, signalling a commitment to ensuring rights enshrined in the UNCRC are fully protected for the children of Scotland (*UNCRC [Incorporation][Scotland] Bill, 2021*).

The construction of the young child as a capable participant and active meaning maker is reflected in early childhood policy in the Nordic countries, where values of democracy are often presented as a focus for early years pedagogy (Einarsdottir et al, 2014). The Swedish curriculum for preschool explicitly promotes democracy as the foundation of early learning environments, placing emphasis on human rights and democratic values in early years pedagogy (Sweducare, 2018). In Finland, values underpinning the early childhood curriculum are explicitly shaped by the UNCRC (Salminen, 2017). Similarly, the framework for kindergarten in Norway highlights democracy and participation as a core value of ECEC, establishing early childhood institutions as places of

democracy where the UNCRC is reflected and promoted (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2017). However, notwithstanding explicit reference to democracy and rights-based practice in Nordic early childhood policy, there is an international trend towards an emphasis on school-readiness, with the emergence of increasingly formalised learning and standardised assessment from the earliest stages of education. Rights based pedagogy is often framed around the individual child as a future decision-maker and consumer, rather than celebrated as a capable human being within contexts of belonging and community (Kjorholt, 2013). Otterstad and Braathe (2016, p. 93-94) contend that Norwegian early childhood policy has recently seen a shift from values-based pedagogy towards greater “schoolification,” where children are viewed as “effective recipients of knowledge” who are positioned as future economic investments. Participation rights, whilst visible in early childhood policy, are aligned with notions of individualisation, where children are positioned as independent holders of rights, “choice-makers and consumers” within the global economy, rather than situated within a discourse of connection and community (Kjorholt, 2013, p.249). The construction of participation rights in policy is therefore vulnerable, particularly in terms of how rights are understood and enacted in practice. In England, with the absence of explicit reference to the UNCRC or participation rights, these vulnerabilities are accentuated.

### 3.3 ECEC graduate workforce development in England

Alongside the development of early childhood policy and curricula in England, early years workforce reform became a government priority in England in the new millennium. Following the publication of the Effective Practice in Pre-School Education (EPPE) study (Sylva et al, 2004), which highlighted graduate led provision as a key indicator of quality, funding was introduced to improve ECEC workforce qualifications. Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) was introduced by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) in 2006 as the only graduate level professional status for practitioners working in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector (CWDC, 2006 and 2009). Recognising

the pathways needed to achieve the status, the government invested in fully funded training routes for undergraduate and postgraduate level practitioners. To achieve the status practitioners were assessed against thirty-nine professional standards (CWDC, 2010). The rights of young children were highlighted explicitly in several standards, including standard 18, which required Early Years Professionals (EYPs) to protect and promote children's rights (CWDC, 2010). Additionally, standard 27 compelled EYPs to "listen to children, pay attention to what they say and value and respect their views" (CWDC, 2010, p58). Further amplification for standard 27 supported practitioners to ensure that the views of children were considered and acted upon, reflecting the aims of Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989).

The standards for EYPS underwent review as a result of changing administration and were revised in 2012 with the removal of children's rights as a key standard but moved to be included as a subsection in standard 8.4, stating that EYPs must "promote equality of opportunity through championing children's rights and anti-discriminatory practice" (Teaching Agency, 2012). In terms of listening and participation, the revised EYPS standard 2.2 compelled practitioners to communicate "sensitively" with children, with further guidance in the amplification, encouraging practitioners to find ways to communicate with children in ways that are "suitable for their developmental stage and understanding" (Teaching Agency, 2012, p5). The rewriting of the standards presented a change in emphasis from the construction of the young child as an active decision maker towards a vulnerable image of the child. Vulnerable conceptions of early childhood, perpetuated through policy documents, may influence the view of the child held by practitioners and potentially limit their ability to accept young children as able citizens with rights (Coady and Tobin, 2020).

Recognition of the importance of a qualified early years workforce was reiterated in the Nutbrown review (2012). The government response to this review, 'More Great Childcare' (DfE, 2013a), introduced changes to qualifications in early years, including the development of Early Years Initial Teacher Training

(EYITT) leading to the award of Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) as the graduate status to replace EYPS. The introduction of EYITT resulted in the publication of new professional standards for the early years sector, the Teachers' Standards (Early Years) (TSEY) (NCTL, 2013). Reflecting changes in early years curriculum policy, the promotion of children's participatory rights is absent from the most current set of standards for EYTS. The TSEY are focussed on supporting children's development and monitoring progress, with an emphasis on attainment and outcomes, achieved through group learning with explicit reference to systematic synthetic phonics and early mathematics. Included is a standard requiring practitioners to "engage with the educational continuum of expectations, curricula and teaching of Key Stage 1 and 2" (NCTL, 2013, p.3). Rather than prioritising pedagogical approaches that celebrate and promote children's participatory rights, the TSEY are underpinned by developmental perspectives that focus on preparation for formal learning.

The lack of guidance relating to children's rights, both in key early years curriculum documents and professional standards, may limit the promotion of rights-based practice in early years settings. In the review of the EYFS, Tickell (2011) proposed that practitioners have increased confidence in understanding how to use the framework to support their work with young children and suggested ways to simplify the document. However, it is argued here that this review neglected to acknowledge the lack of understanding that new, unqualified practitioners bring to practice and the needs they may have in developing a strong and appropriate pedagogy. All practitioners, arguably, need to be reminded of the importance of children's rights, the UNCRC and how to apply these principles in practice. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that all state parties make a commitment to implementing child rights training for all practitioners working with young children (UN, CRC, 2005). This has not been addressed in ECEC policy in England, and current requirements for EYITT make no mention of children's rights education (DfE, 2020d). The shifting policy landscape, reflected internationally, suggests an increasingly neoliberal approach to ECEC with an emphasis on school readiness leading to work readiness (Sims, 2017). Contrary to rights-based pedagogy, with

a focus on supporting children to participate as active citizens, current policy is directed towards curriculum attainment and an overarching desire to prepare children for the world of work. Some argue that the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in education seeks to undermine a pedagogical approach that focuses on supporting children to understand what it means to be a participating citizen, directing policy to practices that countenance “memorisation, teaching to the test and classroom practices that celebrate mindless repetition and conformity” (Giroux, 2013, p. 459). This characterisation can be seen as reminiscent of the implicit understandings of school readiness directing ECEC policy.

Whilst government led policy development relating to graduate qualifications in early years does not appear to prioritise a children’s rights perspective, advocacy for the rights of the youngest children has been promoted by academics, researchers and organisations seeking to influence policy development. The Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies initiative led by the Early Childhood Studies Degree Network potentially seeks to redress the balance with a set of nine competencies that set the standards for professional practice with children aged 0-8 (ECSDN, 2018). The graduate competencies are underpinned by principles aligned with the children’s rights agenda, stating that they “advocate for young children’s rights and participation and recognise that young children are active co-constructors of their own learning” (ECSDN, 2018, p.13). Although recognised by the Department of Education, the government has not yet fully endorsed this initiative and the competencies are not included in any national policy documentation. There is a current lack of clarity around graduate qualifications in early years, with evidence that the existing system is ambiguous and difficult for settings to navigate (Osgood et al, 2017). This absence of clear direction potentially creates confusion within the workforce about the status of rights in early childhood policy.

### 3.4 ECEC Policy and School Readiness

The status of children's rights in ECEC policy in England remains unresolved. The direction of travel appears to support an approach to education that is focused on preparation for formal learning in school, presenting "education as something done to children rather than a process which actively encourages children to participate in their own learning" (Thomas, 2009, p.15). The school readiness agenda, a theme running through current early years policy, presumes children must be made ready for learning, rather than appreciating children as meaning makers who are born ready to learn (Whitebread and Bingham, 2012). Whilst there is no national consensus on the definition of 'school readiness,' (Ofsted, 2014, p.6) the EYFS highlights 'school readiness' as a focus in early years, laying the foundations for later progress in school (DfE, 2017a, p.5). The emphasis on preparing children for the demands of the National Curriculum is further promoted by Ofsted's 'Bold Beginnings' report that highlighted the teaching of reading and systematic synthetic phonics as the "core purpose of the Reception year" (Ofsted, 2017, p.7). Whilst this report relates to children aged 4-5, there are implications for younger children who are prepared for the reception year through an emphasis on the acquisition of academic skills such as phonological awareness, emphasised in the Teachers' Standards (Early Years) (NCTL, 2013). 'Bold Beginnings' demonstrates a lack of critical understanding of pedagogies that are appropriate in early years and perpetuates a narrative that aims to drive formal learning downwards with little evidence of the appropriateness or effectiveness of such an approach (TACTYC, 2017a).

Similar concerns have been raised about the forthcoming reception baseline assessment (Early Education, 2017; TACTYC, 2017b; Goldstein et al, 2018), suspended in 2020 in response to the pandemic but due to be implemented from 2021 (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020; DfE, 2020c). Baseline assessment was initially introduced in 2014 as part of the national assessment and accountability measures for primary schools (DfE, 2014b). Through a competitive tendering process, the government identified three independent

organisations to become DfE accredited providers of the test. The pilot attracted criticism and was subsequently withdrawn by the DfE due to concerns about the comparability of the test (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2017). However, the government reconfirmed a commitment to introducing baseline assessment as an accountability tool to measure pupil progress in primary schools, with the pilot commencing in 2019 (Standards and Testing Agency, 2018). The emphasis on measuring outcomes has been characterised as a move towards the “datafication” of early childhood education that ultimately results in the “schoolification” of early childhood through increased emphasis on literacy, mathematics and formal learning (Bradbury, 2019, p.7). Organised opposition to baseline assessment, such as the ‘Too Much Too Soon’ and ‘More Than A Score’ movements, have galvanised to expose criticisms of this accountability measure, echoing concerns that it is “flawed, unjustified and wholly unfit for purpose,” and risks a further narrowing of the curriculum (Goldstein et al, 2018, p.30).

This emphasis on school readiness permeates ECEC policy, with little discussion or analysis exploring what it means for young children to become ready for school. The early years inspectorate, Ofsted, acknowledge the lack of common understanding about ‘school readiness’, but are clear that ECEC settings have a key role in preparing children for formal education (Ofsted, 2014). The House of Commons cross party Health and Social Care Committee report establishes a key goal for government to include improving “school readiness” for children in the first 1000 days of life (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, 2019, p.42). Whilst school readiness is not defined, proposals include additional health visitor checks for children from age three to assess readiness for school and suggests that school readiness should focus on early intervention and “addressing social inequalities” (p.30). The construction of school readiness in relation to child poverty and inequality rather than explicitly linked to curriculum attainment outcomes could provide opportunities to conceptualise readiness for school beyond narrow definitions linked to academic achievement in literacy and numeracy. However, the absence of common understandings of school readiness is evident (Brooks and Murray, 2018). The discourse around narrowing the gap draws on research highlighting the role of early years

education and interventions in improving educational outcomes, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE 2017b; Stewart and Waldfogel, 2017; Tobin 2018). Whilst research exposing the value of early years education in enhancing later learning is compelling (Taggart et al, 2015), this discourse may be used to defend increasing formalisation and standardisation of early learning. Arguably, an increased focus on narrow aspects of learning presents challenges in terms of advocating for participation rights in ECEC as practice becomes directed towards measurable outcomes and away from children's voices.

Roberts-Holmes (2020, p.170) argues that neoliberalism has reduced ECEC to a "school-readiness' factory," with an emphasis on preparation for school tests. The current focus directing ECEC policy is centred on preparation for future educational outcomes and subsequent economic productivity, rather than celebrating early childhood as a time of life in its own right, thus marginalising opportunities for children's rights-based pedagogy:

Young children's rights and interests appear to have been subjugated to the perceived interest of the economy and the government's deficit-reduction strategies. The absence of a consideration of children's rights to quality early years provision and of early childhood as a legitimate phase of life, more than as preparation for later educational outcomes, raises serious concerns about the future direction of early years policymaking under the new Conservative Government. (Lloyd, 2015, p.153)

The school readiness agenda is underpinned by developmental theories that remain pervasive within early childhood policy in England. The EYFS statutory framework (DfE, 2017a) and the Early Years Outcomes non-statutory guidance (DfE, 2013b) draw on developmental and age-related norms to present a set of milestones to be measured and tracked as children progress through the EYFS. As such, the discourse of developmental psychology continues to play an important role in understanding and shaping ECEC provision in England. It could be argued that the developmental paradigm presents challenges in furthering the children's rights agenda as it tends to emphasise the developing child as one in



need, rather than acknowledging the young child as competent and strong. This developmental approach influences curricula by establishing standardised outcomes and directing educators to focus on milestones that can be easily observed and measured (Sims and Brettig, 2018).

### 3.5 Recent Reforms in ECEC Policy in England

The forthcoming revised EYFS (DfE, 2020a) aims to address teacher workload with reduced focus on gathering evidence to track progress and an emphasis on improving outcomes for children, and in particular children from disadvantaged backgrounds (DfE, 2019). The new framework promotes a focus on child development within the context of preparedness for later learning in key stage one (DfE, 2020b). The revised non-statutory guidance, 'Development Matters' (DfE 2020e), further cements a view of early childhood as a time of preparation to become capable learners. The title of the non-statutory document has been altered from "non-statutory guidance materials" (Early Education, 2012) to "curriculum guidance" (DfE, 2020e), indicating a direction towards curriculum, and what the child is to be taught. The previous document stated that "children are born ready, able and eager to learn" (Early Education, 2012, p.2). The new version characterises young children as "becoming more powerful learners" (DfE 2020e, p.3). The revised focus of early years curriculum policy is centred around a "progress model," emphasising the need to identify what the child must know, and be taught, in order to secure successful learning in school (Grenier, 2020). The positioning of young children as becoming, embeds a developmental narrative that arguably focuses on the future child rather than celebrating the young child, here and now. A coalition of early years advocacy groups has expressed concern over the revised guidance, highlighting that it presents a "deficit model" of early childhood, failing to acknowledge young children as "active and capable learners" (Early Years Sector Coalition, 2020).

The current and dominant narrative of ECEC as economic investment in the future is pervasive in international policy (OECD, 2011). Moss (2013, p 370) describes this as the “story of quality and high returns,” which places the emphasis of ECEC as a mechanism to improve educational outcomes in order to enhance human productivity and economic growth. Earlier versions of the EYFS established a construction of the young child as “*becoming* the autonomous, self-reliant, productive and responsible citizen of tomorrow” (Papathodorou, 2010, p.8). This vision of the young child, that prioritises the acquisition of skills to become an economically productive citizen of the future, maintains dominance in early childhood policy in England. The Conservative Government vision highlights the role that ECEC has in promoting “economic security and prosperity,” with a focus on preparing children for school and adult life (DfE, 2013a, p.13). Moss (2018) rejects this “impoverished view” of early childhood that regards young children as passive and not yet ready. Instead, he advocates for an alternative narrative; one that positions ECEC as a “place of potentiality...movement and experimentation” (Moss, 2013, p.371). Perhaps such a narrative has potential to flourish through greater involvement of the early years workforce in shaping policy and practice. A groundswell of opposition to recent EYFS reform in England, led by key early childhood professional associations including TACTYC, Early Education, Early Childhood Studies Degree Network (ECSDN) and The Centre for Research in Early Childhood (CREC), has resulted in a project to develop sector driven non-statutory guidance for practice with children aged birth-five (Early Years Sector Coalition, 2020). The development of sector led guidance offers the potential to reposition young children as “competent social actors brimming with potential” (Fairchild and Kay, 2020). Such guidance could provide a space to question the narrative of standardisation, early intervention, global competition and economic productivity and present an alternative, democratic vision for ECEC that places the voice of practitioners and children at the centre.

At the time of writing this thesis, the final draft of the new alternative birth to five, non-statutory guidance, developed by early years practitioners, academics, researchers and consultants, has been published (Early Years Coalition, 2021b).

Celebrating the rights of the child, the guidance explicitly highlights the UNCRC, including article 12, as a guiding principle underpinning practice. The promotion of voice is articulated as a core value, including reference to the importance of listening to the voice of the child. Young children are positioned as competent learners, active in their own development, with children's agency highlighted as a factor influencing positive development. This sector driven guidance presents an alternative perspective to the government endorsed non-statutory development matters (DfE, 2020e). It will be interesting to follow sector response to these two documents and how they might inform and guide practice in ECEC settings.

### 3.6 Summary of Chapter Three

The rapidly changing policy landscape in ECEC in England over the past two decades has reflected an increasing focus on education and care provision for children under statutory school age. The national context sits within a wider international move to prioritise ECEC (OECD, 2001; 2011), highlighting economic gains and future productivity resulting from early interventions (Heckman and Masterov, 2007). Despite years of investment, Moss and Cameron (2020, p.3) argue that we have a fragmented system that is characterised by a "serious democratic deficit." This is reflected in the EYFS curriculum (DfE, 2017a), which fails to clearly articulate values linked to democracy and rights-based pedagogy. Participation rights, as established by Article 12 of the UNCRC, are absent from ECEC statutory guidance and professional standards for EYTS. A system preoccupied with developmental milestones and measurable outcomes has permeated ECEC policy, creating a focus on narrow interpretations of school readiness that privilege particular kinds of curriculum knowledge (Roberts-Holmes, 2020).

Understanding the policy context within which practitioners operate will help to position participant narratives within a wider cultural landscape. Goodson (2017b, p.95) argues that narratives must be "interrogated and analysed in their

social context.” An appreciation of the political priorities articulated in ECEC policy provide a helpful lens through which individual narratives can be connected and analysed. As I listened to participant narratives it became evident that the policy context has a significant impact on practices relating to participation rights (6.4 and 6.5).

Chapter four will include an interrogation of literature and research relating to my project. The review begins with an exploration of participation rights and how these are understood within the context of Article 12 of the UNCRC. I consider research within the field of participation rights, and how these relate to pedagogical approaches that foster opportunities for the voices of young children to be heard. Through an examination of existing research, I reveal gaps in understanding about the application of participation rights in ECEC contexts, particularly in relation to the youngest children. I consider underpinning theoretical perspectives that have directed my line of enquiry and subsequent analysis.

## Chapter Four: Literature Review

### 4.1 Introduction

The literature review aims to ground my own study within the wider field of research relating to the participation rights of young children. Throughout the doctoral process I have used concept mapping as a technique to explore related ideas, find connections between different theoretical positions and narrow the focus for my own study (appendix 2). Concept mapping provides a mechanism to organise and represent the thinking process when exploring literature that is relevant to the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Prior to data gathering, concept mapping was used to consider existing research in the field and how previous findings and methodological approaches from existing research might inform and shape data collection. During and after data collection concept mapping was revisited to determine the theoretical lens through which data could be analysed. Using concept mapping I have made visual my own positioning and established a bounded framework for my research.

As part of the process of creating a boundary for the literature review, three core lines of inquiry were followed:

1. *What is already known in relation to participation rights in early childhood?* Exploration of research literature relating to children's participation rights more broadly and consideration of these concepts in relation to young children in ECEC contexts.
2. *What are the gaps in relation to understanding about the participation rights of the youngest children and how rights-based practice might be enacted with babies and toddlers?* The identification of existing gaps within the field of participation rights for children under three in ECEC settings. The review considers existing pedagogies of listening, and how these might inform practice with very young children.
3. *What is the theoretical framework for the study?* Consideration of the theoretical positioning and overarching theoretical lens that has been applied to this study. Underpinning the theoretical lens is a drive to

understand and explore the status of young children as 'beings' and/or 'becomings' (Qvortrup et al., 1994; Uprichard, 2008). Young children's participation rights have been considered through an exploration of the sociology of childhood and developmental psychology.

These core questions have informed and directed the literature searches. Key search terms have included: *children's rights; children's voice; developmentalism; ECEC; listening to children; participation; sociology of childhood; UNCRC.*

## 4.2 Participation rights in early childhood

The first section of the literature review situates my research within the field of children's rights, and specifically contextualises participation rights through discussion of the meaning of participation, the origins of this as a right of childhood, and the ways in which participatory practice can be implemented in ECEC settings. Set within the context of the UNCRC (UN, 1989), participation is explored as a right that is dependent on maximising the potential for children to be involved, active decision makers in their own lives.

### 4.2.1 Defining participation rights

Participation rights, within the context of the UNCRC (UN, 1989) seek to protect and promote the ability of children to actively engage in all aspects of life. This research has a focus on Article 12, which protects the rights of children to freely express their opinions, have their views listened to and acted upon:

#### Article 12

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

(UN, 1989, p.5)

Whilst Article 12 does not explicitly mention 'participation' as a right, supplementary guidance from the Committee on the Rights of the Child relates the aims of Article 12 to the concept of participation (UN, CRC, 2009). Participation is described as the process by which children can be heard and included in decision making and involves an on-going "intense exchange between children and adults on the development of policies, programmes and measures in all relevant contexts of children's lives" (UN, CRC, 2009, p.5). Whilst Article 12 highlights notions of capability, the convention promotes the presentation of children as "social actors from birth" with access to the full remit of rights (UN, CRC, 2005, p.2). Capability, in relation to Article 12, places responsibility on adults to identify barriers to participation and utilise strategies to enable the voices of the youngest children to be heard:

...the child is able to form views from the youngest age, even when she or he may be unable to express them verbally. Consequently, full implementation of Article 12 requires recognition of, and respect for, non-verbal forms of communication including play, body language, facial expressions, and drawing and painting, through which very young children demonstrate understanding, choices and preferences. (UN, CRC, 2009, p. 7)

Article 12 provides the framework for promoting participation rights for all children including the youngest and directs governments to review national and local policies and practices with consideration of the ways in which children are included as active participants. As active participants, young children are acknowledged as engaged, active citizens (Clark, 2017). At the heart of participation is the notion of listening as a conduit for understanding children's perspectives. Through active listening we come to understand the world of the child and provide spaces for them to participate fully in their own learning and care (Lansdown, 2011).

For participation to be fully realised there is an appreciation of the active nature of involvement. Active participation goes beyond merely taking part and requires genuine consideration of children's views and adults taking action in response to those views. Boyden and Ennew (1997, p.33) define participation as

the “sense of knowing that one’s actions are taken note of and may be acted upon – which is sometimes called empowerment.” Lundy (2007) alludes to empowerment, arguing that meaningful participation requires space and support for active listening of children’s perspectives with the ultimate measure of participation including the extent to which the child’s views are acted upon. The Lundy model of participation (2007; 2020) identifies four elements necessary for the enactment of children’s participation rights: space, voice, audience and influence. At the heart of the model is an appreciation that participation rights move beyond voice and listening and require a commitment to establish conditions for children to express themselves and an obligation to then actively listen, respond and act upon views expressed by children. Without influence, participation is meaningless. Thus, active participation has the potential to be utilised as a mechanism through which children’s agency can be recognised and enacted. Adopting Lundy’s model of participation, Moore (2019) researched parent and practitioner understandings of participation in children’s centres in the UK. Findings highlight the importance of establishing trusting relationships between parents, practitioners and children, in supporting a listening approach that enable the needs of children to become visible and acted upon.

Influence as a key element of participation presents challenges within relationships that are not easily positioned as equal in terms of power. Cassidy (2012) argues that possibilities for children to exercise influence over their lives are limited due to power imbalances between children and adults. For meaningful participation to be embedded there must be “a conscious and deliberate inclusion of children” as part of a genuine commitment to raising their status as able citizens and involving them in decision-making (Cassidy, 2012, p. 68). Participation requires acknowledgement that power relations exist between adults and children, and a conscious decision to promote inclusive approaches that enable children to actively participate (MacNaughton, 2005). This is pertinent when working with very young children, who utilise a range of non-verbal communication strategies and thus may be vulnerable in terms of having their voices heard (Murray, 2019). Creating opportunities for authentic



listening may present challenges as power dynamics are entrenched. Ultimately, adults hold power, making decisions about how to interpret children's contributions, thus having influence over the ability of children to communicate their perspectives (Ruscoe, Barblett and Barrat-Pugh, 2018).

Whilst children demonstrate agency and the ability to be competent decision makers, they require a commitment from educators to construct listening environments. Taylor and Robinson (2009) maintain that this approach, where adults take responsibility for empowering children as active participants, is not unproblematic. Practitioners themselves may lack the necessary empowerment to promote particular pedagogical approaches. In ECEC contexts, Osgood (2006, p.5) highlights the "disempowering, regulatory gaze" that promotes standardised, reductionist practices, thus limiting scope for practitioner autonomy. Particularly in baby room settings, there is a prevalence of low-qualified staff who demonstrate "voicelessness," focussed on pragmatic tasks and often unable to explore deeper pedagogical ideas (Goouch and Powell, 2012, p. 82).

Participation is related to citizenship and can be approached as a mechanism through which children develop understanding of their role as active citizens in a democratic society. Hart (1992, p.5) defines participation as "the means by which democracy is built and it is the standard against which democracies should be measured." It is through engagement in activities and experiences that enable children to express views that an understanding of what it means to be a citizen within a democratic society emerges (Miller, 1997; Lansdown, 2005; Pascal and Bertram, 2009). The relationship between participation and democratic citizenship is supported by Moss (2007) who argues that participation is the vehicle through which citizens (adults and children) work together to shape communities. Moss (2007, p.6) presents the possibility of ECEC settings as places of "democratic political practice." As such, there must be opportunities for children to engage in decision-making. A challenge presented by Moss (2007) is the underpinning aim and purpose of ECEC. If centred on the possibility of political practice that is focussed on securing and embedding

notions of citizenship, participation can thrive. However, where there are alternative aims for education, for example ECEC as a childcare commodity for working parents, vulnerable to market forces and consumer demand, the focus on democracy is marginalised. This may then diminish opportunities for participatory practice. A democratic approach to ECEC is supported by a vision for practice that acknowledges the capabilities of the youngest children and welcomes them as active participants (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007).

#### *4.2.2 Capabilities of young children as active participants*

Whilst there are unique considerations when promoting participation with young children, there remains evidence that even the youngest children are able to express views and offer meaningful contributions. Langsted (1994, p.35) argues that children are “experts in their own lives,” able to express opinions and present unique perspectives from their own lived experiences. A growing body of research has utilised methodologies that capture the perspectives of young children (for example: Stephen, 2003; Cremin and Salter, 2004; Dockett and Perry, 2006; Stephenson, 2009; Colliver and Flear, 2015; Madden and Liang, 2017). Appreciation of the value of including children’s perspectives in research has supported a wider move away from research *on* children towards research *with* children (Alderson, 2008a). Placing children as research partners, rather than research subjects, requires an examination of the power relationships between adults and children (Christensen 2004). With young children there is a need to acknowledge possible assumptions adults may make when interpreting children’s perspectives, which could lead to inaccurate representations of children’s views. Colliver (2017, p.861) suggests this requires a move from “listening to understanding” young children. Drawing on Lundy’s (2007) model of participation, Colliver (2017) highlights the importance of inclusive spaces as conduits for authentic listening encounters. Through examination of children’s actions, as well as words, subtle communication is captured, leading to greater understanding of children’s perspectives. A commitment to moving towards understanding equally rests on the ability to challenge assumptions and resist

“adultist” interpretations, thus shifting perspective towards the young child (Colliver, 2017, p.861).

Efforts to maximise the ways in which children’s lives are understood through participatory approaches have been developed. Much of the existing research within the field of early childhood has centred on toddlers and young children (aged 2-8), utilising a range of creative approaches to enable the voices of young children to be heard (Clark, 2005; Einarsdottir, 2006; Pascal and Bertram, 2009; Clark 2010). Clark and Moss (2001; 2005) developed a participatory framework used to gain insight into the perspectives of young children. The ‘Mosaic Approach’ is a multi-method framework, combining evidence gathered from young children, parents and practitioners to develop a clear picture of the views, interests and needs of young children. Each piece of the mosaic is included to create a detailed and rich picture of children’s perspectives. Merewether and Fleet (2014) report on a project focussed on young children’s perspectives of the outdoor learning environment where a range of methods inspired by the mosaic approach were utilised. Methods included child led tours, photographs taken by children, photo elicitation interviews, slide shows and child drawings. The researcher aimed to employ a respectful and collaborative approach, acknowledging children as active participants in the research process. This reflects the earlier position argued by Woodhead (1999) who advocates for greater thoughtfulness in the methodologies used to understand children’s worlds. Engagement in honest participatory practice with children requires reflection on how we “alter our agenda of presuppositions,” considering our beliefs about the status and capabilities of young children and the extent to which we enable them to challenge our beliefs (Woodhead, 1999, p.18).

Fewer studies have researched the perspectives of babies, highlighting gaps in our understanding about the unique ways in which babies communicate their worlds as active participants. Alderson (2008b) argues that babies express a range of complex emotions and are involved as partners in family relationships. Conducting research in neonatal intensive care units in England, Alderson, Hawthorne and Killen (2005, p.47) reveal understandings about the ways in

which premature babies demonstrate capabilities as “informed choosers, agents and contributors with views.” Through an ethnographic study in four neonatal units in the south of England the researchers used observations and interviews with parents and neonatal staff to examine how babies respond to neonatal care. Findings highlighted the capabilities of pre-term babies to demonstrate preference for particular care routines and for the people who cared for them. Although the babies were extremely vulnerable, with complex medical issues, the data revealed that far from being “unconscious organisms,” the babies demonstrated the ability to interact in human relationships with parents and clinicians (Alderson, Hawthorne and Killen, 2005, p.46). With strong determination to survive, premature babies were found to use vocalisations and movements to demonstrate pleasure and dislike, thus effectively communicating effectively their care needs. The researchers argue that even the very youngest babies demonstrate capabilities as active participants, concluding that the participation rights of premature babies are “feasible, immediate, integral and indispensable” (Alderson, Hawthorne and Killen, 2005, p.31). Trevarthen (2011a, p.130; p.124) explores research from the fields of developmental psychology and neuroscience that highlight the “active agency and sociable awareness” of babies, demonstrating their ability to communicate with others in a “cooperative relationship.” Babies use purposeful communication strategies such as gesture, vocalisations, facial expression, and coordinated movements to engage with others. Thus, babies demonstrate competency as active agents within social relationships.

Moving towards acknowledgement of the young child as an active protagonist promotes a celebration of young children as holders of participation rights, with the ability to actively engage as individuals with agency. However, participation can also be viewed as an evolving aspect of the young child’s human rights, developed through social interactions. Etchebehere and De Leon (2020) position participation as an aspect of developmental psychology, relating to the development of social competencies that are acquired through meaningful social encounters with adults. As such, the development of active participation is related to a “progressive autonomy,” defined as the gradual acquisition of skills

needed to be competent decision makers, fostered through enabling environments organised by supportive adults (Etchebehere and De Leon, 2020, p. 4). Lundy (2020, 12:47) suggests that the enactment of participation rights is dependent on the identification of a “dedicated listener” who fulfils obligations to actively listen, respond to and act upon children’s perspectives. She suggests that very young children may be marginalised in terms of having their participation rights realised and thus require deliberate actions by adults to create conditions for active participation (Lundy, 2020). Highlighting potential tensions between protection and participation rights, Lundy (2019) contends that children’s agency should not be overshadowed by notions of vulnerability. Participation and protection rights align with one another as part of a comprehensive approach that establishes children as holders of rights. Woodhead (1999) argues that appreciation of the status of children as rights holders does not negate adult responsibility or reject the notion of development and emerging abilities. Rather, celebration of the “social child” places additional responsibilities on adults to facilitate environments in which children can flourish as active participants (Woodhead, 1999, p.19).

### 4.3 Participatory pedagogy in ECEC

Enacting participation rights in early childhood presents a unique set of challenges, particularly with the youngest children as they are not yet able to communicate in conventional ways and are thus vulnerable in terms of having their voices heard. Wall et al (2019) explore conditions necessary to facilitate opportunities for Article 12 of the UNCRC to be realised with the youngest children. Through a series of dialogic seminars entitled ‘Look who’s talking,’ they identify eight factors underpinning practice that enables the voices of young children to be heard and acted upon: definition; power; inclusivity; listening; time and space; approaches; processes; and purposes (Wall et al, 2019, p.263-264). These elements provide a structure to instigate discussion about the status

of children's participation rights and provide a stimulus for practitioners to review and reflect upon participatory approaches with the youngest children. Concepts of democracy, inclusion and the importance of creating respectful spaces for active listening are at the core of the 'Look who's talking' seminar outputs. They reflect existing pedagogies of listening and a relational ethic of care in ECEC, explored below.

#### *4.3.1 Pedagogies of listening in ECEC*

Listening, as an enabling factor in promoting opportunities for active participation, rests upon a pedagogical approach that maximises the potential for children's voices to be heard and acted upon. Pedagogies of listening are realised through environments that celebrate the infant as a capable meaning-maker and are illustrated through the philosophy of preschool education in Reggio Emilia, Italy (Rinaldi, 2012). This progressive philosophy of early childhood emerged as a response to the Second World War fascist regime in Italy. The Italian Women's Union (UDI) campaigned for early childhood programmes that would promote equalities within democratic learning communities (Balfour, 2018). Loris Malaguzzi, Italian educationalist and first director of the preschools in Reggio Emilia, placed core values of "uncertainty and subjectivity, wonder and surprise, solidarity and cooperation and, perhaps most important of all, participation and democracy" at the heart of the municipal preschool system (Moss, 2016, p.172). Malaguzzi took his inspiration from constructivist theories of learning and philosophies rooted in democratic approaches to education, drawing on the work of Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey (Dahlberg and Moss, 2006). Central to the philosophy guiding practice in Reggio Emilia is the positionality of young children as active meaning makers, engaged in respectful relationships that are situated within democratic communities (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2021).

Listening, as a core component of Reggio Emilia's democratic approach to education, moves beyond the act of hearing and requires a commitment to appreciating alternative perspectives, differing ways of communicating and an openness to valuing others (Rinaldi, 2006). As an active process of engagement,

listening is focussed on understanding and responding to the baby or toddler (Elliot, 2009). Malaguzzi highlighted the “hundred languages of children,” acknowledging the complex ways in which young children communicate their worlds (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012, p.3). An openness to the ‘hundred languages’ creates a context for listening that captures the perspectives of young children through “action, emotion, expression, and representation, using symbols and images” (Rinaldi, 2012, p.235). Thus, listening is an active and reciprocal process that requires engagement with all senses to create opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Attuned, responsive relationships, that enable the perspectives of young children to be known, understood and acted upon, are reliant on practitioners who actively listen to young children. This requires a commitment to appreciating the multiple ways in which young children communicate their worlds (Clark and Moss, 2001; Clark, 2005; Clark, 2007). Listening to the perspectives of babies and toddlers requires attention to subtle non-verbal cues. Through observations of movements, actions, sounds and interactions, the practitioner can interpret and respond to the infant's endeavours to communicate (Rich, 2011). Listening is an integral factor in promoting active participation as it is the means through which we come to understand what young children experience, feel, need, and desire. Pascal and Bertram (2009) examine participatory approaches with young children, highlighting the challenges of capturing the authentic voice of the infant. Accurate interpretation of voice is contingent on environments that are conducive to listening, with understanding that listening encompasses more than spoken words and includes rich and complex non-verbal communication. Ethical and respectful practices, that consider the power dynamics between adults and infants, provide spaces for active listening. Pedagogues who are positioned as learning collaborators, engaged in joint meaning-making with young children through a “dialogic relationship,” create places of learning that celebrate the child, and teacher, as co-researchers (Moss, 2016, p.173).

Listening is closely connected to a relational pedagogy, positioning relationships and collaboration as core elements of learning. Relational pedagogy

acknowledges learning as a process of co-constructed meaning making, drawing on social constructivist theories of learning that view the learner as an active agent working in collaboration with others (Papatheodorou, 2008). As a social constructivist, Vygotsky (1978, p.97) argued that development is awakened when the child is “interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers.” Relational pedagogy celebrates such approaches to learning, highlighting interaction, connection, reflection and listening, visible in the Reggio Emilia nurseries (Murray, 2015). Through listening approaches, relational pedagogy offers conditions for active participation to thrive, enabling young children to develop capacities as “reflective, critical, meaning-making and active citizens” (Papatheodorou, 2008, p.14).

Pedagogies of listening embed observational methods that capture the experiences of young children. Observation is understood as a reflective tool used to develop understanding of children’s perspectives (Luff, 2014). Lawrence (2021, p. 292) advocates for a “dialogical” approach, positioning observation as joint meaning making between children and adults. This reflects the pedagogical approach of Reggio Emilia, acknowledging observation as a subjective process enhanced through inclusion of multiple perspectives (Rinaldi, 2006). Observation as an ethical endeavour is enacted through “pedagogical documentation” which seeks to make visible democratic relationships between children and adults (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012, p.226). Pedagogical documentation is linked to professional reflection, offering space for practitioners to suspend their own assumptions and engage in collaborative learning with children (De Sousa, 2019). Through narrated stories, videos, notes etc., learning is made visible and shared with children for purposes of reflection, learning and the development of agency and belonging (Rinaldi, 2006; Albin-Clark, 2020). From this perspective, observation is approached as part of the co-constructed learning process, potentially in conflict with observational methods that are driven by summative assessment requirements situated within the EYFS (Flewitt and Cowan, 2019). Observation as a pedagogical instrument for listening situates the child as a competent partner in the learning experience, able to offer pertinent contributions to jointly observed learning encounters.



The ability to listen and acknowledge perspectives of young children relates to the image we hold of the child. Democratic pedagogies of listening, as articulated by the Reggio Emilia philosophy, hold an image of the child as 'rich' and full of potential (Moss, 2016, p.171). The way we view children influences our interactions and approaches:

Each one of you has inside yourself an image of the child that directs you as you begin to relate to a child. This theory within you pushes you to behave in certain ways; it orients you as you talk to the child, listen to the child, observe the child. It is very difficult for you to act contrary to this internal image. (Malaguzzi, 1993, p.1)

Adult perceptions of the capabilities of young children inform pedagogies in ECEC environments. Payler (2007) examined learning encounters of two sets of four-year old children in pre-school and reception, exploring the conditions in which children were able to participate actively in their learning. Findings suggest that children's participation is contingent upon the values embedded in setting pedagogy and relate to adult perceptions of children and opportunities for creating spaces to listen to and value children's worlds.

Underpinning beliefs and values held by practitioners, relating to the capabilities of young children, inform interactions and influence possibilities for active participation. Drawing on data from four empirical studies exploring pedagogical quality in ECEC, Sheridan (2007) identified four overarching dimensions that work in harmony to support effective early learning; the society, the child, the teacher and the learning context. High quality provision was characterised by trusting, cooperative relationships between teachers and children, where teachers celebrated children as social actors and had a commitment to listening to children and understanding their perspectives. Salamon and Harrison (2015) engaged in collaborative practitioner-researcher discussions, examining observations of practice. They found that practitioner conceptions of infant capabilities influenced interactions and practices with young children. For example, practitioners who advocated for children's rights to be involved in their learning were also able to enact this in practice by facilitating opportunities for

infants to lead their play. Active participation in learning was supported by practitioners who held conceptions of children as capable social actors. In congruence with Malaguzzi (1993), the image of the child held by the practitioner directs practice.

Pedagogies of listening may be supported by an unhurried approach to ECEC. Borrowing ideas from environmental education, Clark (2020, p.140) examines the potential of “slow pedagogy” in ECEC. Payne and Wattchow (2009, p.16) argue that “slow pedagogy” creates conditions to “pause or dwell in spaces for more than a fleeting moment”. It is about re-examining interactions and creating environments that enable “lingering, revisiting and rethinking” through the appreciation of “slow knowledge” (Clark, 2020, p.142). Applied to pedagogies of listening and the potential for young children to exercise participation rights, slow pedagogy is fostered by pedagogues who pause, connect and reflect before interpreting the voices of children. Such an unhurried approach reflects the work of Emmi Pikler, Hungarian paediatrician and educational theorist who advocated for practice that moves at the pace of the child, resisting adult dominance and thus creating spaces for the capacities of the young child to be observed, understood and valued (Vamos, 2015). Working with orphans in a residential nursery in Budapest, Pikler promoted children’s “autonomy, competence and relatedness,” advocating for practice that responds sensitively to the child’s lead (Sagustui, Herran and Anguera, 2020, p.4). Focussing on motor development, Pikler (1979) argued that babies demonstrate greater progress when given space and time to show initiative in their own learning rather than be driven by traditional ‘teaching’ practices led by adults. Authentic listening may then be contingent on practices that allow babies time to discover their own competencies.

Arguably, opportunities and spaces for ethical pedagogies of listening are threatened by policies that place emphasis on surveillance, accountability and data-capture, over the relational aspect of ECEC. A review of the 2019 baseline assessment pilot found that the demands of conducting the standardised test with young children early in their reception year repositioned teachers “away

from their caring pedagogic values of observing and listening to young children and towards a screen-based scripted standardised test” (Roberts-Holmes et al, 2020, p. 7). Moss (2006) argues that the growing emphasis on standardisation, attainment and the assessment of measurable outcomes, increasingly places ECEC practitioners in the role of technicians, responsible for the transmission of knowledge to enable children to successfully progress through pre-determined developmental milestones. This focus on technical practice in ECEC marginalises relational practices that cannot be easily measured (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Goodfellow, 2008). The emergence of standardised approaches that focus practice on measurable outcomes to satisfy external bodies may prohibit opportunities for practitioners to demonstrate their own agency in enacting practice that aligns with their relational philosophy (Gooch and Powell, 2013). Rejection of the status quo in ECEC policy involves a “transformative” reimagining of ECEC, placing “cooperation and participation, democracy and listening” at the heart of pedagogical design (Moss and Cameron, 2020, p.232). Such a change in direction may provide the opportunity to revisit the status of young children and uphold the UNCRC commitments to the participation rights of young children.

#### *4.3.2 Participatory practice with children under three as a caring and relational endeavour*

When constructing understanding of the status of participation rights with very young children there is an appreciation that children, like adults, are connected to others through social networks and therefore notions of rights are understood within the context of interdependent relationships (Cockburn, 2005; Kjørholt, 2013). With very young children a sense of belonging and being heard within early childhood education and care contexts derives from close personal relationships with caring professionals (Page, Clare and Nutbrown, 2013). The role of ECEC practitioners can be viewed within a “relational ethics of care” (Noddings, 2010. P. 391). An ethic of care emphasises the interplay between

practitioner and child, with a focus on attentiveness and a commitment to understanding the needs of the cared-for (Noddings, 2012). From such a perspective, caring is “the process of putting aside your own choices, preferences, and ideas to welcome another person’s preferences” (Christie, 2018, p.11). Noddings (2013) characterises caring relationships as reciprocal, in which both parties engage together in relational exchange. Within this relationship, caring involves “engrossment” through close and receptive attention between the carer and the cared for (Noddings, 2013, p.17). Relationships are centred around key dimensions of “reciprocity, intimacy and commitment” and involve a dynamic exchange within a social environment (Degotardi and Pearson, 2009, p. 145). In a systematic review of international research exploring quality early childcare provision for babies and young children under three, Mathers et al (2014, p.5) identified “stable relationships and interactions with sensitive and responsive adults” as a core feature of high-quality pedagogy for young children. Through mutually attuned encounters, within the context of a responsive relationship, the world of the baby can be understood (David et al, 2003). Responsive care giving involves practitioners who see “the world from the child’s point of view” (Belsky, 2007, p.18). It is through sensitive responsiveness that the voice of the young child can be heard, thus providing favourable conditions for participation rights to be realised.

The quality of the relationship between practitioner and child influences the ability of young children to act as active participants in their learning and care. Bae (2012) conducted an ethnographic study of two preschool teachers working with children aged 3-6 in Norway, exploring interactions between practitioners and infants and the potential created for children’s participation. Findings highlighted the role of reciprocal encounters between children and practitioners, and the “attentive and focussed presence of mind” demonstrated by the teacher that promotes joint engagement, thus creating conditions for participation rights to be exercised by young children (Bae, 2012, p.61). The presence of the teacher creates an environment where children’s subtle communicative signals can be noticed and successfully interpreted. Through video observations of preschool

and primary aged children in Sweden, Pramling Samuelsson and Johansson (2009) examined the ways in which children invite teachers to be involved in their learning. Children, and particularly the youngest children, seek out opportunities to engage with teachers and use social cues to invite adults into their play. The presence of the teacher creates opportunities for children to actively share their perspectives and engage in joint meaning making with adults. The concept of presence relates to the connectedness between teacher and child and how awareness of the individual and group, through close and careful observations, can optimise conditions for meaningful learning encounters (Rodgers and Raider-Roth, 2006). Goodfellow (2008) highlights the importance of presence as a central aspect of the relational, caring nature of work in ECEC. Presence is aligned with notions of attunedness, responsiveness and the ability of practitioners to connect with young children.

Connectedness and the ability to respond to the needs of babies and young children within ECEC is established within a dynamic relationship, or “triangle of care” between parent, child and practitioner (Brooker, 2010, p.185). Page (2017, p.136) defines ‘professional love’ as the “reciprocal relationship” between child, parent and practitioner that is framed around a “triangle of love.” Such relationships are rooted in attachment theory (as discussed in 4.4.3) and relate to the intimate and enduring connections with young children that are created in partnership with the primary carer, providing a context within which children can flourish. Opportunities for a shared understanding of the child emerge within environments where authentic relationships of trust are agreed and a ‘permission’ to enact ‘professional love’ is established between parent and practitioner (Page, 2017, p.136). Brooker (2010) contends that relationships between parents and practitioners can be challenging as parental anxiety combined with a lack of respectful communication may lead to misunderstanding and distrust. Where agreement is reached about childcare practices and common understanding is shared about roles within the triangle of care, there are greater opportunities to avoid conflict and maintain successful partnerships (Hohmann, 2007).

Whilst increasing focus has been placed on parental involvement in ECEC, parental knowledge has largely been characterised as “inadequate,” “supplementary” and “unimportant,” positioning practitioners as experts and parents as subordinate (Hughes and Mac Naughton, 2000, p.242). When practitioner knowledge is privileged over parental perspectives, opportunities for embracing diverse understandings are diminished (Vandenbroeck, 2009). The opening of dialogue to explore and celebrate difference may combat difficulties in creating equal partnerships. Tronto (1998) highlights the complexity of caring relationships that are embedded with power struggles between the carer and cared for. Successful caring relationships are shaped by interactions that are “attentive, responsible, competent and responsive” to all members of the caring relationship (Tronto, 1998, p.19). The pedagogical philosophy of Reggio Emilia places egalitarian relationships at the heart of a democratic approach to early childhood education. As such, parents' perspectives are valued and contribute to a learning partnership between practitioners, children and families (Forman and Fyfe, 2012). Children, parents and practitioners are recognised as competent and equal members of the triangle, bringing their own perspectives to the shared experience of learning (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). The caring relationship is thus rooted in democratic practices that respect the voices of all stakeholders in the early childhood setting.

The next and final section of the literature review explores the underpinning theoretical lens through which the study has been designed and researched.

#### 4.4 Theoretical Positioning

In this section I examine the theoretical positioning of my research. Robinson and Taylor (2007, p.7) perceive theory as a “powerful explanatory tool” to uncover deeper understanding about an issue. As an instrument for understanding a phenomenon, the theoretical framework can act as a structure or foundation for shaping the research (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It can help to provide greater meaning as it grounds the research within a wider field of knowledge, acknowledging the positioning of the researcher (Adom, Hussein and

Adu Agyem, 2018). Wellington et al (2005, p.57) argue that the role of theory is “to provide generalisation, to give us powerful abstractions and to create the links and frameworks that can connect and interlink studies that would otherwise remain stand-alone and disconnected.” My research has sought to develop greater understanding of practitioner perspectives on the participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC settings. This has led me to consider the status of young children and the capabilities they possess as holders of rights. Exploring the intersection between the new sociology of childhood and developmentalism I have sought to consider the positioning of the youngest children as beings and/or becomings. This section of the literature review will explore underpinning theories informing understanding of the sociology of childhood, alongside developmental theories that explore childhood as a stage of life marked by key changes that occur within the context of relationships. Contributions from these often disparate disciplines converge to provide greater understanding of the capabilities of the youngest children as holders of rights.

#### *4.4.1 Sociological perspectives of early childhood*

This section of the literature review will consider the emergence of the sociological perspective of childhood and the influence this field has had on understandings of the capabilities of young children as active participants in their lives. The positionality of young children as either beings or becomings will be explored in relation to sociological perspectives. Moving towards a “relational sociology of childhood” (Gabriel, 2017, p. 37) the review will consider the ways in which a multi-disciplinary approach, drawing on contrasting perspectives, can contribute towards our understandings of childhood and the ability of young children to be active participants in their learning and care.

The new paradigm of the sociology of childhood emerged in the 1980s, presenting alternative narratives about the nature of childhood. New theories of childhood challenged the pervasiveness of developmental psychology and sociological theories of socialisation as the dominant discourses relating to understandings of childhood (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Prout (2011) contends that the new sociology of childhood was built upon four earlier

theoretical frameworks, including interactionist sociology, structuralist sociology, feminism and social constructionism. Through this discourse, a rejection of the child as a passive subject, and acknowledgment of childhood agency and the involvement of children as active co-constructors of knowledge became visible (James and James, 2004). Appreciation of childhood as a social construct, rooted in historical and cultural contexts, emerged as understanding about “diversely and locally constructed” childhoods developed (Prout, 2011, p.7).

Sociologists challenged perspectives rooted in traditional developmental psychology, that characterise childhood as a time of transition as children progress through normative stages of development, on route from immaturity to competency as fully formed humans in adulthood (Gabriel, 2017). Such perspectives present a western, “sentimentalised” representation of childhood that does not accurately reflect beliefs and practices in Majority World countries (Burman, 2008, p.293). Scholars within the field of sociology raised questions about the presumption of a universal concept of childhood, dominated by western values and beliefs (James and Prout, 1997). Western, developmental perspectives position children as adults in the making, framing the child as “not yet”, but on the way to becoming (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt, 2013, p.120). This characterisation of childhood as a time of dependency and vulnerability conflicts with many Majority World cultures, where agency and responsibility are more commonly experienced by children (Westwood, 2018). Whilst accepting that child development is situated within a specific stage of life, with core characteristics relating to physical changes, James and James (2004, p.13) argue that development is “interpreted, understood and socially institutionalised” within diverse cultural contexts.

In congruence with perspectives from the discipline of developmental psychology, the existing traditional sociological theories relating to socialisation have presented a particular view of childhood. Socialisation theories characterise childhood as a time for children to be guided to become fully developed citizens, and cement beliefs about childhood as a time of dependence,



wholly influenced by adult modelling and support, with little consideration of child agency (Corsaro, 2015). The new sociology of childhood presented an alternative vision, recognising the notion of childhood as a social construct, influenced by cultural and political contexts (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; James and James, 2004). Sociological perspectives challenged the perceived deficit model of childhood perpetuated by theories rooted in developmental psychology and earlier sociological models. The depiction of children as engaged social agents became visible, with an appreciation of children as active “social agents”, influencing relationships (Mayall, 2002, p.21).

The new sociology of childhood presents opportunities to explore alternative constructs of childhood. Instead of viewing children as incomplete humans, in the process of becoming adults, children can be celebrated as citizens able to engage as active social agents. Qvortrup et al (1994, p.2) define young children as “beings not becomings,” rejecting a deficit model of childhood and embracing the construction of childhood as immediate, engaged, active and present. This shift arose from a desire to afford children a rightful place in society, appreciating that children have their own needs that may conflict with adults. Maintaining a dependency construct restricts the ability of children to be recognised as agents in their own lives and perpetuates a societal structure that places the power with adults, over the lives of children, marginalising the ability for children’s perspectives to be heard and valued (Corsaro, 2015). Characterising children as beings enables different modes of thought and representation that place children alongside adults. From this theoretical position it can be argued that children hold their own unique perspectives on life, and therefore should be given opportunities to have their voices heard and acted upon (Kellett, 2009), in sympathy with the spirit and aims of Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1989).

The notion of children as beings, particularly when applied to the youngest, most vulnerable children, can present problematic challenges. There is an acceptance that young children have a degree of immaturity and may not possess the long-term perspective necessary to make fully informed and appropriate decisions

(Hemrica and Heyting, 2004). The world of a baby is small, focussed on close personal relationships, with limited understanding of the world beyond immediate needs. Perspectives highlighting the value of participatory practice contend that participation leads to understandings of citizenship and democracy, suggesting that there is an element of what is to come (Lansdown, 2005). Children are active agents on their way to developing a secure understanding of democracy – but they may not yet have full appreciation of such concepts. The requirement of the adult to be a facilitator of participation suggests that young children are not yet able to realise their own participation rights without support, denoting an element of becoming and an appreciation of developing competency. Observing toddlers in a Finnish pre-school context, Kalliala (2014, p.14) found that whilst there was evidence of competency as active participants, young children also demonstrated reliance on adults and thus were “both more competent and less competent”. Kalliala (2014) suggests that appreciation of young children as both competent and vulnerable may not be problematic.

Accepting an element of becoming acknowledges the ways in which children increasingly become socialised, developing life skills and abilities that eventually enable them to engage in the adult world. The binary positioning of young children as *either* beings *or* becomings fails to capture the complex nature of early childhood. Prout (2011) suggests that the new sociology of childhood emerged at a time when the wider field of sociology was rejecting modernist approaches that sought to order and standardise beliefs about the social world. However, in attempting to present alternative understandings about the nature of childhood and maintain a strong position within the field of childhood studies, the new sociology of childhood established “dichotomized oppositions” that cemented binary beliefs about the nature of childhood (Prout, 2011, p. 6). Rather than polarise young children as beings or becomings, a more helpful perspective is to accept the relationship between these concepts as aspects that complement one another. Children can be recognised concurrently as active social agents and as vulnerable subjects in need of protection (Herbots and Put, 2015).

Appreciating children as beings *and* becomings acknowledges agency in childhood whilst accepting transition and change as a part of life – children are actively involved in their own social engagement with the world, as they become adults (Uprichard, 2008). Indeed, the developing nature of life continues through the lifespan. Prout (2011, p.8) argues that “both children and adults should be seen through a multiplicity of becomings in which all are incomplete and dependent.” Children may need the support of adults to enable opportunities for participation, but likewise adults are dependent beings, living in connection with others. Participation as a means through which agency can be realised rests on an interdependency between adults and children (Esser et al, 2016). Depicting children solely as becomings - on route to fully developed adults - perpetuates the notion that change and transition is solely within the remit of childhood and does not acknowledge the temporality of the full life span. This mindset perpetuates a deficit model of childhood that accepts notions of incompetence and intellectual inferiority in comparison with adulthood and fails to give weight to the capabilities of children (Green, 2010). Acknowledging children as beings *and* becomings may mitigate against this deficit model of childhood.

This dual, and complementary perspective is echoed in the ways in which children paradoxically define their own childhoods. Children recognise their own social agency whilst acknowledging their interdependence with adults as they progress through an “apprenticeship” to adulthood (Mayall, 2000, p.255). This mediation between being and becoming allows spaces for understanding of temporality to exist. Young children are active social agents, but they are also on the way to developing as citizens. This is reflected in the UNCRC, which presents potentially conflicting constructs of childhood through the presentation of protection and participation rights. The dual construct of the child as vulnerable and in need of protection and the child as active social agent presents a perspective that acknowledges agency alongside dependency. Such a perspective does not seek to negate the voice of the child but rather highlights the position of rights within social contexts, where children are both “autonomous and dependent” (Neale and Smart, 1998, p.16).

The field of childhood studies has created opportunities for a multi-disciplinary approach (Woodhead and Montgomery, 2003; Powell and Smith, 2018). However, this has often been presented as opposing disciplines, with sociological perspectives often distanced from developmental approaches, perhaps as a result of a desire to create a strong position for the new sociology of childhood. It could be argued, as highlighted by Smith and Greene (2015), that childhood studies has become a *multidisciplinary* field rather than *interdisciplinary*, highlighting the lack of truly joined up approaches, but nevertheless acknowledging this as a field of study that draws on multiple perspectives. Prout (2005) advocates for greater interdisciplinary approaches within the field of childhood studies in order to develop greater understanding of childhood and children's worlds. There is a growing acceptance that childhood is "simultaneously biological and social" and thus closer alignment across fields of study brings opportunities for new understandings (Smith and Greene, 2015, p.172). This is not without challenge as disciplines are firmly rooted in their own structure, language and epistemology. Thorne (2007, p.148) argues that childhood studies is '*pluridisciplinary*,' drawing on knowledge from disparate fields of study but without joined up research or discussion. She calls for the creation of a "fully trans-disciplinary, theoretically eclectic mix" approach that can transcend the boundaries of disciplines associated with childhood studies, such as sociology and psychology (Smith and Greene, 2015, p.226).

Whilst the field of childhood studies cannot yet claim to be truly interdisciplinary, there is growing appetite for genuine partnership between sociological and psychological research (Green, 2010). Gabriel (2014) proposes a "relational sociology" of childhood, integrating ideas from sociology, psychology and biology. He argues that a multi-layered approach provides opportunities for critique of existing theories and spaces for new research to emerge but is dependent on sociologists overcoming resistance to developmental psychology. Thorne (2007) argues that greater understanding of the development of children over time and within social contexts will only be secured through appreciation of the contribution diverse disciplines can make to one another. This rests on the

need for “extensive mutual dialogue to transcend this particular wall of silence” (Thorne, 2007, p.150). Shared regard for and consideration of alternative paradigms may provide opportunities for richer understanding about the status of childhood, young children and their capacities as social beings. Drawing on concepts from developmental psychology and sociology, I position my research within the broader field of childhood studies, acknowledging diverse disciplines that contribute to understandings about childhood and development and how these relate to the application of participation rights in ECEC contexts.

#### *4.4.2 Developmental psychology*

This section of the literature review explores the contribution of developmental psychology to understanding about the capacity of young children to be holders of participation rights. Acknowledging criticisms levied against developmental psychology, the review considers the alignment of this discipline with ECEC. Exploration of the young child as active meaning maker is discussed in relation to constructivist and social constructivist perspectives. The review draws on modern research within the field of development psychology, highlighting the competency of infants to be active participants in social encounters. Following this section, a specific focus on attachment theory examines the status of infant/practitioner relationships in ECEC contexts.

Developmental psychology has been a contentious discourse within the field of childhood studies as it has been characterised as a discipline that inherently presents a deficit model of childhood, emphasising the needs of children within a context of dependency (Woodhead 1997). The focus on development suggests that children are not yet fully formed humans but rather on route to becoming adults, thus placing childhood as a time of incompetence in comparison with adulthood as a time when full competence is achieved (James and James, 2004). Thus, the construction of the child from a developmental perspective positions the young child as dependent and lacking capability, restricting opportunities to

acknowledge the child as a competent social actor able to exercise participation rights.

Development is linked to biological changes, with a focus on the specific changes that occur throughout childhood. Morss (1990) contends that the developmental paradigm rests on an assumption that humans improve with age, progressing from incomplete beings in childhood through to full competency in adulthood:

Perhaps the most fundamental assumption concerning an overall picture of individual development is that of progress. Derived from, or at least legitimated by biological sources, the notion that the individual gets better and better as time passes has been central to most developmental thinking. (Morss, 1990, p.173)

Such a perspective does not provide space to perceive development as something that ebbs and flows through the life span but rather is constructed as a flat, linear and predictable process that relates only to childhood.

Developmental stage theories have presented the construction of childhood as a time of change and progression through a set of predictable, normative stages of development.

Piaget (1964) identified stages of cognitive development that children progress through as a process of maturation. The stages are chronologically defined by age and characterised by a set of developmental norms that present childhood as the unfolding of a “normal and universal” progression to adulthood (Jenks, 2005, p.21). This universal depiction of childhood development, which can be objectively understood, observed and measured, is largely centred on a particular construction of childhood that is situated within western culture (Rogoff, 2003). Fixed notions of development fail to appreciate cultural difference and the influence of social context and relationships on the developing child, perpetuating a standardised view of development that limits scope for critical examination of developmental practices (Fleer, 2008). Working within the field of psychology, Burman (2008) has presented a critique of the developmental paradigm, arguing that it is “culture-blind,” fails to acknowledge

“childhood subjectivity and agency” and presents the child as “lacking knowledge, hence requiring protection and education” (Burman, 2008, p.82). This reflects sociological critiques of developmental psychology, highlighting resistance of the developmental paradigm to appreciate the child as a competent being. However, Hammersley (2017) argues that such criticism of developmental psychology is unfounded as a large body of research within this field draws on constructivist perspectives of learning that acknowledge the influence of the child in their learning.

Constructivism as a theory of development presents learning as an active process where the child constructs knowledge of the world through interaction with her environment (Packer, 2017). Thus, the central argument of constructivism presents children as “active participants in their own development” and rejects the notion that children passively acquire knowledge through direct instruction (Schaffer, 2006, p.36). Rather than knowledge deficient, children are active knowledge seekers. Whilst Piaget accepted the relationship between the individual and society, he placed greater emphasis on the individual, conducting laboratory experiments with children in isolation rather than studying the influence of social and cultural context on development (Rogoff, 1990). Situating development within the individual, measured through universal norms relating to western ideals, limits opportunities to consider diversity of experience and the influence of society and cultural context. The exclusion of cultural relevance within the experimental design employed by Piaget failed to acknowledge the potential for children to demonstrate higher cognitive abilities if given tasks relevant to their context (Burman, 2008). Analysing the experimental conditions used by Piaget, Donaldson (1978) discovered that young children demonstrate higher levels of cognitive understanding when given tasks set in familiar conditions with apparatus relevant to their own context. Such critiques challenge constructivist perspectives that reduce development to a set of predetermined, universal stages, highlighting the role of social and cultural context.

Social constructivism aligns with constructivism, acknowledging the child as the active meaning maker. However, greater emphasis is placed on the social context of learning and development. This perspective contends that psychological development is rooted in 'meaning-infused interactions' between humans (Greene, 1999, p.253). The child cannot be understood solely as a biological organism, devoid of cultural influence, but rather as a social creature in connection with others and situated within relationships and social groups. Vygotsky (1978) theorised the process of development, arguing that understanding begins within social encounters before being internalised within the individual:

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)....All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978, p.66)

Thus, a core distinction between constructivist and social constructivist perspectives is the relevance of social context to individual development. Burman (2008, p.188) summarises that Piaget positions development from the "inside out", starting within the individual, whereas Vygotsky highlights the environment and social interaction through language as the starting point for development, thus moving from "outside in".

The contribution of outside, sociocultural factors have been acknowledged as fundamental aspects of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rogoff, 2003; Harkness and Super, 2021). Explorations of development that only focus on the individual present children as asocial, demonstrating a blindness to wider social or environmental influences. Rogoff, Dahl and Callanan (2018) call for a refocussing of developmental research that is not confined to experimental design, but instead seeks to examine and understand children's lived experiences within their cultural contexts. Introducing the concept of the "developmental niche," Super and Harkness (1994, p.217) advocate for research that examines the social and cultural context within which young children experience child rearing. Such approaches to research offer opportunities to explore



development within cultural communities, thus positioning children as relational beings, influenced by others and influencing social dynamics. From this perspective, development is not explored as an individual unfolding, detached from the wider social context. Rather, it is acknowledged as a dynamic and social process through which the young child engages with others as an active participant.

Increasingly, developmental psychology has offered insights into the capabilities of the youngest children as active social agents. Extending understanding beyond traditional developmental theories, Trevarthen (2004) advocates for a developmental paradigm that embraces knowledge of the infant as a social actor:

Once we abandon reductive assumptions based on prejudices that the newborn must be a reactive sensory-motor system without coherence of intention, a different 'sociable' infant appears.  
(Trevarthen, 2004, p.9)

Drawing on evidence examining infant behaviours, Trevarthen (2011b, p.174) describes babies as 'story-seeking' from birth, engaged in reciprocal relationships as they actively contribute to intimate social encounters with adults. As intentional partners, infants seek out responsiveness from companions. The intrinsic motivation of the baby to engage in communicative encounters highlights intersubjectivity, or the ability to appreciate the other within an intentional exchange (Trevarthen and Aitken, 2001). Goldberg (1977, p.163) rejects a characterisation of the baby as a "passive blob," highlighting the competency of infants in using a repertoire of behaviours that capture and sustain the attention of the adult. As intentional social actors, very young children demonstrate capacities to exercise participation rights through interactive behaviours that communicate their perspectives.

The extension of infant capabilities as active and intentional communicators beyond the family unit has revealed understanding about the ways in which babies relate to adults in ECEC contexts. Examining infant communicative behaviours in ECEC settings, Salmon et al (2017) observed the ability of babies to lead relationships with their care givers. Babies employ non-verbal

communication strategies, demonstrating agency as initiators of “sophisticated and emotionally charged negotiations” with practitioners (Salmon, Sumison, and Harrison, 2017, p.371). Researching practitioner responsiveness to infant communicative behaviours, Vallotton (2009) found that babies demonstrate competency in eliciting responses from their caregivers. Drawing on a range of communicative gestures, babies actively contribute to the caring relationship, thus influencing the quality of their care. This aligns with research by White, Peter and Redder (2015) in which observations highlighted the dialogic nature of encounters between infants and teachers, with both parties initiating interactions as part of a reciprocal and attuned relationship.

Although research within the field of developmental psychology has highlighted the active role of the infant in social contexts, much of the focus on child development within ECEC is framed by a deficit view of childhood.

Developmentalism has a hold on ECEC policy, positioning the young child as a developing entity, en route to mastering the skills of adulthood. The dominant discourse in ECEC policy constructs development as a linear, progressive and universal process. This can be observed in the EYFS, presented as a progress model of learning with a focus on educational programmes that identify linear, standardised expected levels of development (DfE, 2020a). Osgood (2016, p.162) explores the importance of raising questions about theories that inform curricula, arguing that the EYFS demonstrates a “preoccupation with standardisation, certainty and measurability.” Pedagogies rooted in a narrow view of developmentalism, centred on the acquisition of a predetermined set of skills, present a construction of the young child as a human in the making, thus limiting opportunities to embed participation rights. Land et al (2020, p.9) advocate for a pedagogy that resists developmental narratives that locate “children in the future as productive citizens and in the present as humans-in-progress.” Developmentalism has been commandeered by a standards agenda that presents a particular ideology for ECEC, arguably in conflict with democratic pedagogies. Moss (2017) argues that early childhood education is dominated by a narrative that prioritises assessment of development against standardised measurements with a promise of promoting better outcomes, particularly for

children from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, reimagining the developing child as an intentional collaborator offers possibilities to align findings from developmental psychology with sociological perspectives. A joint discourse presents an opportunity to appreciate agency and social context alongside understandings of infant development, thus creating conditions for participation rights in early childhood to be acknowledged and understood.

#### *4.4.3 Attachment Theory and the Key Person Approach*

Recognising rights from birth, the Committee on the Rights of the Child establishes the importance of ensuring young children are provided with “physical nurturance, emotional care and sensitive guidance,” through the formation of strong attachments with their primary carers (UN,CRC, 2006, p.3). In ECEC contexts, the importance of secure relationships between young children and practitioners is commonly framed around attachment theory and the establishment of a key person approach that promotes close bonds between children and their carers. Lundy’s (2007, p.937) model of participation includes the “right of audience,” highlighting the need to identify a specified adult with responsibility for listening to, and acting upon, the voice of the child. Arguably, the key person relationship provides a framework for ‘audience,’ as the practitioner working closely with the young child is well placed to be the active listener, thereby promoting participation rights. This section of the literature review will consider the role of attachment theory in ECEC, and how key person relationships might contribute to the application of participation rights with very young children.

Attachment theory, developed by Bowlby and Ainsworth (Bowlby, 1958; Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1973; Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991) asserts that babies are born with innate attachment behaviours, such as crying and smiling, that act as signals for caregivers to respond to. These signals are used to maintain proximity to the attachment figure to ensure safety. The primary attachment figure, often the mother, is “available and responsive” thus creating a sense of security for the young child (Bowlby, 1988, p.30). Through

this responsiveness the attachment figure becomes the “secure base from which to explore the world” (Ainsworth and Marvin, 1995, p.7). The attachment relationship creates the conditions for the child to develop a “working model” of the self that evolves through the responsiveness of the attachment figure and creates an expectation for future relationships (Bowlby, 1973, p. 202). Thus, attachment theory proposes that the quality of attachment relationships in early childhood influences the development of healthy relationships through the life span (Page, 2016).

Critiques of attachment theory have explored the difficulties of positioning the responsibility of positive infant development solely with the mother. Emphasis on the mother/child dyad emerged from research exploring the impact of maternal deprivation, for example when children were separated from mothers during hospitalisation (Alsop-Shields and Mohay, 2001). Attachment theory came to the fore during the post second world war era when motherhood and the primary role of women as carers within the home was promoted (Burman, 2008). Feminist perspectives highlight the role of attachment theory in mother-blaming and perpetuating patriarchal values (Contratto, 2002). A focus on the mother/child dyad potentially fails to acknowledge the importance of multiple family connections and the capacity of the infant to influence these reciprocal relationships (McHale, 2007). However, modern approaches to attachment theory have extended the application of the attachment relationship beyond mother/infant (Kennedy, Betts and Underwood, 2014). Knudson-Martin (2012) argues that attachment theory offers the potential to focus on relational aspects and the importance of attunement within nurturing relationships. Within ECEC, attachment theory provides a framework for establishing caring relationships between children and their primary caregivers.

There is growing recognition that babies and young children who are cared for in group settings benefit from close personal relationships with practitioners who act as secondary attachment figures (Ebbeck and Yim, 2009; Read, 2010; Page, Clare and Nutbrown, 2013). Attachment theory has had a significant impact on the delivery of childcare practices, with increasing focus on the role of close

personal relationships in ECEC contexts (Degotardi, 2014). Healthy attachment relationships in childcare settings are developed through a primary caregiving approach, where young children are supported by an identified practitioner who takes responsibility for maintaining a special, caring relationship with the child (Goldschmied and Jackson, 2003; Page, 2016). In England there is a statutory requirement for all children in the EYFS to be assigned a “key person” who has responsibility for establishing a “settled relationship” with the child to ensure their individual developmental needs are met (DfE, 2017a, p.22-23). The key person approach emphasises the importance of enabling and caring relationships between children and practitioners:

The Key Person makes sure that....the child feels special and individual, cherished and thought about by someone in particular while they are away from home. It is as though the child was ‘camped out in the Key Person’s mind’ or that there is an elastic thread of attachment that allows for being apart as well as for being together. The child will experience a close relationship that is affectionate and reliable.  
(Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2012, p.23)

The nurturing relationship between child and practitioner is not intended to supplant the existing close bond between parent and child, but rather provide stability and emotional responsiveness whilst the child is being cared for away from home. As such, the key person becomes a significant secondary attachment figure, ensuring the emotional needs of the young child are met (Read, 2010).

Whilst the importance of secure and nurturing relationships in ECEC settings has been widely acknowledged, there remain questions about the legitimacy of prioritising attachment theory as the primary framework for understanding relationships in early childhood contexts. A focus on the adult/child dyad limits opportunities to explore and understand multiple relationships in ECEC centres, including peer relationships and the building of community (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 2007). Degotardi and Pearson (2009) argue that attachment theory directs attention towards individual, biological behaviours of proximity seeking, without considering the wider social and cultural context. Relational pedagogies

underpinned by connection, community and interdependence extend understanding of infant development beyond individual attachment relationships. This is visible in the Reggio Emilia preschools, where community, social cohesion and the co-construction of knowledge in social groups is a focus for practice (Gandini, 2012). Arguably, a narrow and dominant focus on attachment theory may limit opportunities to promote agency and create conditions for participation rights to thrive. Trevarthen (2004, p.26) proposes an approach to attachment that constructs relationships beyond dependency and towards friendship, framed by “emotions of shared discovery,” as infants engage in playful encounters with responsive companions. However, overwhelming evidence suggests the development of consistent relationships of attachment in ECEC contexts offers advantages for young children, families and practitioners (Howes and Hamilton, 1993; Raikes, 1996; Lee, 2006; Ebbeck and Yim, 2009; Ebbeck et al, 2015). Attachment theory continues to demand attention as a lens through which practitioners in ECEC settings conceptualise the key person role and enact responsive relationships with infants in their care.

A primary focus for the key person is the ability to attune to the child (Dowling, 2014). Gerhardt (2004) argues that babies are active communicators, born ready to engage in social relationships but are equally dependent on responsive adults who can attune through responsive encounters. Whilst the young child is understood as a human being with agency, this is socially dependent. Agency is developed through social networks and responsive relationships. The young baby is thus understood as “an interactive project not a self-powered one” (Gerhardt, 2004, p. 18). Ainsworth (1969) rejected a passive view of the young child within the attachment relationship, having observed the deliberate ways in which babies elicit reactions from mothers, initiating interactions as part of the attachment behaviours employed to maintain safety and security.

Responsiveness to these invitations provides the backdrop for the world of the baby to become known to the adult. Dialogue between the baby and adult facilitates opportunities for the baby to develop a voice, and it is through responsiveness that the voice of the baby is affirmed. Edwards and Raikes (2002,

p.14) characterise this responsive relationship as a “dance” in which the attuned practitioner responds to the baby’s cues for engagement.

The quality of the key person relationship is related to the ability of the adult to understand and meet the needs of the young child (Page, Clare and Nutbrown, 2013). Responsiveness to young children involves a process of interpretation by the adult. Within family relationships the ability to attune and interpret the world of the baby has been theorised as ‘mind-mindedness’, which is defined as the capacity to appropriately interpret and understand the baby’s internal mental state and relates to maternal sensitivity and the quality of the attachment relationship between the mother and baby (Meins, 1997; Meins et al, 2012; Zeegers et al, 2017). Mind-mindedness rests on the ability of the care giver to appreciate the baby as a “feeling, intentional, and sentient” being (Degotardi and Sweller, 2012, p.253). It provides the framework for young children to develop a sense of self and is dependent on interactions with a parent who is able to view the child as a “psychological agent” (Sharp and Fonagy, 2008, p.737). Research methods that assess mind-mindedness draw on observations of adult-baby interactions and focus on the ability of the carer to accurately describe the intentions of the baby, rather than enforce an adult agenda on the observed behaviour (Meins, 2013). Conducting research in childcare institutions Degotardi and Sweller (2012) identified mind-mindedness in practitioner/infant interactions, highlighting the role of practitioner sensitivity when interpreting infant behaviours. This ability to sensitively interpret infant communication is highlighted by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, who advocate for a “child-centred attitude,” characterised by adults who seek ways to understand the diverse ways in which young children communicate thus creating conditions for the promotion of rights with young children (UN, CRC, 2005, p.7).

The ability to interpret behaviours and respond to very young children in ECEC contexts is not without challenge. Baby room practice is emotionally demanding work, led by highly committed practitioners who endeavour to meet the needs of babies and their families (Goouch and Powell, 2013). Local and national “spheres of influence” present obstacles for responsive caregiving as practice is directed

by multiple and diverse priorities, often acting in tension with the needs of the baby as perceived by practitioners (Powell and Goouch, 2012, p.116). Examining attachment relationships in nursery settings, Page and Elfer (2013, p.564) highlight the “logistical and emotional complexity” of nursery practice. Intense emotional relationships with young children give rise to complex emotions as practitioners manage their own needs alongside the needs of the babies they become closely connected to. The development of intimate relationships is further complicated as practitioners grapple with confidence in implementing loving relationships with young children within a wider policy context (Page, 2017).

The challenge of establishing and sustaining loving, responsive key person relationships sits within a backdrop of ECEC in which care arguably has lower status than education. With a focus on competition and individual gain, neoliberalism has infiltrated ECEC and positioned learning and academic achievement ahead of pedagogies rooted in love and care (Rouse and Hadley, 2018). The achievement gap of children from disadvantaged backgrounds has given rise to a discourse that promotes greater focus on learning in relation to school readiness in early childhood (Urban, 2015). Dahlberg and Moss (2005, p.92) argue that care and learning are inseparable aspects of education, advocating for a pedagogy underpinned by an ethical stance that positions “attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness to the Other” as a central commitment. Care, from this perspective, moves beyond notions of ‘childcare’ that relate only to institutions enabling parents to work, but instead highlight an ethics of care, driven by moral responsibility and rooted in respectful relationships that celebrate difference (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Such relational pedagogies highlight child agency and the role of relationships within communities, with less attention to the potential of individual key person relationships of attachment. Taggart (2016) explores notions of care ethics in early childhood contexts, highlighting the tension between psychological approaches that focus on the individual and sociological perspectives that focus on community. He calls for a “psycho-social” approach, acknowledging both individual emotional development and the role of pedagogies that promote



agency, community and democracy (Taggart, 2016, p.175). Researching the perspectives of nursery managers, Elfer and Page (2015) found that baby room practice celebrates infant agency whilst acknowledging dependency within attachment relationships. An early childhood pedagogy for children under three demands consideration of care within key person relationships that provide the context for infants to thrive (Page, 2016).

## 4.5 Summary of Chapter Four

The literature review has provided a critical evaluation of relevant research within the field of participation rights in childhood as understood through Article 12 of the UNCRC. The status of young children as holders of rights has been explored with reference to the ways in which pedagogies of listening in ECEC contexts promote opportunities for active participation. The review has considered the relational aspect of practice with young children, drawing on notions of care and how caring relationships underpin practice in ECEC settings. The underpinning theoretical positioning of the research is discussed, with examination of the construction of the young child from both sociological and psychological perspectives. From the field of developmental psychology, the contribution of attachment theory and how this relates to relationships between young children and practitioners in ECEC contexts has been examined.

Little is known about the ways in which participation rights are understood by practitioners working with children under three in early years settings in England. Overwhelming research highlights the need for very young children attending early childhood settings to be cared for by responsive adults in nurturing environments (Trevarthen et al, 2002; NICHD, 2006; Mahers et al, 2014). The capabilities of the youngest children as competent social actors have been observed, highlighting the status of the youngest children as active participants (Alderson, Hawthorne, and Killen, 2005). I have approached my research within this context; acknowledging the vulnerability of babies whilst

celebrating their agency and wondering how participation rights in ECEC might be understood by practitioners who care for the youngest children.

Chapter five provides a detailed account of the methodological positioning of the research. The chapter includes an exploration of narrative inquiry and how I have engaged with this as a tool to capture the perspectives of graduate early childhood practitioners working with the youngest children in ECEC settings.

## Chapter Five: Methodology, Methods and Ethics

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter of the thesis outlines the methodological approach that has shaped my doctoral project. It examines my underpinning epistemological and ontological positioning and how this has informed methodological decisions. The research, situated within a constructionist research paradigm, is framed by a narrative approach which seeks to draw on practitioner voices and experiences to illuminate understanding about the participation rights of the youngest children in childcare contexts. The research question has driven my desire to employ a narrative methodology in order to capture authentic voices of graduate practitioners working in the field:

***What beliefs do graduate practitioners working in early childhood education and care settings in England hold about the participation rights of young children (aged 0-3), with specific reference to Article 12 of the UNCRC ?***

### 5.2 Ontological and Epistemological Positioning

As a qualitative researcher I have developed research questions that focus on the “why and how of human interactions” (Agee, 2009, p. 432). My research paradigm is defined by my “philosophical orientation,” which is informed by my understanding of the nature of reality (ontology) and how the social world can be understood (epistemology) (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017, p.26). Thus, my epistemological and ontological beliefs have shaped the research questions which in turn have informed the methodological approach. My methodological approach is underpinned by a social constructionist ontology and epistemology. I subscribe to the view that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Crotty (2003, p.42) defines constructionism as the view that all knowledge “is contingent upon human

practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context". As a social researcher I am interested in human experience and hold the view that we develop understanding of the social world from the "social actors that inhabit it" (Blaikie, 2007, p.180). My research does not align with a positivist paradigm, as I do not believe that complex social phenomena can be reduced to isolated, generalizable facts. I have therefore employed an interpretivist research design, which has provided a framework to capture qualitative data that enables the voices of participants to be heard, and rich, diverse meanings to emerge. Interpretivist approaches celebrate the social world as a "nuanced, multi-layered phenomenon whose complexity is best understood through a process of interpretation" (Denscombe, 2017, p.8). I have not sought to discover an unquestionable 'truth' about the participation rights of the youngest children, but rather have developed research questions that aim to understand the multiple perspectives of practitioners working with babies and toddlers. It is their experiences that I have wanted to understand, with the aim of providing spaces for their perspectives to be heard and understood.

In alignment with principles established in the European Early Childhood Education Research (EECERA) ethical code for researchers, my research is framed around "democratic values," underpinned by a deep respect for the rich and diverse perspectives that participants bring to the research relationship (Bertram et al, 2016, p.2). Democratic research is rooted in a commitment to social justice, making visible the lived experiences of participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). The insights of practitioners working with very young children have been sought to provide greater understanding of the participatory rights of babies and toddlers, thus developing understanding of the ways in which practitioners perceive and engage with the youngest children as democratic citizens with rights. Vandenbroeck et al (2012) suggest that the dominant positivist paradigm may not always provide a democratic framework for early childhood research. They argue that research derived from evidence based, 'what works', approaches, rests on particular presumptions about the nature of

early childhood and purpose of ECEC. Moss (2015, p.230) argues that political interest in early childhood education has sought to reduce early learning to a purely technical practice, drawing on large scale positivist research design to determine “what works” to accelerate development and maximise school readiness. The reduction of ECEC practice to technical function limits opportunities to observe other realities or ways of understanding or experiencing ECEC, obscuring “democratic deliberation about critical or political questions” (Moss, 2015, p.230). Biesta (2007, p.10) argues that education is a “moral practice more than a technological enterprise” and as such cannot be solely researched through positivist approaches that seek to identify professional “effectiveness”. Education is a social, moral practice, led by educators who make multiple decisions about what works in varying contexts with diverse groups of students. A more democratic paradigm provides opportunities to explore “different understandings of educational reality and different ways of imagining a possible future” (Biesta, 2007, p. 21).

In seeking to adopt a democratic approach to my research I have situated my project within a paradigm that acknowledges and attempts to address power dynamics between myself as the researcher and the participants. I appreciate there is an unequal power balance that cannot be ignored or eradicated. I am the researcher – I have identified the research question, I am the creator of the research design, I have chosen the methodological approach and I have ultimately formulated the findings. I am not working in equal partnership with participants as co-researchers. However, my research has aimed to provide spaces for the participants to bring their own understandings to the research problem and to shape the direction of inquiry and analysis as co-constructors of knowledge within the project. Research within a social constructionist paradigm advocates for the “democratisation of the research relationship” (Burr, 2015, p.174). Aligning with social constructionist perspectives, my project has been designed with the intention of developing understanding through co-construction of knowledge with my participants. My research design is underpinned by a commitment to enable the voices of participants to be heard.

My interest in listening to participant voices led me to narrative inquiry (5.3) which is situated within a “pragmatic ontology of experience” (Clandinin and Murphy, 2009, p.42). Rooted in Dewey’s theory of experience, narrative inquiry is a methodology used to explore storied experiences (Clandinin and Murphy, 2009; Hutchinson, 2015). Dewey (1997) highlighted the connection between education and experience, arguing that learning happens through experiences and interactions with others and the environment. Experience does not happen in a “vacuum”, but rather is situated within a social context (Dewey, 1997, p.40). Reflecting Deweyan theory, narrative inquiry examines the interaction between the personal, social and environmental, expressed through stories of lived experiences (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

Framed by an “ontological commitment to the relational”, narrative inquiry positions ethical relationships between researchers and participants at the core of the research process (Clandinin and Murphy, 2009, p.600). Bruce (2008, p. 327) contends that narrative inquiry presents a methodological approach that “affirms, values and validates” participant experiences. This was keenly illustrated to me during a seminar led by Professor Ivor Goodson during stage one of my EdD. Professor Goodson reported on a research project that examined experiences of learning. Two teams of researchers were used. One team used a semi-structured interview approach, framing questions around participant experiences of learning, specifically within school settings. The other group used a narrative approach and asked participants to discuss their experiences of learning, leaving concepts of ‘learning’ open for participants to interpret. The two data sets produced different results as the group engaged in narrative inquiry did not mention school during interviews but instead focussed on learning in differing contexts (learning to drive, learning skills in the workforce, learning at home as children etc...). Narrative inquiry provided space for participants to co-construct meanings of learning, creating opportunities for data capture of experiences beyond a narrow, researcher defined scope, thus enabling the voices of participants to direct research findings. As relational research, narrative inquiry is deeply embedded within an ethical framework, prioritising

ethical matters (5.6), with explicit consideration of the relationship between researcher and participant (Clandinin, 2013).

### 5.3 Narrative Inquiry

Having introduced my interpretivist ontology and epistemology, the purpose of this section is to outline how this position, combined with my commitment to practitioner and children's voices, led to narrative inquiry as the basis of my methodological design. Narrative inquiry aligns with the social constructionist paradigm that frames the research project. As a qualitative research methodology, narrative inquiry has been used to gather, understand and analyse the lived experiences of ECEC practitioners working with the youngest children.

At the heart of this research project is the centrality of 'voice' as a means through which human experience can be shared and understood. Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p.63) argue that issues of voice relate to the "positional and political" aspects of social research. Whilst qualitative data seeks to capture the voices of participants, the positionality of the researcher is closely aligned to data collection and analysis through the process of interpretation and translation. Voices are not heard in a social vacuum but rather within a political context, shaping the questions asked and the narratives gathered. Ultimately the aim of research should be to honour voices, thus 'voice' is understood as a political mechanism for realising social change (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). The voice of young children and the application of pedagogies of listening to empower babies and toddlers as active agents in their own learning and care has shaped my own personal pedagogy and has directed my interest towards this field of study. My pedagogy has been shaped by the children and students I have worked with, both in early years education and HE, and how listening to my students has formed the foundation of my work as a teacher. Participatory pedagogy is at the heart of my professional practice, and deeply embedded in my personal values and beliefs about the importance of listening, and therefore it felt inevitable that I would elect to use narrative inquiry to shape and direct data collection and analysis for my own doctoral studies.

When constructing my research plan layers of voice became visible with the centrality of voice as a mechanism for understanding human experience; the voices of young children and how these are heard and understood by practitioners; the voices of practitioners who work with young children and their own perspectives and understandings about participatory approaches. Alongside this, has been my own voice as the researcher and how my voice intersects with the participants through a “collaborative and reciprocal process” that helped shape the research question, approach and analysis (Goodson and Gill, 2011, p.25). Honouring the collaborative nature of narrative requires a commitment to listening, through “sustained attention” and an understanding of the narrative encounter as one of “being in relationship” (Clandinin, 2013, p.51). As a methodology that celebrates attentiveness to individual experience, narrative offers a “humanising” alternative to research favouring “statistics without stories” (Turvey, 2018, p.17).

Narrative inquiry can be viewed as a qualitative methodology used to understand human experience (Riessman, 2008). Narrative research seeks to “re-present the myriad perspectives or, in other words, the personal and shared truths that characterise human understanding of any and every social situation or life experience” (Sikes, 2012, p.127). Narrative inquiry involves storytelling. Every individual has their own story to tell about their experiences, interactions, and relationships. To make sense of our world we draw on the stories of our lived experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Xu and Connelly (2010, p.352) describe story as the “portal to experience” that enables us to understand the social phenomenon being studied. As a teacher educator the use of storytelling has framed much of my work with novice teachers and early childhood practitioners. I draw on my own stories as an educator to help students make links between theory, policy and practice, as they reflect on their own stories and construct their teacher identity. Narrative is thus a vehicle through which we can examine, reflect upon and understand the beliefs and values that shape professional practice (Hayler, 2011), and explore the “puzzles” of human experience (Caine, Estefan and Clandinin, 2013, p.576). Goodson (2013,



p.3) argues that understanding of human experience is “constructed and mediated” through the stories we share. This resonates with me and has driven me towards a methodology that can be used to listen and understand individual perspectives that emerge through experience.

Bruner (2004) suggests that in the process of telling the stories of our lives, we construct the ‘truth’ about our experiences, we “become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (p.694). From this perspective, human experience can be understood and explored through the stories constructed by individuals. Xu and Connelly (2010, p.355) define narrative inquiry as “experiencing the experience” and “thinking narratively”. Narrative thinking is thus a cognitive process, as we reflect on life experiences and bring our own meanings to the stories we share. Bruner (2004, p.692) argues that the construction of life narratives is not a “clear-crystal recital of something univocally given,” but rather a reflexive, interpretive act. Through the process of social interaction, the researcher and participant share their own narrative histories and jointly engage in the construction of stories, and thus the research narrative becomes a “co-production” between researcher and participant (Burr, 2015, p.172). This approach to research enables the complexities of social phenomena to be explored, unlike more traditional positivist approaches which may reduce human experience to numerical data (Xu and Connelly). Juzwik (2010, p.376-377) explores the limitations of narrative inquiry, arguing that the use of narrative as a way of knowing is problematic because the story telling can include “factual inaccuracies and harmful assumptions”. She warns that narrative has the potential to dilute conceptions of reality as the narrators will engage in a certain degree of “editing or filtering” when constructing stories. However, this critique suggests that narrative aims to provide an exact account of past events, providing a “mirror of the world ‘out there’” (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p.91). This is not the purpose or aim of narrative. Narrative does not aim to identify generalisable truths but rather is used as a way of “expressing human experience” (Polkinghorne, 2010, p.395). Narrative inquiry does not aim to capture empirical data that can be tested and replicated, but rather seeks to “elaborate and investigate individual interpretations and worldviews of complex

and human-centred events” (Webster and Mertova, 2007, p.89). Through narrative stories we explore events and experiences as a way of understanding social phenomenon.

The validity of narrative as a reliable way of ‘knowing’ may be brought to task because of the subjective nature of the process of storytelling. However, research within a social constructionist paradigm does not seek to determine an objective reality (Burr, 2015). Research narratives can never be presented as “neutral straightforward recountings” as they are situated within social contexts and bound in subjective interpretations (Sikes, 2012, p.132). Indeed, narrative research can provide spaces to question and challenge positivist claims to objective truths through greater understanding of the lived experiences of participants (Kim, 2015). Thus, narrative can be grouped within a group of qualitative methodologies that are “unapologetically subjective” (Sikes, 2006, p.112). The subjective nature of narrative research is accepted as an asset, rejecting notions of universal truths and focusing issues of validity around the authentic storying of participant narratives. My research has not aimed to discover objective answers about ‘what works’ and arrive at conclusions that can be generalisable. Instead, my aim was to gather narratives of practitioners working in the field with young children, and to “capture commonalities across individual experiences” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p.475). Thus, validity relates to the trustworthiness and authenticity of the representations of narratives.

Whilst it may be argued that personal narratives have the potential to shift and change through time, this does not negate the validity of the stories that are told. An important characteristic of narrative is the appreciation of temporality (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry appreciates the continuity of lived experiences through past, present and future, which suggests that lived stories are continually in “temporal transition” (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p.479). Lives are lived experiences, through time. Life evolves and our understanding of experience changes as we move through this dynamic process. This means that our interpretations of life events will change as time passes. We do not edit our stories, but rather we bring new understanding to past

experiences through our engagement with life over time. The stories gathered during my research represent the position of participants at a particular time, within the context of a rapidly changing policy landscape in ECEC (discussed in chapter three). As “stories of action within theory of context,” participant narratives are “located” within a specific time and place, and thus are understood in relation to the wider political and social context (Goodson, 2017a, p.5).

## 5.4 Participants

My research question emerged from experiences in my professional role as Programme Leader for EYPS/EYITT, and concerns about the changing emphasis of professional standards for graduate practitioners leading practice in early years childcare settings in England (1.2.1). I am interested in the ways in which leaders of practice conceptualise and enact Article 12 of the UNCRC with the youngest children and therefore undertook purposive sampling to recruit participants who were graduate leaders of practice working with children under three years of age. Participants were recruited from the EYPS/EYTS alumni network from the University of Brighton, working in Ofsted registered early childhood settings in the South East of England (Table 2). All participants were previously known to me through my professional role as Programme Leader. As such, the sample is not representative of the wider ECEC population but rather provides an in-depth exploration of the values and beliefs held of graduate practitioners who had previously been students of mine. Thus, they will have been exposed to debates and discussions relating to children’s rights in early childhood and potentially could have held similar attitudes towards ECEC provision. This research aims to contribute towards wider discourse around Article 12 and the application of these rights with specific reference to the capabilities of very young children as holders of participation rights. The sample was chosen as leaders working in ECEC and with a determination to amplify their voices within this discourse.

As I was conducting a narrative inquiry my aim was to maintain a manageable cohort of participants, with the intention of a maximum group of six. The initial call for participants was conducted by email (appendix 3). I contacted twelve members of the alumni network to scope interest in participating in the project, hoping that 50% might be interested in taking part. These twelve practitioners were identified with an aim to recruit a diverse range of graduate leaders. For example, included in recruitment were participants working in a variety of early years contexts (preschool, day nursery, childminding etc...), with varying levels of experience and leadership roles, including both EYPs (graduate Early Years Professionals who had qualified with the original set of professional standards) and EYTs (graduate Early Years Teachers who had qualified under the Teachers' Standards Early Years), and across the South East of England. Some of the participants work with children up to (and beyond) age five. However, for the purpose of the project I asked them to focus their reflections and our discussions on the youngest children in their care.

Of the twelve practitioners that were originally contacted, ten responded positively to my initial scoping email. This was my first ethical dilemma. I had to elect to proceed with ten, a larger sample than intended, or limit participation and choose six to proceed with the project. The responses to the scoping email were overwhelmingly positive (Table 1) and it would have been difficult to say 'no' to any of the respondents. I had opened the invitation to participate and felt a commitment to honouring this invitation.

*Table 1: Sample of responses from original scoping email to potential participants*

- *"I am so pleased to assist your study which has begun a line of thinking in my head"*
- *"I would be really happy to participate. Thank you for asking me I'm sure it will be really interesting"*
- *"I am absolutely on board, it sounds like it could be very interesting"*
- *"I'd love to do that"*
- *"I would be delighted to take part in your research!"*
- *"I would be honoured to become involved you never know it might inspire me"*
- *"I would really like to take part – thanks for asking!"*

This aligns with my belief that early years practitioners should be afforded the opportunities to share their experiences and have their voices heard. Early childhood education and care can be characterised as a marginalised sector within education, illustrated by low levels of pay and status, particularly in the PVI sector (Bonetti, 2019; Osgood, 2005; Osgood et al, 2017). This lack of professional recognition has resulted in feelings of “frustration and resentment” within the sector (Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Alback, 2020, p.21). This reflects my work with undergraduate and postgraduate work-based learning early childhood practitioners. I have had many conversations where students have expressed exasperation about the lack of professional respect they are awarded, and the general lack of understanding about the role of an early childhood educator. Through their research exploring baby room practice, Gooch and Powell (2013) developed networks of support for practitioners working with the youngest children. They found that practitioners involved in the project valued opportunities for professional dialogue, and that moments of reflection and discussion were a catalyst for increasing confidence and value in their work. Narrative approaches can enable marginalised groups to contribute to greater understanding about social structures, thus providing a richer understanding of the complexities of human encounters (Goodson and Gill, 2011). I have conducted this project with the intention to work alongside ECEC practitioners, providing a vehicle to promote professional agency by offering spaces for their voices to be documented and shared.

Throughout the doctoral process the participants have welcomed the opportunity to explore their values, beliefs and experiences. At several points participants have thanked me for listening and affirmed their belief that the research has purpose and importance. At a conference presentation I began delivering my paper on emerging findings only to look out to the audience and spot one of my participants. I felt a sense of responsibility to ensure the presentation of data truly reflected the voice of this participant. Following the presentation, the participant emailed me and said, “*It was really great to hear you talk about it – I felt very heard and heartened that our experiences in the sector are being collated like that*”. The ongoing ethical responsibility to document, analyse

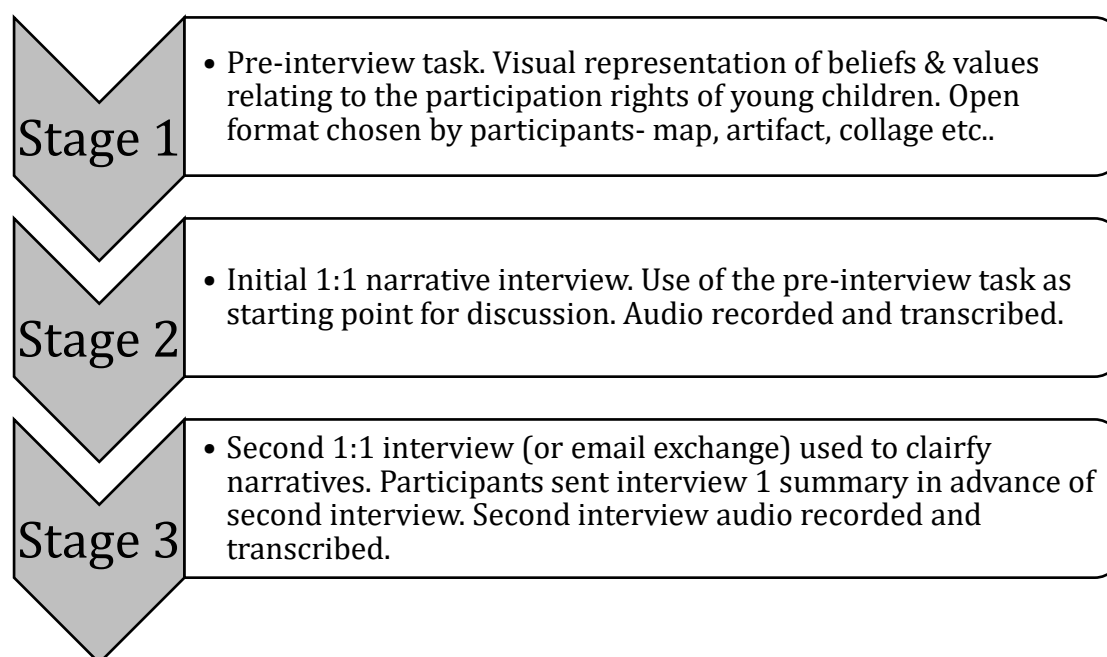
and report the stories of early years practitioners has been a driving force for my doctoral process. During challenging times where the completion of the project felt unrealistic and out of reach, I continually had the faces and voices of my participants in mind, encouraging me to persevere.

<b>Table 2: Overview of Participants</b>					
<b><i>Pseudonym</i></b>	<b><i>Experience in ECEC</i></b>	<b><i>Professional Qualification EYPS/EYTS</i></b>	<b><i>Type of Setting; Role in Setting</i></b>	<b><i>Age of Children (relevant to research)</i></b>	<b><i>Interview Details</i></b>
Alissa	16 years	EYPS	Day Nursery in local authority Children's Centre; Manager	3 mths - 3 yrs	Interview One (Int1): 21/9/17 Interview Two (email): 15/3/18
Amanda	9 years	EYTS	Montessori Setting; Senior Teacher	2-3 yr olds	Interview One (Int1): 26/6/17 Interview Two (Int2): 26/2/18
Andy	10 years	EYPS	Local Authority Nursery; Deputy Manager	6 mths - 3 yrs	Interview One (Int1): 29/8/17 Interview Two (Int2): 16/3/18
Ava	6 years	EYPS	<i>(changed role between interview 1 &amp; 2)</i> Childminding Setting; Owner/childminder, working with her husband  Large National Nursery Chain; National policy advisor and QA lead	Birth - 3 yrs	Interview One (Int1): 23/8/17 Interview Two (Int2): 16/3/18
Holly	3 years	EYTS	Day Nursery; Early Years Teacher	2-3 yr olds	Interview One (Int1): 2/9/17 Interview Two (Int2): 24/2/18
Jen	30 years	EYTS	Under 3's Provision within Maintained Nursery School/Local Authority Children's Centre; Practitioner	2-3 yr olds	Interview One (Int1): 8/9/17 Withdrew from research after interview 1.
Jess	5 years	EYTS	Pack-away Pre-School Setting; Owner/practitioner	2-3 yr olds	Interview One (Int1): 21/9/17 Interview Two (Int2): 22/2/18
Josie	10 years	EYTS	Childminding Setting; Owner/practitioner	3 mths- 3 yrs	Interview One (Int1): 7/9/17 Interview Two (Int2): 22/2/18
Joyce	32 years	EYPS	Community pre-school and childcare; Manager	Birth-3 yrs	Interview One (Int1): 11/9/17 Interview Two (email): 4/4/18
Willow	17 years	EYPS	Sessional Pre-School; Manager	2-3 yr olds	Interview One (Int1): 22/8/17 Interview Two (Int2): 3/3/18

## 5.5 Methods and Stages of Data Collection

The process of data collection was set out in three stages (Table 3)

Table 3: Stages of Data Collection



### 5.5.1 Stage One: Pre-interview task

I initially invited participants to complete a pre-interview task (participant information sheet, appendix 5). This open-ended task was offered as a reflective tool to support participants to explore ideas prior to the interview. I had trialled this approach during stage one of the doctoral process with success and appreciated the potential of such a task to support participants to reflect prior to the initial interview. The intersection between reflection and narrative storytelling presents possibilities to make visible lived experiences, thus developing insights (Chambers, 2003). Rather than coming to the research interview cold, or devoid of consideration, my aim was for participants to reflect on the core ideas and their own positioning within this. Meier and Stremmel (2010, p.250) argue that reflection requires educators to engage with a “conscious scrutiny of their own interpretive points of view, which are rooted in personal and formal theories,




culturally learned ways of seeing, and personal core values”. Considering experiences through individual reflection prior to the interview created a space for participants to confront and explore underpinning values and beliefs and how these influence practice.

The task suggested participants bring to the initial interview a visual artefact (i.e. photograph, object, resource) or document (i.e. mind-map, poem, reflection) representing their values, beliefs and experiences about the capabilities of young children as active decision-makers in their learning and care. The intention was that this pre-interview task would provide an opportunity for participants to consider their own perspectives in relation to participation rights of the youngest children and come to the interview with a starting point for co-construction of the research narrative. Artefacts shared by participants can be utilised as a tool to elicit stories (Clandinin and Huber, 2010), acting as “triggers” for participants to express narratives (Clandinin, 2013, p.46). The pre-interview task enabled participants to initiate the conversation, bringing their own stories to the interview situation. In narrative interviews researchers aim to create spaces for participants to relay their stories and extend narratives with limited interruption (Riessman, 2008). The pre-interview task aimed to create a listening space from the outset of the interview.

The pre-interview task was presented as an invitation rather than an essential aspect of participation in the research. I did not want to place any additional expectations on participants, appreciating how busy they are as working professionals, and therefore decided to present the task as an optional exercise. Four of the ten participants engaged with this element of the research (Table 4). Three participants brought a mind-map to the interview, and one participant brought an artefact.



<p>Joyce</p>		<p>Joyce brought a delicate plaster cast of a garden scene depicting a woman with young children. Joyce described the plaster cast: <i>“This is a little plaster cast of what loosely could be described as a woman in a garden...When I saw it I absolutely loved it. Sadly it got broken and I glued it together..a real bodge job. And even if it’s broken, I cannot part with this.. I guess it means a lot to me because it describes contentment to me, and that’s what I think I always want for my own children. I always want them to be content....And that’s what I want for the children who come into my care. I want them to feel content.”</i></p>
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The participants who did not bring a physical object or document with them had nevertheless reflected on the subject matter prior to the interview and arrived with stories to tell in response to the information provided about the project. For example, Ava started the interview by indicating that she had taken time to reflect on the ideas and had talked these through with her husband the night before our first meeting:

**Erica (Int1):** *Thinking about the information I have sent you about being involved in the project, I wondered what ideas came into your mind at first?*

**Ava:** *I sat and thought about choice quite a lot, because I think it’s something I don’t think about a lot, it’s just inherent in the practice about what we do. It’s that whole reflection thing isn’t it. You have to sit and work out what you do.....When [husband] and I were talking about this last night we were trying to work out with very young babies - we look after babies from three months old - actually what are the choices they choose to do....*

It had been helpful for Ava to take time to reflect on the topic of the research prior to the interview and at several times throughout her first interview she drew on stories from her childminding practice that she indicated she had mentally noted prior to our meeting.

Although Andy did not bring a visual representation as suggested in the pre-interview task, he nevertheless engaged with the ideas prior to our meeting. In the days leading up to our first interview we exchanged emails about a policy he was developing at work and how his engagement with that piece of work had initiated reflection on the rights of young babies:

**Andy** (email): *Some interesting bits came up today in relation to children's voice and sleep. It relates to a policy on sleep. Thought you might be interested.*

**Erica** (email): *Really interesting Andy. Maybe this is something we could discuss when we meet for the interview?*

**Andy** (email): *Yes definitely something for discussion. Since you started this thought train I keep thinking.... The problem I'm having with this policy is that it potentially puts an obstruction between baby and caregiver.... Anyway more of this when we meet.*

**Andy** (Int1): *Do you remember before this I sent you an email from the National Day Nurseries Association and it was about...um...it was in relation to the sleep policy that we are writing up, but it was about teaching practitioners about children's rights....*

Whilst Andy did not bring a document or artefact to initiate our discussion, he had reflected and brought the story of a recent work experience to use as a starting point for our exploration of his values and beliefs in relation to the participation rights of young children. Participants who had completed the pre-interview task, and those who hadn't, demonstrated evidence of constructing narratives independently, through a process of reflection. What became evident through the pre-interview tasks and evidence of reflection prior to the interviews, was the positionality of the research itself as an instigator for reflection and as an interruption in the life narratives of the participants. Clandinin (2013, p.201) argues that participants and researchers do not exit the

narrative inquiry “unchanged”. Directing attention to the process of reflection and storying leaves a residue that influences ongoing personal narratives.

### *5.5.2 Stage Two: Unstructured, narrative interviews*

Following a narrative approach, 1:1 unstructured interviews were chosen as the method to capture the lived experiences, values and beliefs of participants. Aligned with the underpinning ontological and epistemological positioning of the research, unstructured interviews provided the means through which participant experiences could be captured and analysed. Narrative, unstructured interviews provide a vehicle for the co-construction of knowledge. The overarching methodological approach was situated within a narrative inquiry, with the use of unstructured interviews as the method used to provide space for participant voices to be heard. As a collaborative process, the story emerges through dialogue and interaction between interviewer and participant (Muylaert et al, 2014). Riessman (2008) suggests that narrative interviews offer possibilities for a change in power relations between participants and researchers. Whilst she acknowledges that the research relationship will never be truly equal, the narrative interview has the potential to provide opportunities for sharing control, which can enable spaces for “genuine discoveries about a phenomenon” (2008, p. 24). This requires an investment by the researcher to approach the research interview with sensitivity and patience, enabling the participant to feel at ease in sharing their story (Chase, 2011). Trusting researcher/participant encounters can be achieved through an atmosphere created by the researcher that is “unstructured, informal, anti-authoritative, and non-hierarchical” (Karnieli-Miller, Strier and Pessah, 2009, p.280). This was my aim for data collection and in seeking to provide opportunities for participants to freely share their perspectives I rejected the use of a formal, structured interview schedule, favouring the use of a “relatively unstructured, informal, conversation-type” approach that would create favourable conditions for the flow of unfettered storying (Goodson and Sikes, 2017, p. 79). Each initial interview started with an open question, using the pre-interview task as a stimulus for discussion – *‘talk me through what you have*

*brought.*' For participants who did not bring any artefacts/documents to the interview, I started with an open-ended question such as '*what were your thoughts when you read the information sheet and reflected on the focus for this research?*'.

There were noticeable benefits in electing to conduct unstructured, narrative interviews. The open nature of the interviews meant that participants were able to participate in shaping the line of discussion, particularly at the outset of each interview. Narrative interviews have the potential to produce trustworthy and accurate data as they provide opportunities to empower participants to share stories of their own lived experiences, focussing on the elements that are most pertinent to them (Elliott, 2005). At times the open, unstructured approach led to uncomfortable moments. As a novice researcher I felt a level of anxiety about 'doing it right' and ensuring I made the most of the time with participants. During one interview I was unsure about the path the narrative was taking, concerned that we were moving into territory unrelated to the research question. However, I wanted to honour my commitment to allowing participants space and time to share their perspectives. When listening to the recording following the interview, I began to understand the connections the participant was making with ideas around voice and participation. These were not instantly visible during the research interview, but on reflection the data provided a rich and diverse element that enabled me to develop greater understanding of the ways in which practitioners in the field conceptualise rights and the tensions that arise from this.

During initial stages of data collection, I combined audio recordings with field notes. Tessier (2012) argues that researchers should resist rejecting more traditional methods in favour of new technologies and consider the potential of combined methods, including field notes, transcriptions and working from recordings, to enrich the research process. Field notes present limitations as a method of data collection when used in isolation, as they may restrict the ability to gather a rich and complete data set (Braun and Clarke, 2013). However, I wondered about the potential of field notes to support data collection. I aimed to

use field notes as a mechanism to record my emerging reactions to participant narratives and to document initial “hunches” as part of the first stages of analysis (Mason, 2018, p.160). Field notes additionally provided a potential place to record additional information not captured by audio – for example, body language, facial expressions, and contextual elements. Non-verbal communication can portray important meaning that may often be missed by qualitative researchers (Denham and Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Finally, field notes acted as an insurance policy to mitigate any breakdown of technology during the interview or potential loss of audio recordings.

After several unsuccessful attempts at keeping field notes during interviews, I abandoned this approach and favoured the use of audio recordings during interviews combined with reflective journal entries following interviews to capture initial thoughts. Field notes during interviews became a distraction from my ability to listen with intent and be in the moment with participants. Listening back to interview recordings I noticed how engagement with my notebook created an awkward barrier to the flow of dialogue. As an inexperienced researcher my field notes were not particularly useful and often repeated words recorded on the audio rather than capture additional elements or reflective thoughts as I imagined they might. As I became more confident with the interview process, I found myself narrating non-verbal communication, capturing this as part of the audio and subsequent transcript:

**Erica (Int2):** *So on the one hand you're talking about the idea of school readiness...we need to get them ready for school...but then on the other hand you said 'let them be children, let them be themselves'...*

**Willow:** *You feel like you're being pulled. You do feel like you're being pulled.*

**Erica:** *For the benefit of the audio, Willow is pulling her hands apart from each other, as if it's a kind of tension that you're pulling? Do you feel like that?*

**Willow:** *Most definitely...*

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**Amanda** (Int2): *...but they do need the adult input. They might not get that at home, as well. So we are having to direct them. It's really tricky isn't it?*

**Erica:** *For the benefit of the audio, Amanda is moving her hands like a balance.*

**Amanda:** *It is you know...child led/adult led. Do we do enough of each? or are they really, is child led really child led, or the toys we think they should be playing with today that's going to extend their maths....*

Articulating non-verbal communication provided an opportunity to reflect with participants on their developing narrative, often exposing contradictions and tensions relating to their stories.

Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Engagement with both the original recordings and transcriptions was undertaken throughout analysis. The process of analysis is further discussed in section 6.3.

### *5.5.3 Stage Three: Clarifying Narratives*

Stage three included an invitation to participants to take part in a second 1:1 interview to clarify key points discussed during the first interview. As part of my commitment to ongoing dialogue and a desire to work alongside participants in the construction of their narratives, I created a summary of the first interview and shared this with participants prior to the second and final 1:1 interview (appendix 7). Further discussion of the process of synthesising the initial interview data into a summary is discussed in section 6.3.3. Whilst the initial interview followed an unstructured format, allowing participant narratives to frame the discussion, the second interview was utilised to revisit key themes highlighted in the initial interview summary, and address any misconceptions or misrepresentation of participant narratives. Following an initial phase of analysis, emerging themes that connected participant narratives were becoming visible. The second interview provided an opportunity to agree the initial interview summary, clarify concepts explored in the first interview, and revisit



recurring themes identified across the narratives. Additionally, it provided a space to probe where narratives conflicted or where participant stories highlighted unique experiences. In terms of trustworthiness of the data, the second interview was used as a mechanism to check my interpretations of participant narratives.

Alongside data from the second interview, email correspondence was used as a method of data collection. Email offers a viable way to overcome constraints of time, geography and other personal obstacles that may exclude some participants from face-to-face interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The asynchronous nature of email offers the possibility of extending reflective spaces for participants to respond in their own time (James, 2017). Two participants were unable to attend a second interview, however emails were used to clarify issues arising from the initial interview summary. One participant who took part in both interviews also chose to use email to engage with ongoing dialogue relating to the research. Narrative, as a relational methodology, necessitates a relationship of trust, where participants feel safe to share stories and reveal aspects of their lived experiences (Caine et al, 2020). Arguably such relationships are established most effectively through face-to-face encounters, however Ratislavova and Ratislav (2014) argue respectful and trusting relationships can be developed via asynchronous email communication, and indeed may be easier to sustain with participants who experience feelings of vulnerability during face-to-face encounters. In my study, emails were used towards the end of data collection, when the research relationship had already been created, which helped to mitigate against some of the potential challenges of virtual interviews, such as establishing rapport or verifying the identity of participants (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Alongside the initial interview, transcripts from the second interview and email exchanges became part of the data set used during analysis.

## 5.6 Ethics

In constructing and conducting my research with regards to ethical considerations I have taken inspiration from Sikes and Goodson (2003, p.33) who argue that good social research should be approached as “moral practice”. Sikes (2012, p.136) argues that narrative approaches carry a “heavy ethical burden” as the researcher commits to re-presenting stories with moral integrity. Placing notions of morality at the heart of research requires an appreciation of the centrality of the personal within the research story, both in relation to the participants and the researcher who is embedded in the research process. This is part of the process of conducting research that is underpinned by ethical and moral intent. Pascal and Bertram (2009, p.255) approach research with a commitment to constructing an “equalising research ethic” that seeks to address power, challenge inequality and enable the voices of all participants to be valued and heard. Equity and fairness in research design demand consideration of power relations, including a process of negotiation between researchers and participants throughout the research process (Grieshaber, 2010).

Narrative methodology provides a useful framework to enact this process of negotiation in the research relationship. Approaching my own study from this perspective, I have considered how the narratives of early childhood practitioners provide rich contributions to the discourse around children’s participation rights. The underpinning ethical framework for my study has included reflection on key questions posed in relation to power, voice and representation in ECEC:

...whose voice is privileged and how in traditional early childhood practices?; ...who benefits from traditional early childhood truths about the child and about pedagogy?  
(MacNaughton and Smith, 2001, p.37)

There are limitations in terms of the ability of research to truly empower participants, however framing the research encounter around ethical practices

that prioritise the stories and reflections of participants can provide opportunities for participant experiences to be valued and shared. Just as children can be viewed as experts in their lives, practitioners are experts in understanding the practices and pedagogies of ECEC settings. It is this expertise that I have sought to explore and understand, and in so doing have approached my research with ethical integrity including a commitment to capturing and presenting the authentic voices of participants.

My study has been guided by the EECERA ethical code for early childhood researchers (Bertram et al, 2016), including the dimensions that position ethical research as embodying a commitment to justice, equity, democratic values and underpinned by respectful practice. Such approaches acknowledge power relations between researchers and participants and seek to ensure that power is distributed in such a way as to ensure participants “actively have voice in the research process” (Bertram et al, 2016, p. v). The methodological design for this study has integrated opportunities for participants to direct the research conversations towards issues that emerge from their own lived experiences. In seeking to authentically capture and represent their perspectives I shared summaries of the first interview with participants to ensure my interpretations are a fair and accurate portrayal of participant contributions (6.3.3). This often resulted in ongoing dialogue to clarify positioning and ensure accurate portrayal of practitioner perspectives. The second interview provided the opportunity for me to revisit ideas with participants to ensure I had captured key concepts accurately. Some participants additionally opted to utilise ongoing email correspondence as a mechanism to continue the co-construction of the narrative. Through these multiple interactions a research relationship of trust and mutual respect was established and sustained.

Technical or procedural ethics provide the framework for participant consent, however the practice of conducting research that is ethical goes beyond consent and relates to the ongoing moral purpose that guides and shapes the research project. Combining the necessities of adhering to ethical guidelines alongside the overarching aim to conduct research with moral purpose, I have drawn on the

work of Gullemin and Gillan (2004, p.261) to explore ethical issues from two perspectives, “procedural ethics” and “ethics in practice”. These two elements intersect, highlighting ethics as a meandering force that weaves through the research process, from initial approval through to completion of the research project.

Procedural ethics relate to the ethical approval process and actions taken by researchers to maintain high levels of ethical research practice as set out in professional codes of conduct (Gullemin and Gillan, 2004). In order to secure ethical approval for this study and ensure the research design addressed issues relating to ethics, the British Educational Research Association guidelines for ethical research were adhered to (BERA, 2018). In alignment with underpinning principles of research approached with an “ethic of respect,” this project has sought to maintain a responsibility to participants from initial recruitment through to analysis (BERA, 2018, p.5). Engagement with procedural ethics has laid the foundations for a project designed with ethical integrity. To act with ethical integrity requires a commitment to “honesty and accuracy” (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p.63). Informed consent was secured from all participants, with transparent acknowledgement of their right to withdraw and a commitment to maintaining confidentiality and participant anonymity (appendix 5 and 6). Whilst these actions were taken at the outset, ethical considerations have been revisited throughout data collection and analysis, including ongoing consultation with participants.

Attention to ethical issues are not resolved at the point of ethical approval but are negotiated as “ethics in practice” throughout the research process (Gullemin and Gillan, 2005, p.264). Staller (2013, p.401) argues that ethical issues arising from qualitative research are often unforeseen at the ethics approval stage and suggests that the assumptions which guide ethical regulatory bodies are grounded in “objectivist epistemologies” which conflict with qualitative research. Narrative inquiry is rarely designed with interview schedules structured around predetermined questions. Instead, the narrative interview is an emergent process which evolves through interaction between researcher and participant

and can expose ethical conundrums along the way. Commitment to the research as an ethical endeavour includes consideration of day-to-day ethical issues, or “microethics”, and responses to unexpected events which may become “ethically important moments” (Gullemin and Gillan, 2005, p.265). Thus “ethics in practice” involves ongoing consideration of the ethical dilemmas that become visible throughout data collection and analysis. Some of these dilemmas have been easier to resolve myself, but often they have required communication with participants. Throughout the project I have been acutely aware of the volume of correspondence with participants. The participants are busy people, working long hours and leading practice in often complex and demanding circumstances. I appreciate this research project is not high on their list of priorities, however my ethical responsibility to them has been central to the integrity of the project. My aim has been to share important information, seek feedback and responses, whilst maintaining boundaries that ensure engagement with the project did not become burdensome for participants.

A seemingly minor ethical issue revealed itself as an opportunity for reflection on respectful approaches with participants. In establishing anonymity, each participant was initially allocated a pseudonym. As I approached writing up of the thesis report I began to wonder how participants might feel about the names they had been allocated. Although I felt it might be an unnecessary additional email for participants to respond to, I decided it was important to give them the choice to decide on the name used in the final report. Initially this seemed to be an insignificant ethical issue, however for some participants the name used to represent them was important. One participant, Joyce, elected to choose her mother’s name, which held significance in relation to our initial interview where she had talked about her own mother and how she had felt listened to as a child. Andy also changed the pseudonym he had been allocated, choosing a name that held meaning to him from his own postgraduate studies. He told me about a research project that his mum and stepfather had once participated in where his mum was allocated a pseudonym that was the name of her husband’s ex-wife. We cannot assume that pseudonyms are benign, and thus the naming of participants cannot be viewed as solely a technical process. Allen and Wiles

(2016) argue that names hold psychological meaning within cultural contexts and thus pseudonyms should be negotiated with participants as part of a respectful research design. Allocating pseudonyms was not something I had considered at the outset of the project, but rather was an ethical issue I stumbled upon and resolved through engagement with participants.

Responsiveness to participants, with a guiding commitment to considering their interests as an integral part of the research, was established in the research design. For example, there may have been potential for a richer data set had I insisted all participants complete the pre-interview task, however my position was always to be thankful for the contributions participants were able to make, with an awareness of demands on their time. Two participants were unable to complete the second interview, which could potentially have limited their opportunities to respond to initial findings. Such dilemmas create tensions between ethical responsibilities to participants and ethical commitments to the validity of the research endeavour (Josselson, 2007). However, we were able to overcome this through the use email exchanges to clarify points and continue to co-construct the emerging narrative.

Another ethical dilemma was presented when one participant withdrew from the study following the first interview. Initial consent gained from participants highlighted the right to withdraw and that data gathered up until the point of withdrawal could be used. It would have been acceptable for me to use the data without consultation as this had been agreed at the outset. However, I felt it was important to demonstrate my ethical responsibility to this participant by revisiting consent to ensure she still felt comfortable for the data to be used. Ethics is not something that is agreed and completed at the outset of research but rather is a process of ongoing consideration as ethical issues “shift and change” throughout the inquiry process (Clandinin, 2013, p.197). Thus, research must be underpinned by an “ethical attitude” that creates a “deeply human, genuine, empathetic, and respectful relationship to the participant” (Josselson, 2007, p. 538-539). Ethical approaches demand an ongoing reimagining of participant interests.

Whilst the research question, with a focus on professional practice, is not situated in a visibly contentious area of personal experience, it was notable how many interviews included personal accounts. One participant requested that I stop note-taking and not transcribe part of the research interview as we began to explore ideas of children's rights that instigated memories of her own childhood experiences. Such encounters may be unforeseen but can be supported when the narrative interview is approached with an "ethic of care", acknowledging the relational aspect of the research encounter (Caine et al, 2020). Sikes (2012) reminds us of the responsibility researchers hold when they employ methods that have similarities with counselling. Whilst I am not a trained counsellor and thus have not knowingly used techniques from counselling in the research interviews, I have nevertheless felt a responsibility to conduct the research relationships within a caring framework. Ellis (2007, p.4) characterises this as "relational ethics", where researchers act from their "hearts and minds" with an appreciation of the interpersonal nature of qualitative research and the connections that are made between researchers and participants. A commitment to relational ethics requires a "wakeful" approach with awareness of the dynamics between researcher and participant and the position of the researcher in shaping the research encounter (Clandinin, 2013, p.199).

Approaching the interviews with a relational ethic of care necessitates a commitment to active listening. Clough and Nutbrown (2012, p.102) describe "radical listening" as the process of moving beyond simply hearing participants, to considering the wider ethical responsibilities held by the researcher. Ethical approaches to listening reflect the principles that underpin pedagogies of listening, acknowledging listening as an integral part of the co-constructed narrative. Rinalidi (2006, p.114) describes listening as an "openness to others," where we suspend preconceptions and value alternative perspectives. Thus, listening creates opportunities for encounters where "understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue" (Rinaldi, 2012, p.235). Lipari (2009) locates listening as a core element of ethical, moral practice. As a compassionate act, listening that is "fully present, embodied and centred," allows

us to engage with difference, challenge existing beliefs and come to understand the other (Lipari, 2009, p.56).

Listening to interview recordings, researchers can reflect on their ability to remain attentive to the participant and consider the balance of researcher/participant talk (Mason, 2018). Listening requires confidence to accept silences and to resist the temptation to fill the silent spaces (Braun and Clark, 2013). Revisiting interview recordings I was able to reflect on my engagement with participants and the quality of my listening. During earlier interviews my own voice is more dominant. There are examples where I have missed opportunities to follow the line of discussion established by the participant, possibly as a result of not fully attending to the participant. In this example, Ava introduces a discussion around negotiating rules and boundaries with children. Instead of following her lead I move the conversation on to routines. I must have made a link in my own mind with the challenge of routines, but missed the opportunity to further explore ideas around boundaries, as initiated by Ava:

*Ava (Int1): We'll never say 'no you can't do that'. That's not in our ethos. I don't think that's good for any child. But if you actually explain to a child why. We do have one child, we don't have that many tantrums, but she does all of them! It's really difficult to negotiate with her because if she hears that 'no' word, that's her trigger point. And actually, it's not until she calms down that you can explain why. So we've had to learn other ways of saying no. That's an interesting one.*

*Erica: What about children's routines? Sleeping, eating, that kind of stuff. Do children have choice over that or is that routine dictated? Is it dictated by you, by the parents?*

Instead of listening with intent I change focus abruptly, thereby directing the shape of the narrative and potentially missing important aspects of Ava's narrative. Whilst I accept the construction of narrative occurs through a collaborative, dialogic relationship, researchers must also be aware of power imbalance and strive for equality in the research relationship, to ensure the resulting narrative is authentic. Moen (2006) argues that teachers may not feel heard and thus researchers have a responsibility to conduct narrative interviews



with an emphasis on empowerment. In the extract with Ava, I have taken control of the direction of the narrative and have not demonstrated a respectful and curious approach to listening. This was disappointing and something I agonised over in my reflective journal. My anxieties about capturing 'usable' data, staying focussed on the research question, and worry about 'doing it right' at times distracted me from attentive listening and trusting participant narratives. As I worked through the interviews, I made a concerted effort to improve on listening and consciously note the shifting balance of power in the research interviews.

In later interviews my listening skills are visibly refined, and I am more comfortable with silences and spaces for the narrative to develop through a more equal and organic process of co-construction, as illustrated in this extract from the initial interview with Andy:

**Andy** (Int1): *...Now I think practitioners at the more modern liberal end of the scale might balk at some of the things that went on there, or the way behaviour was managed at times. But, it did work. ....[long pause]....*

**Erica:** *In what sense 'work'?*

**Andy:** *In the immediate sense it managed their behaviour effectively so that unwanted behaviour stopped.....[long pause]....  
In the bigger sense I think it may not have been the best approach in terms of children learning about their behaviour, because I would argue that that's a balanced approach between a liberal choice giving approach and a disciplinarian containing approach maybe, but that approach did provide a containing space for those children and an emotional stability.*

**Erica:** *So, liberal is choice, disciplinary is containment?*

**Andy:** *Disciplinary is the control maybe. I would say that maybe containment would, hopefully, fit somewhere in the middle of that.....[long pause]....*

**Erica:** *Interesting – you are saying that it helped in the immediate sense in that it managed their behaviour there and then, but in the longer term, did it help them in terms of learning about their behaviour, their own sort of self-regulation?*

**Andy:** *Um.....I think if approaches are too controlling, too disciplinarian they cut down on children's ability to make choices and think for themselves. That's perfectly evident, but also I think that if practitioners are too liberal in their approach and there is too much choice, there is a risk that children, um.....[long pause]...become emotionally insecure and aren't able to.....make choices because they are....cowed.....by their own anxiety. I don't want to say crushed because that is too extreme, they're limited by their anxiety.*

As I reflect on this extract, I can identify areas for development as a narrative researcher. Perhaps I could have left more time following some of the long pauses before interjecting. This may have given Andy the opportunity to further explore his idea of containment in relation to discipline and choice. However, I think I have attempted to listen with attentiveness and respect for Andy as the primary driver of his narrative.

Engagement with reflexivity has opened a window to understanding my own positioning within the research process. Alongside requirements to engage with ethical practices that protect participants, the EECERA ethical code additionally highlights the importance of academic scholarship and proceeding with research that upholds values of “honesty, trustworthiness, reliability and validity” (Bertram et al, , p.xi). Particularly in qualitative, social research, where the social and personal are interrelated, reflexivity helps to protect research integrity by revealing our blind spots and exposing assumptions that we bring to our research (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Reflexivity provides a lens through which we consider our own perspectives and the influence our positioning has on our relationship with data collection and analysis (Elliott, 2005). Berger (2015, p.220) offers this definition of reflexivity, which has helped me to proceed with a reflexive approach:

It means turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognise and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation. As such, the idea of reflexivity challenges the view of knowledge production as independent of the researcher producing it and of knowledge as objective.  
(Berger, 2015, p.220)

Particularly in relation to analysis, the enactment of reflexivity has happened through a process of repeatedly tackling the data with a conscious awareness of my own positionality. This has involved questioning the layers of decision making as I have engaged with the data and attempted to represent the narratives. Such questions have included:

- *What have I noticed in the data?*
- *Why have I noticed this in the data?*
- *What have I missed in the data?*
- *What might my participants notice?*
- *Why is this extract of data important?*
- *How have I made decisions about the data extracts I have selected?*
- *What alternative interpretations might there be?*

Such questioning has been framed by my own internal dialogue, often annotated on interview transcripts (appendix 8), in my voice journal and in my written research journal (appendix 9). This has been an iterative process, with the revisiting of data on multiple occasions. In alignment with the “voice-centred relational method” of analysis, my aim has been to expose and reflect upon my own response to the data (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003, p.419). Additionally, I sought to check my interpretations with participants, through the process of negotiating their narratives. This happened during interviews and/or through email correspondence, and through the process of agreeing interview summaries (6.3.3).

Potentially greater understanding of the wider influences on our data collection and analysis may not be revealed until the research is complete. Mauthner and Doucet (2003) highlight the limits of reflexivity and argue that issues of bias and positionality cannot be completely resolved during the research process as we are ‘in it’. My doctoral experience has been punctuated by significant life events that have undoubtedly influenced my perspective and resulting engagement with data. I am a different person to the person who initially embarked on the doctoral programme. I accept the thesis is a representation of findings at a

certain point in time, with belief that I have proceeded with ethical intent and a commitment to upholding high ethical standards.

## 5.7 Summary of Chapter Five

Chapter Five has included a discussion of the methodological positioning of the research, including a detailed account of the methods used to gather the perspectives of ten graduate ECEC practitioners. The foregrounding of the research question and aims has directed methodological decisions, framing the study within a qualitative, narrative inquiry. The chapter has concluded with an exploration of my commitment to ethical practices, acknowledging ethics as a moral endeavour that runs throughout the research process, underpinned by a desire to engage in a reflexive approach that is respectful to the participants who generously shared their narratives.

Discussion about the methodological approach extends through to chapter six, providing an account of data analysis and the stages undertaken to identify findings from the study.

## **Chapter Six: Data Analysis and Findings**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter sets out the approach taken to data analysis and presents core findings. At the centre of analysis are participant narratives and my overarching aim to present these stories authentically. I consider the layers of analysis, and how these have been guided by an iterative approach. This process of repeatedly and reflexively revisiting data is underpinned by a commitment to listening. Listening is conceived as an ethical endeavour, rooted in democratic values that connect individuals and create spaces for openness to difference (Rinaldi, 2012). The chapter provides an initial analysis of individual participant narratives, or micro narratives, revealing core elements of participant perspectives. The chapter then explores the macro narratives that connect individual stories and reveal insights in response to the research question and aims and in relation to the underpinning theoretical lens.

### **6.2 The Theoretical Basis of the Analysis**

Narrative analysis provides an opportunity to understand individual human experiences, whilst connecting them to wider social structures. Exploring narratives provides “insights into the lived experience of individuals and thus can illuminate an understanding of the ‘field’ or culture as a whole” (Goodson and Gill, 2011, p.20). My intention through the process of analysis has been both to acknowledge and honour individual narratives whilst considering common themes across the body of the narrative interviews. Through a process of synthesizing the data I have sought to develop an “authentic explanatory narrative” to develop greater understanding of practitioner perspectives on the participation rights of young children (Turvey and Hayler, 2017, p.45).

In seeking to understand practitioner perspectives on the participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC settings, I have proceeded with analysis guided by

the intention to listen to individual narratives and consider how they are connected to the wider field. Polkinghorne (cited in Clandinin and Murphy, 2007, p.633) defines narrative research as a methodological approach that focuses on “the particular, the unique”, through the analysis of individual stories. Thus, a distinction can be made between narrative analysis and the analysis of narratives, with the former aligned with qualitative ways of exploring data with a view to identifying themes and the latter relating to narrative inquiry where the individual story is the final research output (Clandinin and Murphy, 2007). In positioning my research as narrative inquiry I have drawn on individual narratives of ECEC practitioners, exploring their experiences working in the field with young children and using these to examine understandings of the participation rights of babies and toddlers. Their narrative accounts have framed the interviews and through analysis I have aimed to represent their individual stories. However, I have also wanted to identify connections, commonalities and contradictions across the narratives to support analysis and produce a resulting overarching explanatory narrative alongside individual stories.

Understanding individual stories and how they connect to other narratives provides a grounding for exploring stories within cultural and social contexts. Individual narratives are constructed “always in relation, always in a social context” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.2). Goodson (2006) argues that a focus on the purely individual aspect of narrative limits opportunities to consider the wider social, cultural and historical structures through which narratives are experienced. Narratives are not located within a vacuum but rather are lived experiences “highly dependent on wider social scripts” (Goodson, 2006, p.15). Valuing individual narratives and connecting them to other narratives with an appreciation of the wider cultural context has been my approach to analysis.

The connecting of narratives has been explored through the theoretical framework applied to the study, with an emphasis on understanding participation rights in relation to sociological and psychological theories of childhood and development. Kim (2016) proposes that application of theory to narrative inquiry provides the opportunity to explore where stories intersect,

thus leading to greater understanding of the narrative in relation to the wider social context. Drawing on Kim (2016, p. 229) I have approached my data with an appetite to understand what the narratives tell me “while finding ways to transfigure the story’s commonplace to illuminate the larger society”. Burri (2017, p.31) describes this as an “agonising experience....that requires patience and hard work”. Casanave and Li (2015) highlight feelings of intimidation and anxiety experienced by doctoral students grappling with making connections between their own research and wider theoretical frameworks. This has certainly been my experience. I have moved between the data and conceptual thinking throughout the process. Concept mapping is a tool I used to enable me to make links between the data, my thinking and existing theory (appendix 10).

### 6.3 Process of Analysis

A research report lends itself to the construction of a linear narrative, creating an illusion that analysis is a straightforward process as researchers move systematically through progressive stages of analysis towards a final construction of the narrative findings. However, qualitative analysis is more commonly a “complex, interwoven” and iterative process (Hunter, 2009, p.48). Through reflexive thinking, data is revisited, links across the narratives are explored and connections made with wider theoretical concepts. Srivastava and Hopwood (2009, p.77) explore the centrality of “reflexive iteration” as a process of “continuous meaning-making and progressive focusing” used in qualitative analysis to identify commonalities in the data set and provide evidence to reveal new understandings. Drawing on Dencombe’s (2017) five stages of data analysis, I discuss the process undertaken as my iterative approach to analysis. This process has not been conducted in a linear fashion, but rather I have moved between, in and around the stages throughout analysis. I am a naturally organised person who likes lists and am drawn to routine and process. It therefore seemed logical that I would use a systematic approach to analysis. The reality has been a more organic engagement with the data. I have employed systems to organise and categorise data, however, I have also learned to embrace

a reflexive interaction with data that has provided flexibility and responsiveness during analysis.

### *6.3.1 Analysis through listening*

Voice and listening are core elements of active participation lying at the heart of the research question driving this project. Narrative methodologies align with the research question, prioritising the listening of participant perspectives. Layers of listening and re-listening were evident throughout the research process, starting from the moment of meeting participants as they shared their stories. Schostak (2006) argues that the process of analysis begins during interviews as conversations are “sculpted in order to embody meanings.” Meanings are created in dialogue through listening, questioning and connection. I aimed to engage in a process of active listening during each interview (5.6). Applying values of a pedagogy of listening, I have embraced listening within the research relationship as an ethical endeavour, that allows openness and a welcoming of the unknown through an intentional learning encounter (Rinaldi, 2012). Following each interview, and prior to transcribing, I revisited each interview recording, reflecting on the narratives as an initial stage of analysis through listening.

The transcribing of qualitative interview recordings can be viewed as the first stage of “data preparation” to inform analysis (Denscombe, 2017, p.263). Transcribing each interview provided the opportunity to revisit participant narratives and develop a further closeness with the data (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006). I initially transcribed each interview, ensuring core elements were documented and then returned to each recording and transcription to check for accuracy and add in details such as lengthy pauses. I appreciate that transcribing of data is an ‘interpretative act’, rather than an identical replication of the research encounter (Bailey, 2008, p.130). Throughout analysis, and particularly at the final stages of writing the thesis, I returned to the original audio recordings to reconnect with the narratives in light of my emerging conclusions.



### *6.3.2 Analysis Through a Dialogue with Data*

Following transcription, the next stage I engaged with was a dialogue with the data. Gathering data together, including the pre-interview task, transcriptions, email printouts and field notes (although these were limited as I found this to be a less successful strategy and abandoned note taking after the first few interviews as discussed in 5.5.2), I embarked on a conversation with the data. This involved annotating the data with reflections, posing questions and highlighting extracts of particular interest or significance (appendix 8). Denscombe (2017, p.263) defines this as stage two of analysis where researchers begin an “initial exploration” of the data. Engaging with both “interpretive” and “reflexive” reading I sought to get underneath the data to reveal understandings about participant perspectives on participation rights whilst questioning my own positionality and influence on the research process (Mason, 2018). Questions and reflections posed through engagement with the first round of interview data were also used to frame interview summaries and subsequent discussions at the second interview or via email exchanges. This process of exploration of and discussion with data was repeated following the transcription of the second round of interviews.

### *6.3.3 Analysis Constructed with Participants*

In alignment with ethical commitments, informed by the EECERA ethical code for early childhood researchers (Bertram et al, 2016), my aim was to ensure participants had opportunities to reflect on and respond to analysis. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002, p.332) highlight the collaborative nature of narrative research as a process of co-constructed storying, and the importance of ensuring alignment between the “narrative told” and the “narrative reported”. Following my initial internal dialogue with data gathered at the first interview, I created an interview summary for each participant (appendix 7). These summaries were emailed to participants prior to the second interview with a request to check for accuracy, highlight omissions and respond to initial analysis. Some participants

elected to respond by email and these exchanges became included as data. Others waited until the second interview to revisit summaries, clarify ideas and extend narratives. This process of validating data with participants aligns with Denscombe's (2017) fifth stage of analysis, relating to the rigor and reliability of analysis. The verification of analysis, through member checking, provides a layer of trustworthiness that helps to ensure the credibility of the research process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As a reflexive tool, member checking elevates the voices of participants thus creating opportunities to re-orient researchers and enhance opportunities for "reciprocal learning" within the research relationship (Caretta, 2016, p. 317). This layer of analysis was built into my research design from the outset, with participants made aware of this during recruitment.

Critiques of member checking pose questions about the application of this approach in qualitative research. Morse (2015) guards against member checking as a strategy to determine validity, arguing that different interpretations of data between participants and researchers compromise the integrity of the research process. Likewise, Braun and Clarke (2013) explore potential problems arising from a process of checking analysis with participants, including time constraints both for researchers and participants, issues of power, the ability of participants to easily challenge analysis and difficulties that may arise when participants contest analysis. They suggest placing limitations on the process of checking to allow time and space for researcher analysis to embed. My project was designed within a narrative methodology which celebrates the co-constructed nature of storying, and thus demands greater connectedness between researcher and participant. Checking in with participants during the process of analysis provided a reflexive space to help maintain authenticity in storying. However, whilst I used narrative summaries to support validation during the process of data collection and analysis, I also created space following the second interview to bring my own interpretations to the data.

Narrative summaries were organised around tentative themes identified through initial stages of analysis. Commonalities found across narratives were summarised and grouped under core headings (appendix 7). The narrative

summaries became one of the layers I returned to throughout later stages of analysis as part of the iterative process.

#### *6.3.4 Analysis Through Coding*

Denscombe's (2017) third stage of analysis begins with coding of data. Coding allows researchers to have an "intense conversation" with data, in order to identify "commonalities, differences, patterns and structures" (Basit, 2003, p.144). Through coding, researchers organise, sort and categorise data in order to identify overarching connections and themes that help to illuminate new understanding in response to research questions and aims. Following transcription of the second interview, and my initial dialogue with data, I began coding by attributing words or short phrases to extracts, with the aim of connecting data, capturing the essence of meaning and beginning the process of interpretation (Saldana, 2013). Whilst coding was mostly inductive, in that codes were developed through engagement with data, there was a deductive element as some codes and subsequent categories (i.e. 'beings' and 'becomings') arose from the underpinning theoretical lens relating to sociological and developmental perspectives of young children. Coding does not happen in a "theoretical vacuum" but rather flows from the research questions and related theoretical frameworks informing the study (Mason, 2018, p.229). I have brought my own positioning to analysis and thus it was not an entirely inductive process.

Research is acknowledged as a subjective process, with individual values and perspectives influencing the lens through which data is gathered and analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Through active engagement in reflexivity, I was mindful to approach coding with an open mind and to accept contradictions or "outliers" in the data (Denscombe, 2017, p.330). For example, Andy's data provided opportunities to challenge my thinking, review codes and categories and examine linkage. His narratives often brought a differing perspective that at first glance seemed contradictory to other narratives, but upon greater

examination provided opportunities to consider different dimensions of often similar issues or phenomena.

Following a process of coding I grouped codes into related categories. For example, codes such as *'broadening experience, 'evolving capabilities', 'adults as more knowledgeable partners'* and *'protection/participation'*, shared common features relating to constructions of the young child as a developing, yet-to-mature, becoming, and thus were grouped under one umbrella category of *'young children as becomings.'* Using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet I recorded coded extracts, with corresponding details relating to the source of the extract. 87 individual codes were recorded in excel, grouped under 11 categories (appendix 11). Maintaining an organised approach enabled me to navigate the cyclical nature of coding as I returned to data extracts through the iterative process of analysis (Saldana, 2013). Although time consuming, this process of recording and indexing was beneficial as it allowed me to easily retrieve data during later stages of analysis (Mason, 2018).

### *6.3.5 Developing Participant Narrative Summaries*

Using data from individual participants (pre-interview task, interviews, and emails where applicable) I developed final individual narrative summaries. This process was undertaken after coding, and through a process of reviewing codes and categories alongside a return to interview data. The resulting individual narrative summaries are explored in section 6.4 and introduce participant micro narratives that are then connected to identify overarching themes, or macro narratives, in the final stage of analysis (6.3.6 and 6.5). Micro narratives consider the local and unique experiences that shape individual participant beliefs. Macro narratives explore the interconnection between individual stories and how these reveal insights about the themes that are woven across the dataset. Macro narratives capture and hold micro narratives, connecting these to wider social processes, cultures and structures. A thematic analysis approach was applied to identify macro narratives and is further explored in section 6.3.6. Braun and Clarke (2013, p.180) explore potential weaknesses of a thematic approach to

qualitative analysis, claiming that individual participants can become 'lost' in the process of focussing on patterns or themes across the data. This is a tension I felt throughout analysis. Whilst aiming to develop an explanatory narrative through the process of identifying connections, commonalities and contradictions across the dataset, I have also wanted to ensure that individual narratives are celebrated and understood as representations of participants' unique lived experiences. The individual participant narrative summaries aim to capture the essence of each participant, introduce their perspectives, and highlight key issues raised through their narratives.

### *6.3.6 Identifying Overarching Themes*

Moving from individual micro narratives I have sought to identify overarching explanatory macro narratives that connect individual stories and respond to the research question and aims. This aligns with Denscombe's (2017) third stage of analysis, concluding with the identification of themes that define core concepts connecting categories of data that have been coded. Thus, codes are the "building blocks" for meaning making and resulting themes are the mechanism through which findings can address the research question and communicate researcher analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2017, p.297). Using a thematic approach, I have drawn on Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) systematic process of "searching for, reviewing, defining and naming themes." In practice this has involved moving from codes and categories to potential themes, often with a revisiting of interview transcripts and original audio recordings to reflect on interpretations.

As discussed in relation to coding (6.3.4) I have combined inductive and deductive processes to arrive at overarching themes that connect participant narratives. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.83) present these as contrasting approaches - inductive thematic analysis is "data-driven" whilst a deductive approach to thematic analysis is directed by the theoretical positioning of the research project. My research question and aims were underpinned by a desire to understand participant perspectives and to explore values and beliefs in relation to participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC settings. This

lends itself to an inductive approach, where themes are generated from participant narratives. However, I have also aimed to consider practitioner perspectives relating specifically to constructions of young children as beings and/or becomings, and how sociological and developmental discourse informs understanding around participation rights of the youngest children. As such, themes were identified through a related theoretical lens, bringing a deductive element to analysis.

My approach to settling on overarching themes has been multi-layered and has involved several reflexive processes that have helped me to remain close to participant narratives whilst looking for explanatory concepts in response to the research question and aims. Following coding and during the earlier stages of analysis I took time to write a data story. This captured my responses to codes and categories as I began to play with potential themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that writing is an essential aspect of analysis. Through writing about the data, I was able to experiment with interpretations, try different ideas and gather thoughts about predominant themes. The use of my reflective journal and thematic mapping also aided the process of generating themes.

Analysis of individual participant narrative summaries are presented in section 6.4, with findings from connected narratives, exploring key themes from the data, discussed in section 6.5. This aligns with Denscombe's (2017) fourth stage of analysis, relating to the presentation of findings with inclusion of participant quotes and tables to illustrate interpretation of data.

## 6.4 Participant Narrative Summaries

In this section initial findings from individual narrative summaries are explored. Voice has been a driving force throughout the doctoral process and lies at the heart of my research question and design. My intention throughout data collection and analysis has been to ensure that participant narratives are captured and presented as honestly as possible. I felt it was important for each

participant to clearly identify themselves in the thesis and have confidence that I had re-presented their stories accurately. There were challenges as each participant was involved in the creation of multiple pages of data and synthesising this into manageable summaries for the purpose of the report involved a process of decision making and editing. As the researcher, I took responsibility for narrating the stories. This was not a wholly collaborative project; however, it was a study that was directed by a moral and ethical commitment to valuing practitioner experiences and presenting them honestly. Bignold and Su (2013, p.412) argue that researchers must aim for “clarity, authenticity and integrity” when collating participant stories, whilst acknowledging that personal perspectives of the narrator will inevitably influence the construction of the narrative. Narrative accounts are created through a process of co-construction between researcher and participant (Salmon and Riessman, 2013). Interviews and email exchanges are a product of our co-constructed, mediated narratives, and the subsequent refining of participant stories has been produced through my lens. I used the first interview summaries, which were shared, edited and agreed with participants, and key themes from the follow up interviews and emails to frame these participant summaries. Each of the ten participants is introduced with inclusion of selected quotes from the interviews to illustrate key points discussed during our time together.

#### 6.4.1 Alissa

*“It is the whole team. We all have to have the same idea and way of working with children for these things to work. If you have got the same shared ethos and practice that’s so much easier to deal with...but it takes time and it takes resources to train staff.” (Int1)*

As a mature student, Alissa undertook a degree exploring early childhood practice and later achieved EYPS. With over 16 years' experience working in early years, she is currently manager of a day nursery located in a children’s centre, supporting children aged three months – five years. Alissa has mentored

several trainees through EYITT and is a strong advocate for a qualified early years workforce.

Alissa framed participation around listening, voice and choice. She talked at length about strategies used to empower children to be active decision makers. For example, she uses Makaton (a sign and symbol language) in the setting to support pre-verbal children to communicate their needs. She feels this is an important tool, because you can witness *“a lot of frustration with the under twos when they can’t speak.”* Enabling the voice of the young child to be heard is facilitated by practitioners in her setting who find ways to support non-verbal communication.

She spoke about the learning environment and structures such as free flow, low level accessible storage, picture symbols, opportunities to choose resources and appropriate ratios that promote opportunities for young children to be active participants in their learning. She highlighted the practitioner as central to ensuring children have access to choices in their learning. She spoke about the creativity of practitioners in finding ways to listen to children’s perspectives and adapt practice in response to this. She gave an example of a group of boys who were reluctant mark makers. In response to this the practitioner encouraged the boys to engage in mark making in different places, not just at tables/indoors. The boys were then often found lying on the floor, under tables, mark making in spaces chosen by them. Alissa was pleased that the practitioner did not insist that children sit at tables for mark making activities and was able to identify unique ways of capturing children's perspectives and guiding practice in response. She highlighted the link here between development and children’s voice, exploring pedagogical challenges when young children are not ready, in terms of physical development, to sit at tables and write. She expressed appreciation for practitioners in her setting who use their understanding of developmental needs, combined with close observation and listening, to adjust practice accordingly.



Alissa spoke about balancing the importance of offering children opportunities to be decision makers, with the ultimate responsibility of keeping them safe; *“...they need to be able to make their own choices, with the caveat of safety. I see the adult there being able to facilitate it by providing safe choices.”* Introducing choices helps to *“broaden their horizons. It introduces them to new things”*. She felt that at times adults need to impose certain ways of doing things to protect children, both in the moment and in terms of long-term health (i.e. ensuring they eat healthy food) and maintain some social rules; *“It’s not a case of not letting them have any boundaries by choosing what they want to do...there are social norms and there are acceptable boundaries.”* However, she spoke at length about the need for young children to experience agency and have opportunities to make decisions and learn from their own mistakes.

As a manager of the setting, Alissa highlighted the importance of creating a shared set of values that inform practice. Establishing a shared ethos helps to ensure that listening approaches are embedded throughout the nursery. However, Alissa spoke about the challenges of creating continuity of approaches and shared values. She attempts to do this through staff training and mentoring, however, this has become increasingly difficult as there are staffing, finance and time constraints that impede opportunities for training, particularly extended training that support reflective practice.

#### 6.4.2 Amanda

*“What we expect of children maybe shapes how we treat children.”* (Int1)

*“These are little, tiny people. And they are, they’re little, tiny adults, who have got their own minds and can make these choices and don’t like it when you tell them what to do. They don’t, do they? We don’t like it when we’re told what to do, so why should they? I know sometimes we know best because we have that experience but sometimes why not do it their way?”* (Int1)

Amanda has EYTS and has over 9 years' experience working in the early years sector. She came to early years through a voluntary role, supporting young children in settings when her own children were young. At the time of the first

interview, she held the role of Senior Teacher in a Montessori setting working with children aged two-five years. Between the first and second interview Amanda moved employment to a committee run village nursery, working with children aged two-five years. Amanda had collated her thoughts prior to the first interview on a mind map and we spent much of the first interview using this as a stimulus to explore her ideas in relation to children's active participation in learning (Table 4).

Throughout both interviews Amanda used experiences with individual children to explore ideas around children's voice and participation. She spoke about a two-year-old boy with English as an additional language who had difficulties with communication and how his mum had started using baby signing at home to support his language. Amanda could see the benefits of using signing and worked with his mum to learn the signs used at home so that communication could be aided within the setting. However, the setting manager was not in favour of using signing and this caused frustration for Amanda. She felt that rejecting this strategy meant they were *'missing a link to reassure him that we acknowledge him.'* This tension between her own values and the ethos of the setting was illustrated through another example. A toddler new to the setting, whose dad is a bass guitarist, kept wanting to use the Montessori equipment, such as the one-meter ruler, to act as a bass guitar to support his role play. Amanda felt frustrated by the Montessori approach that dictates the way that equipment should be used correctly by children. She felt she was meant to stop the boy from playing his imaginary guitar but resisted this in preference of allowing him to direct his own role play. She decided to follow her instincts and supported his play by finding a peg board and elastic bands to help him make a guitar but was worried that other practitioners might criticise her approach. Amanda felt that practice directed by adults presents limited opportunities for children to be decision makers.

Amanda discussed many of the challenges faced by practitioners in supporting practice that enables young children to be decision makers. The management of routines often impedes opportunities for children to truly make choices, with

practitioners becoming ‘*task focussed*’ rather than child focussed. She talked about the competing demands on a practitioner; “*It feels like a plate spinning, juggling, people pleasing role, and trying to keep the child in the centre of all that can be quite difficult. Because you’ve got all these competing.....parents, OFSTED, other practitioners...*”. These demands can make it difficult to find the time to actively listen to individual children.

When exploring the capacities of young children to be competent communicators Amanda used an example from the film, ‘Look Who’s Talking’, where babies are depicted as talking to one another. She wondered if very young children are “*not saying anything out loud but they’re all commenting on life, and sometimes I think children are sitting there in their heads commenting on life. They’re looking at us as if to say, what are you talking about? In that way they are their own person, but they’re becoming their own person.*” She felt they have their own minds and characteristics but are also influenced by the environments that adults create to “*grow and feed their interests and create sparks.*”

#### 6.4.3 Andy

*“Children’s voices don’t exist unless someone is there to hear them and what I think babies fundamentally need is a sensitive ear.” (Int1)*

*“...we are lost in the chaos of children and have become overwhelmed by documentation.” (Int2)*

Andy is a graduate practitioner with EYPS and at the time of the interviews was engaged in postgraduate study, exploring psychoanalytic approaches in early years. With over ten years’ experience working across a diverse range of early years settings, he took up the role of Deputy Manager at a large city centre, local authority run nursery, supporting children aged 6 months to five years. During the process of my doctoral study, he was promoted to Manager of the nursery.

For Andy, the young child’s voice is inextricably linked to the primary carer, most commonly the mother. In order to fully understand the perspective of the baby,

practitioners must rely on relationships with parents, as they are the main conduit for interpreting the voice of the young child. He highlighted tensions that can occur when practitioners take on the role of 'expert' and dismiss the views of parents, and how this can create barriers to truly hearing the voice of the baby; *"Practitioners tend to fall into being the expert on authority in children and what they should and shouldn't be doing, rather than working in partnership with the parent."* He spoke about the evolving nature of children's abilities to be active decision makers, as they grow in independence, making a distinction between the abilities of babies and toddlers; *"Growing up is about learning to be your own independent being away from your parent, and that a child starts child care at [age] two or three and there is already a gap present between the parent and the child and maybe the child has their own ideas and their own, um...real understanding and very definite voice. We know this about two-year olds, they're very clear about what they do and don't want to do sometimes. The younger the baby, the closer that voice is to the parent's voice."*

Andy spoke about the role of the carer (including parents and practitioners) as being able to contain emotions for young children, highlighting the vulnerability of young children and the role of the adult in creating a safe and secure emotional environment. Exploring ideas of vulnerability and how these relate to rights, Andy highlighted his belief in the *"absolute rights"* of young children, whilst appreciating the unique needs of babies. He suggested that the idea of the young child as vulnerable and/or capable was *"fluid"*. He spoke about the need to create a balanced relationship with young children that recognises their dependency and need for a caring adult who maintains a safe environment whilst also providing opportunities for children to be active decision makers; *"I think if approaches are too controlling, too disciplinarian they cut down on children's ability to make choices and think for themselves...but also I think that if practitioners are too liberal in their approach and there is too much choice, there is a risk that children...become emotionally insecure and aren't able to...make choices because they are...cowed...by their own anxiety."*

Andy highlighted the importance of skilful practitioners who anticipate children's needs and used the example of creating routines to prepare children for sleep even if they haven't yet shown they are tired. If practitioners leave it until the child shows the adult they are tired, this can sometimes create a difficult situation; *“Once a child starts to show signs of being sleepy other behaviours can manifest, some children go excessively hyper when tired and start running around, so I think it’s better to anticipate that state because you know that child and you know that child’s behaviour before it happens, rather than just waiting for that.”* This ability to anticipate rests upon a close understanding of the child that is developed with the parent, and through careful observation.

The ability of practitioners to attune to children, contain emotions and provide a safe and nurturing environment where voices can be heard was explored by Andy in our second interview. He spoke about practitioners occupying their time with routine tasks; *“Practitioners tend to prioritise routine care tasks over the more messy learning experiences of the children...it’s easier to go and change 12 nappies, because you’ve got a definable task that you know what you’re doing, than to spend half an hour trying to make something meaningful out of the chaos of a room full of six babies...the time when you could really maybe listen to the more nuanced expression of who a baby is through their play is lost or diminished.”* A focus on routine tasks can help to impose some order on a day that might feel out of control. Andy felt this also happens when practitioners prioritise completion of documentation and routine administrative tasks, instead of engaging in close interactions with toddlers; *“I think there’s also something useful for practitioners who are finding things a bit too much, facing chaos in a room of eighteen two-year olds, is too much. So I’m going to go and do my books, I’m going to do an observation, because then I’m doing a controlled, manageable task. I’m away from the chaos, the feelings of panic that that probably evokes.”*

When talking about the wider policy context Andy felt that practitioners have become *“overwhelmed by documentation.”* He questioned whether Ofsted wants these high levels of record keeping and suggested that perhaps the pressure to document learning comes from practitioners themselves who have become very

focussed on recording developmental achievement; *“I think it’s about our own internal needs to do something, to make order of children’s voice maybe....Practitioners can become very stuck in development matters and this is what the child is learning, this is what they’re meant to learn.”*

#### 6.4.4 Ava

*“So that’s my other big bug bear. ‘We have to do that for OFSTED’. But no, we don’t, because this is not about OFSTED, this is about children, what’s good for children....we have to keep the children in the middle of it, we do not have to keep OFSTED in the middle of it.” (Int2)*

Ava had a career change from health to early years education and has now worked in ECEC for over six years. She holds EYPS and at the time of the first interview was the owner of her home-based childminding setting, working with her husband. Between interviews she had a change of job and took up the position of national policy advisor and quality assurance lead for a large day nursery chain.

Ava talked about balancing children’s protection with their participation. She highlighted the importance of young children having choices; *“this is about beginning to exert control over their environment and part of their natural development, to realise that they’re independent from other people.”* However, she also accepted that some decisions need to be controlled by adults to maintain safety; *“sometimes we have to make choices for them because the choices they might make, for example to run down the road and not hold our hand, is a dangerous choice.”* She talked about the flexibility of her childminding practice and how responsive her and her husband could be to children’s interests and needs. She said that practice was *“fundamentally and foremost about the children” and that this involved being “sensitive”* to the children, in an environment where children trust the adults. There was acknowledgement that individual rights are balanced with the rights of the group and wider societal expectations; *“if you want to live in our society as it is at the moment, then you have to conform to society viewpoints, but actually within that you should be able to be your own*

*individual with your own choices*". There are occasions where the individual choices clash with the needs of the group which means there is *"choice with limitation"*.

The importance of tuning in to young children and being sensitive to their subtle forms of communication was explored by Ava. She reflected on several occasions when she has observed practitioners and noticed a failure to pick up on the invitations to play offered by pre-verbal children. She said that young children offer cues, but these can be missed unless practitioners are facing children, actively listening and responding, and that the ability to interpret subtle communication comes from a commitment to knowing the children in your care. Listening is not only related to verbal communication but encompasses the multimodal ways in which young children express themselves: *"It's about listening and people being aware that listening is not just words. It's everything else, especially with young children."*

Ava also talked about becoming ready for school and the role that ECEC has in ensuring that young children will ultimately be able to work with others and meet the expectations of learning in school contexts. The discussion explored an idea of balance – balancing the needs of the individual against the group, balancing children's decision making with the need to develop skills to be sociable beings, ready for school and wider society; *"I want our children to....get on really well with other children and respect other people and respect other people's views. But also be inquisitive, curious, and thinking and primed for the next stage of their life. It's a balance, not squishing them and going 'you must do this', and encouraging them to be their own person"*.

During our second interview Ava reflected on the differences between her home-based childminding setting and the nursery settings she now works across. She has noticed that practitioners in some nursery settings spend a great deal of time standing with clipboards, observing children with limited interaction with young children; *"The practitioners are standing with their clip boards and they're watching children. And I'm just kind of like, what's missing from this nursery is*

*interaction with children. And it took me quite a while to work out that that was what was missing. It wasn't until I went to another nursery where there was amazing interaction that I went, Oh! That's what's missing from there, there isn't actually any of this chit chat between practitioners and children, apart from disciplining them. And I was just 'oh...'*" Ava wondered if this focus on recording observations comes from a pressure to document and track development. Whilst she can see benefits of accountability measures that have been introduced through the EYFS and Ofsted in terms of raising expectations of practice, she equally is frustrated by practice that becomes dominated by external demands at the expense of focussing on individual children.

#### 6.4.5 Holly

*"I'm trying to juggle 500 plates here to keep people happy...what the paperwork wants and then the actual interaction with the children and having quality interactions with them." (Int2)*

Holly had recently completed EYTS at the time of this research project. With three years' experience she had the role of Early Years Teacher at a city centre, private day nursery, working with children aged two-four years. She was also a mentor for trainee teachers and a leader of pedagogical practice within her setting.

Holly described a listening approach as "*respectful*" practice that relies on adults who demonstrate genuine interest in children's voices. She spoke about the importance of not "*patronising*" young children and taking their interests seriously. She linked a participatory approach with sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004), equating this to practice where "*the child chooses which direction their learning goes. It's their choice really and we're just along for the ride.*" She views adults as facilitators of voice, providing opportunities for young children to make choices.

Holly highlighted the challenges that arise when the voices of adults conflict with the voices of children. She provided an example of a toddler who wanted to wear



a princess dress, but his father did not feel it was appropriate for boys to wear dresses and asked that he not be allowed to do this. Holly felt caught between the wishes of the father and the voice of the child: *"I remember there was a dad who was worried his son might be gay because he wanted to play with the princess dress. So we had a bit of an agreement with mum that if dad was picking up we had to remove the dress before he got there. So myself and one of the parents were allowing the child to explore and make the decision to wear a dress. But behind dad's back."* She said conflict between the voices of parents and children often happens in relation to nap times, when parents request children be kept awake so that they sleep at home, but children themselves want, or need, to sleep during the day. On occasion parents can be 'stubborn' and override a child's wishes, which *"can be a bit unkind to the child"*. In seeking to resolve these conflicting demands, Holly said she needs to know *"when to pick my battles or when to do things against the parents' wishes, in the interests of the child."* Holly also explored the other extreme, where tensions arise when parents *"sometimes seem powerless with their children because they give them so much choice"*. She used the example of a parent who brings McDonalds take-away for the child at collection times, stating *"anything for an easy life...It keeps resonating in my head every time an adult wants to do something, whether it's not letting the child sleep so as to sleep in the car, or potty-training so they don't have the mess anymore, I just keep hearing 'anything for an easy life' resonate in my head."* Some parents seem like "slaves" for their children because *"it's easier to give the child just what they want rather than kick and scream."*

In terms of the ability to be capable decision makers, Holly said that it was quite noticeable that children under three years of age *"don't have a great range of experience to draw from,"* and thus require practitioners to provide diverse experiences to enable their repertoire of interests to develop. As children get older, they are more able to make decisions because they are able to draw on experiences that open new areas of interest and inquiry. This discussion led us to consider the evolving nature of children's capacities as decision makers. Holly felt that with young children, adults often might need to direct decision making as they have more understanding of the situation. She felt that young children

should be protected from making potentially important, life changing decisions - that childhood should be a time that is protected from the stress of having to be a decision maker. Holly drew on her own experiences of having to make difficult decisions at a young age, without a depth of understanding about consequences, and wondered if the adults in her life may have made better choices for her. However, she recognised a tension here and defined adults as often being hypocritical as they don't always make the best choices themselves. She also felt that children given little choice might grow up to be adults who make poor choices. She drew on her own experiences, as a young child denied sugar and then as an adult who craves sugar. Throughout the interviews there was a real tension between children being capable decision makers but also vulnerable and in need of adult guidance.

Holly highlighted the challenges that come from outside pressures and policy guidance. She talked about being "*bogged down*" by the demands of paperwork, that often takes her attention away from interactions with children. She used a metaphor of juggling to describe her work, trying to please people and meet external expectations, whilst maintaining a focus on children. She spoke about the focus on school readiness that directs focus away from other aspects of practice; "*..we're always from above being asked to do things like improve maths, improve literacy, improve this, improve that. That and the whole school ready thing take away from what we should be doing which is teaching them listening and speaking, the basics of being a human.*"

#### 6.4.6 Jen

*"I think it's knowing your children, and just looking at them. They are communicating with us, they are saying there is something not quite right here, keep an eye on me." (Int1)*

Jen has over thirty years' experience working in ECEC, and currently holds a position as practitioner in the toddler room of a large city-centre maintained nursery school. Jen holds EYTS and a Masters Degree in Education. At the time of the interviews Jen was engaged in doctoral study, exploring young children's

communication. Jen created a mind map prior to the first interview, and this was used to instigate our discussions (Table 4).

Jen spoke about the competing perspectives of children's rights to participation with their rights to protection, and the role of the practitioner in balancing the importance of giving children a voice with the need to protect them and keep them safe. She spoke about an article she had read from Scandinavia about nappy changing and allowing toddlers the right to choose to stay in soiled nappies. She appreciated the right of the child to express a view but felt a priority was also to protect young children; *"I can see where they're coming from, but children get very sore and get really bad nappy rash, and sometimes it's horrible...So ok, they've got the right to express their voice but actually we should protect them....I'm not even going to pretend that a two-year old understands that if we leave them in a pooey nappy they're going to get sore."* As adults understand the full consequences of actions, it is up to adults to protect young children. With other care routines, Jen felt there could be more flexibility. She felt it was inappropriate to make children eat if they aren't hungry, *"I haven't read of one and two-year olds being anorexic. So if they're hungry they will eat...If they don't want it – we have days when we don't want to eat. Fair cop. And you have other days when you want to eat non-stop. Also fair cop."* She said she tends to be quite *"laid back"* about mealtimes, often making slight adaptations to the routine to fit in with the rhythm of the children.

Rights of the individual and how this might conflict with the needs of the majority were also explored. Jen talked about participation rights as potentially being individualistic and not always congruent with the needs of the community. This can be a challenge in a group setting with many competing voices; *"Is it the rights of the group, is it the rights of the child? I don't know. What is most important? If you've got ten children who want to go [outside to an area that requires supervision] and two who don't, that's not going to work, so whose right is the biggest? And that is a constant battle....how do you sometimes take account of everybody's right in a community decision?"* Jen also highlighted the need to understand rights in relationship to responsibilities and the role of ECEC in

supporting children to integrate in society and adhere to certain social norms, *“If you’ve got rights, the flip side of that is you’ve got responsibilities. And one of your responsibilities, unfortunately, is to fit a culture...and the extreme end is not to go around murdering people, setting fire to houses, but on the day to day, it is: when is your mother’s birthday? She expects a card”*. Jen tries to find compromises with this. If children don’t want to make a card for their mum but want to make biscuits, then they can make biscuits to give to mum instead of a card. But there are also limitations. There are limited resources which means children can only make one card, for example for Mother's Day, as there aren't enough resources for children to make as many cards as they might wish to. The limitations of resources can impact on children’s choices.

A significant amount of time was spent discussing the ways in which practitioners work with young children in order to fully understand their perspectives. In her work with toddlers, she emphasised the relationship between the practitioner and child and taking time to really know children. Jen talked about the subtle ways that young children communicate – through eye gaze, body language, through the activities they engage with. She talked about practitioners needing *“the time, the awareness and the skills to listen.”* Time was repeatedly mentioned, with an emphasis on the lack of time to spend on meaningful observation; *“it is hard to do when you’ve got twenty two-year olds running around.”* This lack of time was compounded by policy expectations that drive practitioners to work in particular ways. She said the *“EYFS does us no favours...because we’re very focussed on..statutory requirements. It’s a particular construct of the child.”* Jen talked about assessments being framed around particular expectations that do not always capture the strengths of the individual child. Practice can often be driven not by the interests or needs of the child but rather by a need to gather evidence to fulfil requirements in terms of tracking children’s progress against standardised developmental milestones in the EYFS. She felt that overall policy can constrain practice as it focusses on outcomes.

### 6.4.7 Jess

*"Influence over their lives? Honestly? What influence? They're dropped off. If they sat there and said 'I want to be at home today'... and it was done, that I would say you were influencing your own lives.... We have power, we have control. They don't have that.... So to never have a choice I do think I find that heart-breaking. I do think that's a negative. And the positive to the flip side of that is, once they are in with us, we do try to create an environment where they do have choices that they can make. They can choose who they play with, which adult they're with, what's happening to a certain extent. So we try and make that a positive so that they're not in a regimented routine." (Int1)*

Jess is a qualified Early Years Teacher and owner of a rural village preschool where she works with children aged two-five years. At the time of the interviews, Jess had worked in early years for five years, following a previous career in finance. Her pre-school does not have separate rooms for different age groups, all ages are mixed, although there are opportunities for smaller groups of children to work with practitioners in a side room if they need slightly different provision. However, this mixing of age groups created an interesting point to reflect on as Jess spent time as a student observing practice in a nursery baby room and was able to consider how practice possibly changes when accommodating a narrow age band. She was able to reflect on the ways in which the youngest children integrate with older children and find their voices in her busy pre-school setting.

Jess spoke at length about practices that promote the participation rights of the youngest children in her setting. A key element is taking time to know children well through observations. She said they spend time trying to *"catch their non-verbal communication"* as young children can become *"lost"* in the large village hall without a deliberate focus on observing *"their faces, their emotions, everything that's not said."* As a team their primary focus is to be there for the children, to observe behaviour and interpret communication in order to develop a good understanding of children's needs.

Jess offers children many choices during their day at preschool and felt this was important as young children have little choice about attending preschool, so

when they are there, she likes to ensure that they are given opportunities to make decisions about their daily experiences. The children can choose where to play (indoors or out) and can select the resources they want to use. They have a flexible approach at preschool, with some routines but also an ability to respond to children's changing needs. For example, she spoke about a music teacher who delivers sessions that might be longer if the children are engaged but are cut short if the children are less interested. Jess also felt it was important for children to choose which adults to spend time with and to be able to form their own friendships. She acknowledged that some children find too much choice overwhelming and need more guidance and structure.

Jess highlighted the uniqueness of two-year olds. They are not babies, but not three-year olds, and as such have a unique set of capabilities and needs. In a large preschool setting she wondered if sometimes the voice of the youngest children gets lost, although also said that the two-year olds can be very good at making their voices heard. Throughout both interviews there were noticeable contradictions where Jess would talk about the vulnerability of the youngest children in her setting in one moment, and then highlight their amazing capabilities the next; *"I tend to mollycoddle the two-year olds and cuddle them a lot. I also push them to achieve own goals in activities and love the fact they can think critically before verbal communication is secure....the two-year olds can show greater perseverance than the three- and four-year olds!"* When I asked her about her depiction of the youngest children in her setting as both dependent and independent, she said *"You've just described a two-year-old!"* Jess said the youngest children demonstrate amazing skills at having their voices heard, whilst also demonstrating vulnerability and dependence on practitioners. The youngest children are adept at maintaining close proximity to the practitioners and prefer smaller groups and 1:1 time with adults, which requires more staff. This has led to a deliberate policy decision to staff above statutory ratio so that the youngest children have a *"cuddle person."*

Whilst Jess acknowledged that meaningful record keeping is useful in helping to keep track of children's interests, she was critical of the overwhelming amount of

paperwork that is required to meet external demands. She felt excessive paperwork is counterproductive to the purpose of their role – to be with the children – and spoke of the difficulties in managing these competing demands; *“We’re on a guilt trip, all of us, all the time that we could be doing more paperwork or should be doing more paperwork. But with children needing us...if a member of staff has to leave [to do paperwork] there’s a gate and we have little puppy dog faces calling their name to come back. That’s the reality. The children have spoken, that’s their true voice, ‘don’t leave us, come back and play’...but practitioners have to do their paperwork, paid really, in the times that we’re open. Paperwork really shouldn’t leave the setting...How are we meant to manage this situation?”* She talked about using an iPad to record observations, which could potentially free up practitioner time that is spent on writing up observations. However, she was sceptical of this as an approach as it can dominate time and lead to situations where practitioners are focussed on data collection. Jess felt that the pressure to document children’s achievements results in practitioner time taken away from children and consequently quality interactions are interrupted.

#### 6.4.8 Josie

*“Obviously you’re going to miss key points if you’re not actually in tune with them. You’re going to miss their needs, what they’re trying to tell you, what they want...the more in tune you are, the easier it is to help them develop, help them to move on, help them to develop their language, to be able to communicate what they need....if you’re very busy with so many other children, you’re not really going to have time to spend with them, their needs aren’t going to be met, and you start getting behaviour problems and lots of other difficulties.” (Int1)*

Josie is an Early Years Teacher with over ten years' experience working in a range of different early years settings. At the time of the interviews Josie was a childminder working from her own home setting with children aged 3 months-3 years. Previously, whilst undertaking her EYTS training, she was leading practice in a primary school nursery class (with children aged 2-4), and during both research interviews she made comparisons between her experiences working in a large nursery and as a home-based childminder.

When exploring ideas around the capabilities of the youngest children to be active participants in their own learning and care, Josie talked about children's emerging independence and her role in offering choice. She highlighted the importance of knowing children, *"observing them and seeing what they're interested in."* By offering children choices she observes their responses to then gauge their interests. Partnerships with parents, which is established early through home visits during settling periods, was highlighted as a key method to develop bonds with children that enable their perspectives to be understood; *"My little one at the moment has discovered the word 'bird'. So everything, going outside, she's constantly looking for the birds and wants to say 'bird' and mum said she took her to a farm type place and she was so excited about all of the birds."* Through discussions with mum, interests developed at home are built upon at Josie's setting.

Josie talked about the importance of flexibility in routines and planning. Multiple references to 'time' were made during her interviews – time to observe and listen to children, time to respond, time to get to know children and their families, time for children to make choices, time to talk to parents. There was a sense that Josie has a calm, flexible and relaxed approach to her work with young children, with very few structural constraints and the ability to be led by children's interests and needs. She spoke of her frustrations with inflexible routines when working at the school nursery, and the freedom she now has to follow children's interests in her own setting; *"I remember being really sad sitting at the school. There was a little boy looking at some pictures of castles. It was like 'have you ever been to a castle?' I thought, if I was looking after you, I'd take you over to Bodiam or up to Hastings Castle."* Her setting, with small numbers of children, provides opportunities to be more responsive to individual needs; *"With a smaller ratio you can do that, whereas if you've got eight two-year olds it's harder."*

As a childminder, working alone with very small groups of children, Josie feels she can provide a consistent approach that is underpinned by her own values and beliefs in the capabilities of young children. She spoke about challenges



when working in the school nursery, referring to it as a “*cold environment*” that placed multiple barriers in terms of creating opportunities to promote decision making for young children. She spoke about limitations in terms of responding to individual children within school structures and routines; *“I used to try to do key group time, so the children would come in and we’d go off in our little key groups...but you might have a staff shortage or I might have to go and talk to a parent, then my key group are just left drifting around. Or you have another practitioner who doesn’t particularly like doing key group time and she’ll palm her group off with someone else...That’s not what it’s about. It’s about spending time with your children.”*

Josie highlighted the frustrations of working with practitioners who hold different understandings about the needs and capabilities of two-year olds. Reflecting on a placement experience in a baby room in a large day nursery during her EYTS training, Josie spoke with sadness about the treatment of babies; *“It was quite interesting, seeing the care routines, and again how much choice they’ve got. If the children are sitting there doing a puzzle or playing, then someone just comes long and scoops them up and changes their nappy. The shock on their face – literally, one minute they’ve been looking at this and the next minute they’re up in the air and being plonked on the changing mat. And I was like, you could say to them ‘shall we go and do your nappy?’ You could do the sign for a nappy, getting the things out, showing them this is what we’re going to do, rather than just like sweeping them out of whatever they’re in the middle of doing.”* The baby room routines in the placement nursery dictated practitioner actions, rather than a commitment to including young children in decisions about their care. In her own childminding setting Josie feels she is able to exercise flexibility with routines and structure the day around the emerging interests and needs of children. Even the youngest children are actively involved in directing daily planning. This happens primarily through observing children, knowing them well and liaising closely with parents.

#### 6.4.9 Joyce

*"It's so embedded in our own values, that we find it hard to change. So if you have a perception of what your role is... We all have our own values, but you need to have a shared early years value, and understanding of what we're here for... the tension sometimes is not so much between the adult and the child, more with the adults." (Int1)*

Joyce is currently manager of a city centre charity run preschool and childcare setting, primarily supporting children aged birth-three years from disadvantaged backgrounds. She has worked in childcare for over 32 years, across a range of settings, and has EYPS. In response to the pre-interview task, Joyce brought an artefact to our first interview, and used this to instigate our discussion about the participation rights of the youngest children. The artefact was a plaster cast of an image of a woman in a garden with a baby and two young children (Table 4). The plaster cast was broken, and this held significance for Joyce. She described the image as a depiction of contentment, but that this isn't always possible – things get broken – and whilst we might aim for that perfect contentment for a child, we can also accept that life is not perfect. Joyce described contentment as *"the capacity to be in the moment, with the capacity to be interested in the future and knowing that there is more...it's about people being who they are and feeling comfortable about who they are. Early years is the place for that to start."*

As a manager, Joyce spoke at length about the challenges of maintaining an approach where children are listened to, given choice and involved in decision making. She believes that children's participation is reliant on emotionally resilient adults who can see beyond their own needs and actively listen to children. This involves a process of accepting children's perspectives even when they differ from your own position and being open to questioning your perspective, as the adult. Active listening was described as observing all communication, including eye gaze, body movements etc..., as part of a process of watching and responding to young children through a responsive *"symbiotic relationship."*

Joyce equated voice with resilience and the importance of nurturing resilience in young children; *“It’s really important that children have input [in decision making]....because that gives them greater resilience later on in life. Because the thing about resilience that challenges it is the fact you don’t feel you have control or choice, and you’re not going to be resilient...we can’t control everything. However, we also need to see that resilience gives us the capacity to influence things, to make some of the out of control things get a bit better. And that’s about everyone having a voice and the voice being heard, and the collective voice being heard and it changing things.”*

One of the key themes that became a thread throughout my discussions with Joyce was the pivotal role of the practitioner as the facilitator of children's voice, and the barriers that impede this. She feels that practitioners themselves are often not heard and struggle to see the value in their own work due to poor status and pay. She spoke about the demands of the role and challenges that make it difficult to consistently maintain a focus on listening to children. Joyce highlighted the importance of having a shared ethos within the setting, with common understandings about the role of the practitioner. However, she acknowledged the difficulties in developing a shared set of values when each practitioner brings their own set of beliefs to work. She finds it difficult to create shared values with practitioners who do not hold the same beliefs about the capabilities of young children, and perhaps view their role as primarily focussed on cleaning, changing, feeding and meeting basic care needs rather than a wider understanding of care that nurtures voice and decision making; *“If you have staff who are prepared to believe that that’s the best thing for the children then it will work. But if you have staff who are not really understanding that, not really valuing it apparently, then you’ve got a challenge because you can’t create that flow for the children.”*

Joyce highlighted the demands on her time and how this creates challenges in terms of having the capacity to properly listen to children. As a manager she is pulled in different directions, managing administrative duties, whilst balancing the needs of parents, practitioners and children, within a context of low pay and

a lack of resources. She said the wider policy context “*totally restricts voice due to bureaucracy and a lack of understanding or willingness to pay for education*”.

#### 6.4.10 Willow

*“I think they are ‘becoming’ on to their next stage if you like...So it is giving them those tools and equipping them mentally, what they’re going to do and what they’re going to become. It’s about equipping them for life and equipping them to be adults in life.” (Int1)*

Willow is manager of a sessional preschool setting in a small seaside town, working with children aged two-five years. She has over 17 years' experience working in early years and holds EYPS. There is a low turnover of staff in her preschool, and consequently there is a strongly established team that Willow has worked with for many years. She spoke about how practice in the setting has evolved over her time there, and how it has moved from quite a prescriptive, structured environment to one that supports free-flow play and more opportunities for choice and decision making.

Willow was able to easily accept two images of the child that might at first seem contradictory - the young child both as a competent being, able to make choices and participate actively in decision making, but also the young child as a developing person, and the role of ECEC in supporting children to develop skills for school and later life. She spoke enthusiastically about the rights of young children and the importance of upholding these. She highlighted that a key form of communication used by babies is crying, and yet adults often use a dummy to silence that voice, consequently diminishing the right of the baby to exercise their own voice; “*Babies have a right to communicate but often we squash that right. A baby might cry because they want to tell us something, they have that right. But what do we do? We put a dummy in their mouth to stop them. But that baby is trying to communicate, they need something.*”

In her setting, she feels the youngest children often have more opportunities to be active decision makers as there is less focus on school readiness. As they get closer to school age, practitioners introduce more formal activities that help to *“get them ready for school”* because *“there is an element of ‘you’re becoming a four-year-old or five-year-old and you’re going to have to manage this”* - it is about giving children the *‘tools’* to manage school expectations. Whereas the younger children, under three years of age, have more opportunities for free choice and a more flexible daily routine. However, she raised concerns about the increasing emphasis on academic achievement in early years. She said she feels this move towards academic targets is creeping into work with younger children and she feels like she is being *“pulled”* towards more formal ways of working with young children, at the expense of play-based pedagogy that is centred on children’s interests. She spoke about unrealistic *“government targets”* that prioritise ways of learning that are not appropriate in early years. Her aim is to focus learning *“around their interests, because I believe they’re not going to learn if you ask them to do something they’re not interested in”*.

We spoke at length about parents and the tensions that can occur when the voice of the child conflicts with the voice of the parent. Willow finds it challenging when parental expectations do not align with children’s perspectives. Access to the outdoor environment is often a source of tension. Children might come to the setting with a slight cold and parents request that they do not play outdoors. However, the setting policy is free flow and Willow feels it is inappropriate to stop a child from making the decision to play outside if they are well enough to be at preschool. She spoke about the importance of supporting parents to understand their setting ethos and how free flow works, with the emphasis on children's choices in learning. However, there are rare occasions when children are made to do things in order to meet parent expectations. Mother's day cards are *“not a choice, because if a child doesn't have a Mother's day card, my goodness that mother is distraught!”*

#### *6.4.11 Reflection on Participant Narrative Summaries*

Inclusion of individual participant narrative summaries have been presented as the first layer of findings, exploring individual positioning in relation to the research question. It was important to me from the outset of the project that each participant would feel heard and included in the final report. I wanted participants to easily identify themselves in the thesis and hope they recognise my analysis of their individual stories as an accurate synthesis of their perspectives. Of course, these extracts are a summary and inevitably distill hours of interview data into brief versions of the narratives. The resulting narrative summaries highlight core elements that emerged as a focus during our time together and through the subsequent process of analysis.

Each participant had their own story to share, linked to their own unique experiences. As I engaged with the data and prepared the summaries, connections and contradictions across the narratives became apparent. The next section explores findings that connect the individual stories through four overarching themes.

### 6.5 Overarching Themes

This section of the thesis documents findings from analysis of participant narratives, exploring overarching themes across the dataset. The previous section explored micro narratives, introducing individual participants and key elements extracted from their stories. Connections between individual stories are now explored through macro narratives that illuminate understanding about wider social processes through the identification of overarching themes. These overarching themes provide insight to address the research question and aims. The research question has asked; ***'what beliefs do graduate practitioners working in ECEC settings in England hold about the participation rights of young children (aged 0-3), with specific reference to Article 12 of the UNCRC?'*** Additionally, the research was framed by four core aims:

- Develop understanding of the perspectives of graduate practitioners working with the youngest children (aged 0-3) in relation to participation rights as set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC.
- Use a narrative methodology to explore practitioner perspectives relating to young children as 'beings' and/or 'becomings' and how these perspectives influence beliefs about participation rights.
- Explore how values and beliefs influence the ways in which practitioners interact with young children as holders of participation rights.
- Contribute to the wider discourse around participation rights of children, with a specific focus on the capabilities of very young children as holders of participation rights.

Through the process of analysis (6.3.1-6.3.6) four overarching themes were identified (Figure 1) in response to the research question and aims. The process of identifying overarching themes started with individual coded extracts of data. For example, considering this extract from the theme 'The capable, independent child' (Figure 1)

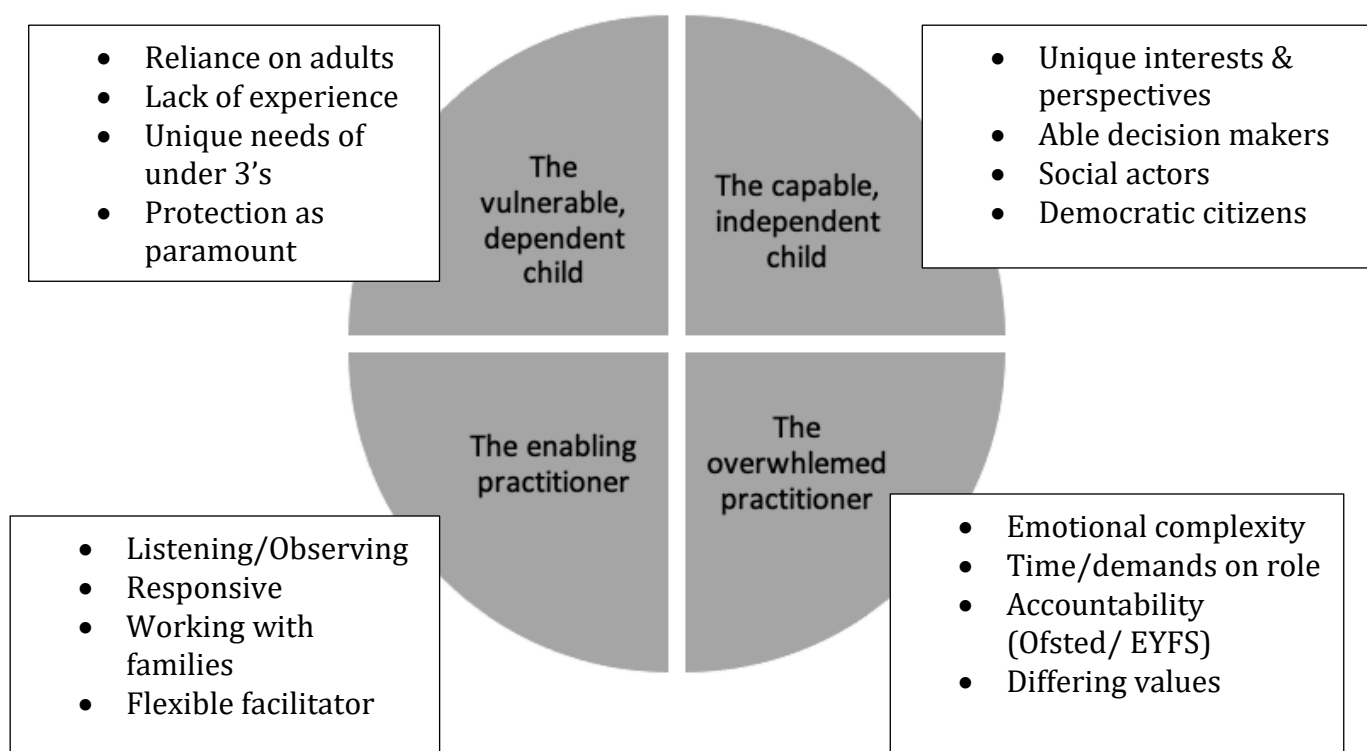
**Alissa (Int1):** *I think that even at a very young age they have their preferences and what they like to do....*

Here, Alissa is talking about the capabilities of the child. Her focus is not on her own practice but rather on young children and the capacities they demonstrate from a young age to be active decision makers. Through a reflective process of examining and sorting, extracts of data such as this were coded and grouped into categories that were subsequently organised around four interrelated themes that consider both the capabilities of vulnerabilities of young children, and equally the capabilities and vulnerabilities of the adults who care for young children.

Participant narratives are interconnected but at times in tension, revealing the complexity of participation rights with the youngest children and how these are understood and realised by leaders of learning in early childhood contexts. The data tells a story of practitioners who view participation rights within a context that acknowledges young children as both competent and vulnerable, and

practitioners who negotiate their own competency and vulnerability as facilitators of participation rights.

Figure 1: Overarching Themes



The four overarching themes respond to the research question and aims. The themes present perspectives of graduate practitioners working with the youngest children, thus contributing to the wider discourse relating to participation rights in early childhood. Key findings from the data are:

### 1. The vulnerable, dependent child (6.5.1)

The first theme details practitioner beliefs about the vulnerability of the youngest children and their dependency on adult carers. The unique needs and abilities of babies and toddlers present implications for enacting participation rights in ECEC contexts. This theme addresses the research aim relating to the positionality of young children as 'beings' or 'becomings,' highlighting the vulnerability of the youngest children.

### 2. The capable, independent child (6.5.2)



The second theme explores practitioner narratives that depict the youngest children as capable, independent social actors who hold participation rights and exercise these in their ECEC settings. Linked to the first theme, the notion of the competent social actor responds to the research aim that seeks to understand practitioner perspectives about young children as ‘beings’ or ‘becomings,’ highlighting the capacities of babies and toddlers as active agents in their care and learning.

### **3. The enabling practitioner (6.5.3)**

The third theme addresses the ways in which responsive and attuned practitioners facilitate participation rights when leading practice with the youngest children. This third theme responds to the research aim that seeks to explore the influence of values and beliefs on practice which enables young children to be holders of participation rights.

### **4. The overwhelmed practitioner (6.5.4)**

The fourth theme considers challenges experienced by practitioners that create potential barriers for the enactment of participation rights with young children in ECEC settings. The final theme represents a pervasive narrative that ran throughout all interviews, providing insight into the realities of enacting participatory practice in early childhood settings.

#### *6.5.1 The vulnerable, dependent child*

The unique status of babies and toddlers as holders of participation rights is explored within the context of vulnerability. Babies and toddlers are, to some extent, characterised by participants as vulnerable, dependent becomings, not fully able to exercise participation rights without the consideration of wider issues of safety and developmental limitations. Whilst participants acknowledge the legitimacy and seriousness of children’s rights, they position participation rights alongside protection rights, highlighting the paramountcy of keeping young children safe. Lundy (2020, 5:26) argues that human rights are “indivisible, interrelated and interdependent” and thus cannot be understood or enacted in isolation but rather are connected to one another. Participation rights and protection rights can be seen as two complementary aspects that are

balanced to ensure the child's voice is acknowledged within a context of a safe environment for all children.

**Jen (Int1):** *I think it's a balance...it's your duty to say, actually...to keep a child safe...It's a balance and yes, they can take some risks, you can run and fall over, that's fine. But you can't run in the path of a car.*

**Willow (Int2):** *It's a safety thing, isn't it? That's where their choices are limited, if there's a safety responsibility there.*

**Joyce (Int1):** *It's all about those safe boundaries. Because play is a children's right, children need to play, they need that like the air they breathe. And obviously the right of protection is an important right. But that whole thing, a kind of carrying, all those things that children need together to make that place of safety.*

The need to protect babies and toddlers is aligned with their limitations in understanding consequences and the resulting dependency on adults to keep them safe. Participants identified children under three as a distinct group, with particular characteristics and needs, requiring an alternative approach to participation rights. The reliance of babies and toddlers on adult carers was explored by participants as a core element that distinguishes the youngest children from their older peers in ECEC settings.

Participants highlighted the capabilities of the youngest children to be active participants within the context of their lack of experience of the wider world. Although accepted as rights holders, the youngest children were viewed as having limited experience and thus dependent on adults to establish environments that widen their experiences, without overwhelming them, thus enabling them to be confident decision makers.

**Ava (Int1):** *And actually, sometimes the choices we give them are a limited palette. So if they're starting to eat, there's a limited choice of*

*two different things for them. So choices sometimes are in a framework for those very young children.*

**Alissa (Int1):** *You need to give them that choice which broadens their horizons. It introduces them to things. We did try once the idea of self-initiated learning. Completely self-initiating...and it was absolutely the worst year because the children, their experiences weren't even broadened. They do need you sometimes to plant that seed for them.*

**Holly (Int1):** *You can see the difference [between 2- and 3-year-olds] quite strongly. Especially when they turn three and a half/four, you can see their ability to make decisions blossom and their opinions blossom, because they have had experiences that can shape their ideas. There is a little boy who, when he first started, was always 'what shall I play with?'...He didn't know. I'd always ask what he liked but he didn't have a point of reference and what he liked...But he's about to go to school and he comes in and asks for the blocks and builds amazing constructions...He draws from those experiences – he can make a road with houses next to it, because there's a strong pathway in his brain that he can draw experiences from.*

**Amanda (Int1):** *I think we can definitely help children to grow and feed their interests and create sparks. But we are doing that, aren't we? Because we are giving them such a breadth of information and opportunities, ideas, exploration.... But it's unlikely they will have come across all of those things before. So they're just learning and seeing what they're capable of, or what they want to do.*

The young child's lack of experience aligns with a developmental perspective, acknowledging the progressive capacities of babies and toddlers. Holly reflected on the importance of children developing greater understanding, through experience, and how experiences build capacities for children to be competent, active participants. She connected experiences from her own childhood with her

role as an early childhood practitioner, exploring potential consequences when developmental abilities of the young child are not considered.

**Holly** (Int1): *This is another thing that interests me. The science of it, the brain science of it. Every moment if it's reinforced, that path becomes strong, doesn't it? So if you don't have the physical pathway there, I don't think you're able to make that decision, because your brain hasn't actually connected A to B to get C and know that that will always happen....I think that connects to decision making in terms of experiences. You need to have experiences to make decisions.... My childhood was, when it came to big decisions, I was asked at six who I would like to live with when my parents divorced. I wasn't a toddler but even at that age I didn't have the knowledge or the experience to know, or the self-reflection, to know that actually I should have gone with Dad. But as an adult I can look back and go "I made the wrong choice". But obviously [mum] was quite hippyish and wanted to give me the decision, but I made the wrong decision...If someone could have taken the responsibilities from me, it would have created a less anxious adult...I think it's allowing them to make decisions that don't inflict pain...that's what I've been concentrating on [in the setting].*

The characterisation of the vulnerable, inexperienced child being dependent on the adult to create boundaries and safe contexts for the enactment of participation rights was echoed by Andy. Participation rights with older children have been considered in relation to the redistribution of power in teacher/pupil relationships (Robinson and Taylor, 2013; Robinson 2018) with reflection on the level of control teachers might hold in classroom contexts. For Andy, the vulnerability of the youngest children requires a different vision of participation that accepts dependency and acknowledges the importance of secure environments, shaped by adults who are in control.

**Andy** (Int1): *I think not feeling that your adult is in control is hugely damaging for babies in particular, and I think one of the things*

*children growing up don't have a stated right to, but is actually essential to growing up, you know, children have a right to an adult who is in control of their world or to feel like their adults are in control.*

Likewise, Jess acknowledged the vulnerabilities of the youngest children in her setting and the need to control their environment to maintain safety. Particularly in her pre-school setting where two-year olds mix in the same space as the older children, the developmental needs and abilities of the youngest children create specific considerations in terms of providing spaces for participation rights to be enacted. Holly highlighted issues that arise when parents appear to be out of control and not able to maintain safe boundaries for decision making. Alissa used the example of parents who allow children to choose to continue using bottles even though this can cause longer term damage to the development of teeth. Creating boundaries for decision making was highlighted as a necessity in terms of protecting young children. Whilst Ava related more controlling environments to less opportunity for choice and decision making, there was also an acceptance that adults have a duty to create safe environments. Control is not characterised by participants as adults having ultimate power over decision making, but rather highlights the vulnerabilities of the youngest children and the role of the adult carer to offer protection and create safe environments for children to exercise decision making.

Acknowledgement of developmental capabilities and a focus on ensuring the safety of the youngest children, are clearly reflected as core elements of practice presented in the statutory early years framework (DfE, 2017a). This policy perspective was played out in the data, highlighting the status of developmental perspectives informing values, beliefs and practices. However, whilst the construction of the young child as a vulnerable, developing 'becoming' is evident in the data, it often bumps up against an alternative view of babies and toddlers as active, able, competent social actors, as illustrated in figure one. Participants hold these potentially conflicting perspectives in tandem, easily navigating between diverse viewpoints.

### 6.5.2 *The capable, independent child*

Participants were united in their acknowledgement of the youngest children as rights-holders. A strong thread across the data set is the characterisation of babies and toddlers as social actors with unique perspectives, who engage actively in their ECEC environments. Young children are acknowledged as capable communicators, able to use wide ranging strategies to engage with others and communicate their needs and interests. The abilities of the youngest children to be competent decision makers was highlighted multiple times.

**Amanda** (Int1): *Babies might have an interest in certain toys. They might want calming toys, stimulating toys, they might particularly like musical things, so they can move towards those and even though they can't speak, selecting what's there.*

**Alissa** (Int1): *I think that even at a very young age they have their preferences and what they like to do.... You see it with the toddlers and the under twos, you put two or three activities out. They will choose which one they want, they don't just sit there and wait to be asked.... If you dictate all of the time, you stifle their development. You're dictating which direction it takes. They've got to have that opportunity to explore and find their own way.*

**Ava** (Int1): *There is one child who is about 17 months and he really has relatively little words but he still manages totally to get his ideas and opinions across. Sometimes it's quite physical, by shoving children over, that kind of stuff, but I think it's again about that safe and secure environment, but he can share whatever he wants with us and we are unconditionally his. It's that security, he knows he can get us to respond, if he looks at us, makes a noise, if he comes and sits in our lap*

*with a book, it's quite apparent what he wants to do.... I think even very young babies can tell you exactly what they need or want.*

Acknowledgement of the capabilities of the youngest children as competent communicators and decision makers reflects a sociological perspective on childhood, upholding an image of the child as a capable social agent (Qvortrup et al, 1994; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002). Participants in my study expressed that the youngest children are particularly adept at seeking interaction with adults and demonstrate preference for spending time around adults, using a wide range of effective methods to make their voices heard. This reflects findings from research in neonatal units, which highlights the “remarkable” agency of premature babies and their ability to express preference about care routines including the people they prefer to be cared by (Alderson, 2005, p.45). Trevarthen (2011a, p.121) explores a wealth of research highlighting the abilities of newborn babies as competent communicators in intersubjective, meaning-making encounters, and their “remarkable expressive capacities” to demonstrate preference.

As competent communicators, young children draw on a wide range of strategies to make their voices heard. Participants highlighted the centrality of body language and vocalisations as mechanisms through which young children, and babies in particular, adeptly communicate with others. Drawing on examples from interactions with young children in their settings, participants highlighted communication strategies including subtle eye gaze, movements and vocal sounds used by babies and toddlers as indicators to signify a range of emotions, needs and interests. Joyce described individual babies in her setting and how they communicate preference for care routines and use signals to indicate when they are ready for food, sleep, comfort etc... Amanda expressed the view that very young children have their own perspectives and whilst adults may not always proficiently interpret children’s voices, pre-verbal children are nonetheless capable communicators. She used an example of a child with very little English who demonstrates interest through his responses to music and

singing and extended this to acknowledge that children's voices are communicated in multiple ways, including through inaction and silence.

**Amanda** (Int2): *...if children aren't telling us something, we presume they have nothing to say. But actually, it's not just their voice telling us, it's their actions and their behaviour. And I suppose it could also be their inaction, they're just sitting there, taking it all in, or they're really uncomfortable. That's telling us a whole load. And noticing that is really important...you have to try and put those jigsaw pieces together.*

This characterisation of children's modes of communication as '*jigsaw pieces*' was reflected by Jen who made explicit links with Malaguzzi's concept of the 'hundred languages of children' (Cagliari et al, 2016) and the multiple ways in which young children communicate their worlds. She presented young children as capable and active communicators who engage with peers and use a wide range of strategies to make their voices heard.

**Jen** (Int1): *Body language is so important and we overlook it. And eye gaze. What are they looking at? Who are they looking at? Why are they doing that? Looking at what they do, not just when they're with us, looking at what they do when they're with their peers and what they say when they're with their peers, which is very different to what they say when they're with us. And sometimes they do draw things. At small world play - it's another one that's great for watching what they really think.*

Young children may not be proficient users of verbal language; however, they competently engage as social actors in their ECEC settings, using diverse modes of communication such as eye gaze, body language, music, play etc... to express their perspectives.



Whilst there is celebration of the capabilities of the youngest children to be active participants, there also exists throughout the data a tension between young children as beings or becomings, with participants often switching between the two. Participant narratives suggest that there is a temporal nature of development and that babies and toddlers are in a constant movement of becoming whilst equally demonstrating capabilities as active beings. The notion of evolving capabilities is repeated across much of the data as well as a resistance to commit to one view of early childhood – young children are vulnerable becomings in need of protection but also capable communicators and decision makers. Willow acknowledged her role in preparing children for what they are to become, whilst also advocating for practice that allows children to be themselves: “*they have a right to be themselves, just as we have a right to be ourselves*”. Jess described the two-year olds in her setting as both vulnerable and capable. During our second interview I asked her to reflect on some of the apparent contradictions that were revealed through our initial interview. She explained how young toddlers in her setting both demand consideration as the most vulnerable children but equally confident in negotiating and demonstrating their own needs.

**Jess (Int2):** *So of course they come in as little tadpoles and of course we're all mother hens. They're so small, their shoes are so small, they can't quite reach their pegs...So we have that massive maternal surge that comes out, we must look after this tiny little thing...On the other side of it...We've got one child at the moment – she's legendary. One book she will read all day, just one book. And she comes round to all of us in turn because she's already worked out if I ask that person six times in a row again, when I get to the end, I'm detecting that that adult is starting to phase a bit by the third reading. There's not quite so much expression in the voice...She's worked that out already. So she goes round with the adults..... I've really been watching those two-year olds and how they operate. They make themselves heard.*

This illustration offered by Jess presents an acknowledgement of the young child as vulnerable and in need of protection and care, whilst equally recognising agency and the ability of the young child to confidently navigate adults in the setting. The use of language relating to the young child's competency at working out how to achieve her own goals and competently operate within the ECEC setting to have her needs met, demonstrates a belief that young children are capable protagonists within their early childhood settings. Equally, they are recognised as having a degree of vulnerability that evokes intense feelings of protection within the practitioners who care for them.

Acceptance of evolving capacities as competent decision makers was explored by many participants in my study, who highlight the role of ECEC in supporting young children to develop greater independence as active participants. Their capabilities were not questioned but rather appreciated within an evolving landscape. Participants spoke about the gradual introduction of decision making that supports foundations for later learning and engagement as citizens.

**Jen (Int1):** *We don't want them to be completely independent and make their own decisions aged two. But if you get a little bit of responsibility and a little bit of opportunity to exercise your own voice, then maybe you get a little bit more, and more. The more practice you get the better you are as an adult.*

**Ava (Int1):** *So giving them choices very early on is starting to help them think and make decisions. I think if children don't do that an early age, it's quite difficult to learn that as they get older.*

**Alissa (Int1):** *I think by understanding they are making choices....they are responsible for what they're actually doing, their actions...If you don't allow them to have choice and they're always directed, then you've got this element of -and I think we see it quite a lot - not being independent learners. Because if they can't think for themselves, they can't follow through their own thoughts, they can't research, they*

*don't find out information about such and such....It has actually got quite a big impact if they don't get those skills early on.*

Willow, Ava, Amanda and Alissa expressed hints of 'school readiness' when discussing participation within the context of developing greater capacities in preparation for school. Ava talked about her role in getting children '*primed and ready*' for school, and viewed this mostly in terms of ensuring children are ready to work in groups and '*get on socially*' with peers. Amanda highlighted the need to establish good routines and habits in early childhood, such as good sleep patterns, to enable children to be ready for later learning. School readiness was often explored by participants in relation to the social behaviours that children develop to enable them to work with others, maintain focus and accept social conventions as responsible members of their school communities, rather than narrowly focussing on the development a particular set of skills or curriculum knowledge. However, at other points during interviews, the drive to become school ready was framed around lack of capability and a deficit model of early childhood. This was linked to increasing pressure to formalise learning in early years, with demands for greater focus on academic learning in order to meet measurable targets.

**Jen (Int1):** *Goals [in EYFS] are identified that put pressure on settings to guide children's learning in particular ways. This combines with top-down pressure to prepare children for school and leads to a particular narrative on learning that often leaves little room for children to actively contribute to decisions about their learning.*

Whilst participants celebrated the capabilities of young children as active meaning makers, they equally highlighted constraints imposed by wider policy measures that frame babies and toddlers as lacking capacity and consequently present challenges for the enactment of participation rights (discussed further in 6.5.4).

### 6.5.3 The enabling practitioner

A consistent and strong theme across the body of data is the central role of the practitioner in facilitating participation rights for the youngest children. The voice of the young child is closely connected to significant adults who establish trusting relationships with the children in their care and thus able to interpret and act upon children's perspectives. Enabling practices are characterised by participants as approaches that focus attention on the voices of children, through attuned observation and flexible responses that create spaces for young children to be active participants in their own learning and care.

Participants highlighted skilful observation as a mechanism for interpreting the voice of the child, and in particular the non-verbal nature of communication with the youngest children.

**Andy (Int2):** *I think it's hugely about observational skills, isn't it? And about being able to tune in to the micro things that babies do, does the baby turn their head away, does the baby nuzzle in to someone who's speaking in a certain way, does the baby wriggle their toes and kick their feet when a certain sound happens? And knowing that these things indicate certain things. It's very different to a three-year-old who can walk up to you and tell you that they're not going to go to sleep now, that they're tired.....Actually how well attuned you are to what a child is saying with their body language, or what a child is saying with their actual physical voice and vocalisations, or what their body is saying.*

**Ava (Int2):** *It's that whole body language, facing on children. Knowing your children well enough to understand what they're saying to you. But it is that recognising that children talk to you through lots of different forms and ways...listening and people being aware that listening is not just words. It's everything else, especially with young children.*

**Alissa** (Int1): *Observing children and actually observing that little Johnny is always the one who is indoors, never comes out. Why? And questioning that, why? Not seeing it as something wrong, but finding out what that barrier is for them... It's actually really knowing the children, taking the time to listen to them, I think.*

**Joyce** (Int1): *I notice how Ruben's gaze is going, I've seen where his eye pointing is. I'm looking at what he's sensing and thinking....Again I think it's back to looking at the children, observing their body language, really promoting their language and their thinking, their sounds. A lot of the children I work with, they don't have verbalisations, so you're looking at their eyes, you're looking at their bodies and how they're moving. It's like watching, **really** watching, and responding to what they're saying. That's really important.*

Ava reflected on occasions where she has observed less experienced members of staff miss opportunities to tune in to the subtle ways in which young children open invitations for communication and interaction.

**Ava** (Int2): *There were two lovely children who were desperately trying to get this apprentice to interact with them in a way that they wanted them to. You know, you've seen it - the child tries to hand the apprentice something, saying something, and looking, all this body language, and she just ignored all of it. I was like "aahhh! come on!".*

As illustrated in these extracts, participants explored the importance of deliberate, attentive and sustained observation as a mechanism for knowing and understanding children's perspectives. They acknowledged the multimodal ways in which babies and toddlers communicate their worlds, and the skills they hold as practitioners in listening to, interpreting and responding to young children. Participant narratives suggest the enactment of participation rights are contingent upon responsive, attuned practitioners who use "patience and

creativity” to actively listen to the multiple ways in which the youngest children communicate their worlds (UN, CRC, 2005, p.7). Lundy (2007, p.936) argues that participation rights are dependent on ‘audience’ and can only be realised when the adult duty-bearer actively listens to the child. She advocates for a ‘dedicated listener’ who seeks to meet their obligations in terms of realising the participation rights of the child (Lundy, 2020, 12:47). Participants positioned themselves as dedicated listeners, fulfilling their responsibilities to young children through relationships centred on attunement. Extending the function of attachment relationships beyond notions of developmental needs and towards the enactment of participation rights, participants emphasised the importance of establishing trusting relationships as a core component of understanding children’s perspectives, and the active role that the youngest children have in seeking closeness to adults.

**Josie (Int1):** *I think it's just getting to know **them**, getting to know the families, building up that strong bond in the early days, especially the 'settling in' sessions....It's just building up a really strong relationship with the family as well as the child.*

**Jess (Int2):** *But the two-year olds will follow us like shadows, they'll sit on our laps all the time....they follow us around everywhere and they talk to us more [than the 3 and 4 year olds]. Their language is emerging, because they're so excited to speak, something to tell you in their broken language, show you what they're interested in. They engage much more with an adult...the two-year olds, they're satelliting the adults and they're just orbiting you all day long.*

The data suggests that closeness to young children as a conduit for promoting participation rights is enacted in collaboration with the primary carer. Participants discussed the role of the parent in providing an important piece of the puzzle in terms of interpreting the voice of the young child.

**Andy** (Int1): *Parents know their child the best, very often in almost all circumstances unless the parent is depressed or for other reasons abusive or struggling. Um.. They are almost always the best interpreters of their child's voice and one of the things I feel quite strongly about with children and sleep is, that we should be listening to what parents say.*

**Josie** (Int1): *And obviously talking to the parents as well and um see what the parents have said they're interested in..... When they first start you ask what routine they have at home and try to kind of mirror that here.*

This reflects research conducted by Clark (2001), which included the use of parent interviews as an aspect of the Mosaic Approach to capture the voices of children under two. Clark (2007) suggests that greater understanding of children's perspectives can be gathered from parents, and thus communication with parents becomes part of the mosaic of approaches used to capture the voice of the child. The parent-child-practitioner dynamic provides a framework for the recognition of needs through a 'triangle of care' (Brooker, 2010). The reciprocal nature of the relationship, where parents are listened to and valued, was highlighted by participants.

**Joyce** (email): *I hope the work I am able to do with babies is of value to the mother and baby....I recall a mum living in nearby temporary accommodation with 2 children under 2 years. She commented that 'it is so relaxing here' in relation to [setting name]. I hope she felt that somehow she was listened to and supported in very everyday ways.*

For Joyce, the practitioner role in terms of promoting participation rights is situated alongside a respectful relationship with the primary carer. Similarly, Andy advocated for practice that respects the voice of the parent as an integral part of the voice of the child. He raised concerns about practitioners who take on the role of 'expert' and fail to appreciate parental expertise in interpreting their

child's voice. Vandebroek (2009, p.169) argues that the appreciation of different perspectives enables us to embrace diversity and accept that expertise is 'provisional and tentative'.

The parent-child-practitioner triade is not always experienced as an unproblematic relationship. Many participants in my study described feelings of frustration when the voice of the child conflicts with the voice of the parent and find the navigation of disparate views a challenging aspect of their practice. Often such conflicts centre on care routines such as eating and sleeping. Data from my participants indicated that often the child's voice takes priority over the voice of the parent when these are not aligned.

**Willow** (Int1): *The other thing is snack time, they are given a choice. If they don't want to come at snack time they don't. That can be a conflict with parents. But it will be 'we can't make them come for snack, if they don't want it you can't make them'. But [parents say] 'they must, they must have it'. We try our best but we're not going to tie them down and make them have it.*

**Jess** (Int1): *We know what we are doing there. And the parents can say anything like that. If a child needs a sleep, a child needs a sleep. We've had parents before who have refused to have a look or come and pick up their child if they're poorly....We go on and do what's right for that child. If the parents support us it's a bonus.*

**Holly** (Int1): *I'll be honest. We just give the child more sleep and don't tell the parent. Which I know is a terrible thing to do, it's not in partnership with the parents and the stuff we learnt, but sometimes you can see that child is exhausted and a parent might not listen...There are some parents you can talk to and say you think they need more sleep, shall we give him half an hour extra...We do work with them in that way, but there are occasions when parents are very stubborn. Sometimes there are parents who don't want their child to*



*sleep because they want them to sleep during the car journey or when they get home...I feel sometimes that can be a bit unkind to the child...Sometimes it's knowing when to pick my battles or when to do things against parents' wishes, in the interests of the child.*

Holly described her role as a 'union rep', advocating for the child when parents' perspectives appear to contradict the voice of the child. Willow described situations where parents are adamant that children have a particular interest that should be fostered, however these interests are not always demonstrated by the child within the nursery setting and at times the perceived interest arises from the needs or wishes of the parent rather than from the voice of the child. Conflict within the triangle of care exposes tensions between parents and practitioners, where differing values and opinions impact on the caring relationship (Brooker, 2010). Dahlberg and Moss (2005) explore the reframing of parent-child-practitioner relationships, presenting the child as an active member of the caring relationship. Within such a construct, diverse views are welcomed and contribute to a richer, democratic dialogue including parents, practitioners and crucially, children. When the child is positioned as an equal member of the triangle, and care is focused on democratic understanding of all voices, opportunities for finding commonality may be enhanced.

Such a positioning of the child as an equal member of the triangle, requires a reimagining of young children as competent protagonists. Participants in my study framed such approaches around flexibility, both in relation to flexible routines that allow practice to be shaped and informed by children's voices but also in terms of flexible thinking as enabling practitioners, able to accept alternative points of view expressed by children. Ava recounted a story of an episode from her earlier days as a childminder that helped her to reflect on how she responds to children's ideas, with a more open, flexible approach:

**Ava (Int1):** *We were singing Old Mcdonald's Farm and I was asking the children about seeing things on farms, like cows, and one child said 'a witch!' and I was like 'you won't see a witch on a farm, give me*

*an animal'. Afterwards I thought about that and I felt bad because I didn't involve that child. But it was Halloween and so, of course, he'd gone to a farm and had seen a witch. But **now** if a child had said that, I'd say, 'yes, brilliant!' ...and that shows my journey. Being quite controlling initially and it's going to happen like this, to going 'fantastic!'....It made me learn significantly. I was never going to do that again. Whatever the child says I'm going to value and try to involve it in whatever I'm doing.*

Joyce had a similar story to share, highlighting how interactions with young children help her to question her own decision making and responses to children.

**Joyce (Int1):** *Another example is Penny. She was an interesting little three-year-old. My mum had made some cardigans, blue ones. And we wore them to go to the park. And then I said to my mum 'do you fancy making some cardies for inside, a different colour, green please?' So we got the wool and I brought the cardigans in. So I said to Penny, 'look Penny, I've got some more cardigans. I thought we could keep the green ones for when we're inside and then switch to the blue ones when we go out'. 'Why can't we wear the green ones to the park? Why can't we do that Joyce?' I said 'I've never thought of that Penny. I thought it might be helpful. I know at the park it might be handy for the grownups to see all the children wearing the same and they wouldn't get lost. But we could wear the green ones. That's a good thought'. But it hadn't occurred to me. I didn't think I'd have to explain my decision about colour to Penny. But I did and I'm glad I did because that taught me something...that was me coming through with an idea, and Penny saying, 'well, why not this?'*

The promotion of participation rights is situated within practice that allows spaces for practitioners to listen to and acknowledge the valuable questions and insights that young children offer. The relationship between practitioner and

child is characterised by participants as respectful interactions underpinned by an acknowledgement of the co-construction of knowledge. This perspective aligns with Malaguzzi's pedagogical philosophy, celebrating "meaning-making through processes of building, sharing, testing and revising theories, always in dialogic relationship with others" (Moss, 2016, p. 173). For Malaguzzi, the teacher/child relationship is a partnership, where both parties are valued as learners and adult vulnerability and humility is acknowledged (Hoyuelos, 2013, p.265). Participants in my study recognised the value of flexible, responsive caregiving and the acknowledgement of children's perspectives as conditions for realising participation rights.

#### *6.5.4 The overwhelmed practitioner*

Through analysis I used the term 'challenges' to categorise multiple data extracts that referred to the barriers participants face when enacting participation rights in ECEC contexts. Whilst the research question did not initially seek to specifically explore potential challenges of promoting participation rights with the youngest children, this was by far the most significant area of discussion initiated by participants. Every interview included narratives about the complexities of implementing participation rights and often this was a dominant feature of the interview. Through analysis I identified an overarching narrative of overwhelmed practitioners, who have an unwavering desire to meet the needs of individual children but are grappling with a complex and often exhausting range of demands. Many participants used metaphors such as 'juggling' and 'spinning plates' to characterise their busy working lives and the complexity of meeting the needs of children, families, colleagues and wider regulatory requirements.

The overarching narrative of the overwhelmed practitioner details a range of challenges faced by practitioners when trying to promote and enact participation rights with the youngest children. I have grouped these narratives into three core sub-headings:

- The physical and emotional demands of listening to the voice of the young child
- Tensions between policy and practice
- Negotiating differing values and pedagogical approaches

### **The physical and emotional demands of listening to the voice of the young child**

Actively listening to young children in order to promote participation rights presents challenges both in terms of physical constraints within busy nursery settings and the emotional complexities of the caring role. As explored earlier (6.5.3), participants described the importance of responsive relationships where practitioners use skills in observation to come to know the children they work with and interpret their perspectives. These close connections, which ultimately create spaces for the enactment of participation rights, are fostered in enabling environments where practitioners have time to connect with individual children and have the emotional support and resilience to maintain a listening approach.

Participants discussed the physical demands of working with young children and the challenges they face in enacting participation rights within contexts where there is a continual list of tasks and care routines to be completed. Time to listen to children and create spaces for them to direct their own learning can be compromised when practitioners have set tasks to complete within the daily routine. Amanda spoke about the challenges of ensuring care needs are met whilst also listening to the voice of the young child.

**Amanda** (Int1): *Children's voice isn't just in the way they play. It's in everything they do. You could say 'nappy changing'. We could say to a child who is heavily involved in water play, 'come on, it's your turn for nappy changing'. And actually, that child was really in their moment playing, could it not have waited? But I've got this routine, this list. I don't want to be the person who misses that nappy off and actually, that child has been in that nappy for six hours because I was doing something else, lunch duty or something and I missed that child. So I*

*think we can interrupt the child's play, which is their voice, in that moment, by having to be task-focussed as a practitioner. And that might interrupt those explorations that might have led to an amazing moment.*

Josie also spoke about constraints that emerge from practices in larger nursery settings. She reflected on her time working in a busy school nursery and how rigid routines would often interrupt learning. She described her childminding routines as more '*fluid*', with the ability to shape the day around the children's needs and interests. At several points throughout the data Josie expressed frustration about her previous role in school, where routines, staffing limitations and school culture prevented her from being responsive to children's interests.

**Josie** (Int1): *It was so frustrating with routines, tidy up time [in school]. So yes, you would be in the middle of doing something and then you had to tidy it all away.... [In the childminding setting] we're reading a book about fishes, and they're really interested in fishes, so shall we go in the car and go down to [the aquarium]?....So I drove down to [the aquarium] and we spent an hour and a half there.*

The ability to actively listen and respond to children is impeded by organisational issues that position routines, tasks and timetables ahead of listening. When such constraints are removed, practitioners have more freedom to respond to children's voices.

Group size as well as adult-child ratio is cited by participants in my study as a factor that can create barriers for enacting participation rights. Physically having the capacity to listen to, interpret and respond to children's voices is reliant on structural factors that create favourable conditions for close encounters between young children and their primary carers. Jess staffs her preschool setting above statutory requirements to ensure there are sufficient adults to be able to maintain responsive relationships.

**Jess** (Int1): *So the two to threes are very dependent on us and for that reason we always staff above ratio, for the cuddle person we need people out there, more bodies, so that the children can go to those adults.*

Ava and Josie highlighted the challenges of listening and responding to individual children in large nursery settings, and the benefits they experience working in home-based childminding settings with smaller numbers of children. When Josie worked in a school nursery, she found that aspects of provision, such as the garden, would need to be closed due to shortages in staffing. This then limited choices for children and ultimately led to behavioural difficulties. Josie, like Ava, spoke about the ability of small, home-based childcare to respond flexibly and quickly to children's emerging needs and interests. Whilst Ava expressed hope that a key person system in larger nursery settings would operate to ensure all voices are heard, she was concerned about the challenges of managing large groups and the risk of quieter children becoming 'missed or lost' in the busyness of the nursery day. This concern was echoed by Alissa who stated that even the statutory one to four ratio with two-year-olds is often not sufficient, particularly in the autumn term when many children are new to the setting and just beginning to develop their independence. Amanda equally highlighted the challenges of tuning in to individual children when working with larger groups.

**Amanda** (Int1): *When you have 35 children, how do you monitor what they have been playing with and what they might be interested in next, and how to support that? That's really difficult.*

This data reflects the review of evidence on quality ECEC provision for children under three, highlighting the impact of adult-child ratios and group size on the availability of practitioners to establish responsive relationships with the youngest children (Mathers et al, 2014). Ratios and group size impact on the quality of interactions between children and their carers (Munton et al, 2002; Thomason and La Paro, 2009). More recent research exploring structural factors such as adult-child ratios in ECEC settings in Norway has confirmed earlier

findings, with data to suggest that higher staff ratios result in higher quality interactions and increased closeness between staff and children (Lokken et al, 2018).

Beyond structural or physical constraints that impede the development of responsive relationships, the ability to maintain close interactions and provide consistent and attentive listening can be emotionally challenging. Participants highlighted the emotional resilience needed to sustain close relationships with children whilst managing a whole host of other tasks that are often equally emotionally demanding.

**Joyce (Int1):** *I get knots in my tummy Erica, because I arrive at work thinking 'how am I really going to give myself to the children and the staff today, and the parents that come their way'. I need to send two urgent emails, I've got this person wanting something...I'm having to fight my way through something that's coming from the more softer parts of our brains, if you can call it that, where we're really having to engage with people and understand and help them on a face-to-face, and then there's all that other stuff... I'm not all singing and all dancing Joyce, I can do what I can do.*

Although many participants positioned the ECEC policy context as a primary barrier to prioritising the voice of the young child, Andy provided a different perspective. He acknowledged that practitioners have become 'overwhelmed by documentation,' but equally felt that practitioners use administrative tasks, such as writing up observations or filling in assessment sheets, as an escape from the emotional demands of work with young children.

**Andy (Int2):** *I think the documentation can stand for different things in different moments. So I think as much as we would aspire for it to be purposeful and meaningful observation, that happens as and when it's required, I think there's also something useful for practitioners who are finding things a bit too much, facing chaos in a room of*

*eighteen two-year olds, is too much. So I'm going to go and do my books, I'm going to do an observation, because then I'm doing a controlled, manageable task. I'm away from the chaos, and feelings of panic that that probably evokes.*

Listening and responding to the voice of the baby can be demanding and emotionally exhausting. Directing attention away from children towards alternative tasks can act as a distraction for practitioners who find the voice of the baby difficult to absorb. Andy interpreted the direction of attention to paperwork, and other '*ritualised tasks*', as a form of defence that practitioners utilise to minimise difficult interactions with babies and impose order in a workplace that can be emotionally messy. Close bonds formed through relationships of attachment may provide a framework for the voices of babies to be heard; however, this work is complex, emotional and potentially draining for practitioners who take on a key person role in a baby room.

**Andy (Int2):** *A baby crying can really trigger something in us, something we want to get away from, that is difficult to contain in ourselves. So practitioners need to have some part of them resolved to deal with that, I think. I think it often happens in nurseries and full day care nurseries, certainly there tends to be a split that emerges between the baby room practitioners and the practitioners in the pre-school rooms. And those who can take it in the baby room and those who can't because facing what babies bring is difficult.*

The avoidance of close interactions with young children and the direction of practice towards routine tasks was also highlighted by Joyce who discussed the frustrations of observing colleagues prioritising routine tasks such as making snacks and tidying cupboards, rather than making time to actively listen to children.

**Joyce (Int1):** *I realised something about the practitioner. She saw her job as nappy changing, getting lunch ready, washing up. She didn't see*



*that her job was more than that...That made me sad and it made me mad, I just wanted to change that. But it was hard because actually she's happy doing that.*

For some practitioners, engagement in routine administrative or cleaning tasks provide a satisfaction that is potentially more difficult to achieve through practice that is directed towards the voice of the child. However, many participants in my study seek to prioritise close encounters with young children, recognising the opportunities for listening, and raised concerns about aspects of practice that take time away from young children.

### **Tensions between policy and practice**

Many participants highlighted the challenges they face in terms of interpreting policy guidance and managing accountability regimes whilst maintaining a commitment to listening to young children. Their narratives reveal tensions arising from increasing and excessive workload demands in response to external pressures. Ofsted inspections and assessment requirements were repeatedly included in these narratives as accountability processes that dominate practitioner workloads, often at the cost of spending time listening to and engaging with young children.

The emphasis on the developing child in early years policy, and the role of ECEC in preparing children for later learning in school, was visible in the ways in which participants conceptualised their role. Participants agreed that the 'school readiness' agenda is more prominent with pre-school aged children (3–5-year-olds), however, the increasing emphasis on curriculum and preparing children for later learning in school has crept into their work with the youngest children. Participants acknowledged the role that ECEC has in preparing children for the next stage of learning. They often conceptualised school readiness within a wider frame that acknowledges the development of learning attributes that enable children to be independent and responsible learners within communities. However, participants also expressed concern about the increasing emphasis on

narrowly focussed curriculum content and the impact this has on pedagogies aligned with children's rights.

**Willow (Int2):** *You feel like you're being pulled. You do feel like you're being pulled [gestures to show tension] ...And you think 'how much more are we going to be pulled in the direction of the academic side of early years?' It concerns me. Because I don't think it should be. I think children should be learning from play. And what concerns me is that we are going to be asked to do more academic stuff in early years. I can see it going in that direction. The government continues to push these targets through.*

Some participants were happy with the content of the EYFS and use it as a guide, whilst guarding against a tick list approach to monitoring children's progress against developmental norms. However, others raised concerns about the ways in which the EYFS directs practice and restricts opportunities to follow children's interests. Ava talked about '*engineering*' activities to ensure children are engaging with resources that will produce evidence of developmental progress. Amanda acknowledged that many tasks planned for children are prescriptive with a specific goal in mind for monitoring progress. Similarly, Jen spoke about pedagogy that is directed by developmental outcomes.

**Jen (Int1):** *In that policy there's often top-down pressure for the things we want the children to do and that impacts on the options we are going to give them. Because even if I want to give them free rein, there are also set goals we somehow need to meet....We do give them as much freedom on one level as we can, but even resources with that are relying for an outcome. Someone didn't just sit there and think, you know what? We'll order this because we feel like it. We'll order it because this is what needs to be done...You're going to order what you need. And some things are a little bit more generic like sand and water. But even what you put in them is going to be defined by what*

*you're looking for as an outcome, isn't it? Because we live and work in an outcome driven education system. We do.*

The focus on outcomes, with a resulting emphasis on tracking and recording progress, creates a pressure to prioritise paperwork and electronic data capture. Jess was unequivocal in her belief that interactions with children should be a priority in her setting, however this is often compromised because of the time taken away from children and directed towards record keeping. Jess highlighted the pressure to produce detailed documentation of children's progress, which she felt originates from expectations set by Ofsted.

**Jess (Int2):** *What we would like to do for the hours that we're open is to just be with the children. And there is so much of the job, part of the job, where we have to be away from the children, writing things up. That paperwork takes time. Those observations can be quick, but there are so many elements regarding a learning journey that's good enough for OFSTED, but it takes a long time. It's not something that affects the children or the parents; this is literally paperwork for when OFSTED visit. And we do feel that it is way too much.*

The tension between wanting to prioritise time for active listening to children's perspectives and the relentless drive to capture sufficient data for the purpose of accountability is played out repeatedly in participant narratives. Holly admits that she has staged photographs to produce evidence of children's progress. This results in a parallel reality, where the pressure to capture moments compromises the real work of interacting with children.

**Holly (Int2):** *I even stage pictures sometimes. So I can just get my paperwork done. This is a complete waste of my time, just so I can get my paperwork done. ...It's weird because you're seeing the observation through the iPad. And I'll be like, 'hold the ball, hold it like this. Hold still, the camera isn't ready'. And I put the iPad down and then it's when I put the iPad down that I have a real interaction with them,*

*because that's the true bit. I'm fully aware I do feel guilty about it, because I want to get the paperwork done so I can spend time with the children.*

Ava made comparisons between her previous role as a childminder and her current advisory role that takes her to multiple nursery settings. She has noticed a trend of practitioners under pressure from management directives to gather observational data. This has resulted in practitioners standing behind clip boards, recording observations, at the expense of interactions with children. Jess explored a similar tension, highlighting the persistent demands to document and track children's progress and how such performativity measures impact on quality interactions.

**Jess (Int2):** *And if every minute I try to do something and go - "oh, wait a minute, I need to get the camera!". And we do do this as well - "wow, you've achieved that off the check list, quick, quick, quick". And that moment is totally ruined. Imagine if everything you did or achieved in life, an entourage following you around. You'd be like a celebrity, the paparazzi, the cameras clicking and someone writing notes....Imagine if all we did was be [with that child]...stay with them for the next 10, 20, 45 minutes, without it being a pressure of "I need to get this noted down because this is what they're looking for," for me to track their progress, show their development. The moment is lost, the magic is definitely lost.*

Moments of 'magic' with young children are understood by Jess as unmediated, uninterrupted episodes of connectedness. Participant narratives suggest an over-reliance on the gathering of observational data poses a threat to such special moments of connection. Participants saw value in close observation as a way of listening to and knowing children, however, they equally position the gathering of observational data as a barrier to close connections with children. The distinction made is one relating to the purpose of observation. As a tool to support participation rights, observation enables practitioners to listen closely to

children's voices. However, as a mechanism for accountability, observation becomes removed from the practitioner/child relationship and directed towards data surveillance.

Despite frustrations with excessive accountability measures, participants expressed how they negotiate policy, prioritising practices that align with their own values about ECEC.

**Josie (Int2):** *You find ways of making them [policies such as EYFS] fit what works for you and your setting...it's [the EYFS] only as good as the people who actually read it and actually take notice of it. Everyone has their own way of interpreting things.*

**Willow (Int2):** *I think the well-being of the children should be paramount, I really do. Because I feel the rest will follow. I think you can be restricted with the policy if you want to be. Or you can use EYFS as a guide...but I don't think you should be using it as a tick list.*

Ava repeatedly mentioned Ofsted during both interviews, highlighting the pressure to document learning and gather sufficient evidence to meet the expectations of Ofsted inspections. However, despite the challenges of working within this context she continues to maintain her focus on children and prioritising their voices.

**Ava (Int1):** *It's not around Ofsted, it's not around outcomes, if that makes sense. It's actually fundamentally and foremost about the children, and that is what I do.*

### **Negotiating differing values and pedagogical approaches**

Implementing a rights-based approach in ECEC is explored by participants in terms of the pedagogical philosophy and collective ethos underpinning practice

within a setting. Participants expressed frustration when working alongside colleagues who do not share their same vision for ECEC, with differing beliefs about the practitioner role and capabilities of the youngest children. As manager of a nursery, Joyce highlighted the importance of agreeing a collective vision with a shared set of values to inform practice within her setting, however, this is not without challenge as practitioners bring differing cultural beliefs and values to their work.

**Joyce** (Int1): *So we're off to the races with all kinds of different cultures, different relationship beliefs, all sorts of values are brought to the table. And what we have to do is we have to think about parking those values a bit and say 'actually this is an Early Years value and needs to be shared and understood'.... I believe it is possible and essential to work towards creating shared values and beliefs about promoting children's voices, but I do not believe it's always achievable to everyone's satisfaction. I think any discussion will likely encounter conflict and sometimes what looks like resentment if practitioners feel that values are imposed because they cannot be agreed.*

Alissa equally expressed that it must be a whole team approach and that a shared ethos supports consistency of practice in relation to celebrating children's participation rights. However, she highlighted challenges in terms of finding time and resources to train staff and embed collective values. Participants in my study discussed the impact of diverse attitudes about the capabilities of young children, and how such differing views between practitioners can create barriers for the celebration and enactment of participation rights.

**Joyce** (Int1): *I think the adults interfere with the children's choices, and don't understand that children can make choices.*

**Amanda** (Int1): *And some practitioners will make the child sit there and try it and put a bit of pressure...Because they don't realise that the*

*child doesn't have to eat it. He has a choice, doesn't he? He has a choice. If he's really hungry he'll eat it. If he doesn't want to eat it, maybe he doesn't really like it, maybe he doesn't feel like eating it... [the practitioner is] not aggressive, but it's assertive without thinking about it from the child's point of view. Maybe that's maturity, maybe they haven't got the background, or that they're not that interested in the children and it's just a job.*

Participants aligned the image of the child held by practitioners with underpinning beliefs about roles and responsibilities of the key person. Differing pedagogical perspectives cause tension between colleagues and potentially limit opportunities for young children's voices to be heard and acted upon. Joyce recognised that some staff see their role primarily in terms of completing routine tasks such as cleaning, preparing meals, changing nappies and perhaps do not regard young children as capable social actors and thus do not recognise their own role in terms of promoting participation rights. Contrasting understandings about the roles and responsibilities of practitioners potentially create conditions where the voice of the child is left unheard.

**Andy (Int2):** *And I think the idea with that every institution has a primary task, and actually sometimes different people within the institutions have a different idea as to what that primary task is. So a nursery's function might be to look after children, the manager might see it as the nursery's primary task is to make money. The nursery staff might think their primary task is to listen to the children or to get through the day or get the cleaning done. The interesting thing that may be gets lost in that is the child's voice or what they think the primary task at nursery is. And I've got a feeling the youngest children, most of the time, their response would be "I've got to survive without Mummy".*

Malaguzzi (1993) argues that pedagogical approaches are informed by the image of the child held by the practitioner and that young children are sensitive to the

working relationships of adults in ECEC environments. The pedagogical philosophy of Reggio Emilia positions young children as protagonists and architects of their own learning (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012). Alongside this is a respect for the competency of the pedagogue as a learning partner, 'a researcher, an experimenter...in short, a rich educator for a rich child' (Moss, 2018, p.83-84). However, in England ECEC workforce reform has resulted in a 'split and devalued' sector with the role of the Early Years Teacher oriented towards a school readiness agenda (Cameron, 2020, p.72). As such, workforce qualifications may present barriers in terms of understanding the role of the ECEC practitioner within a rights-based framework. Findings from my study reflect this confusion, with narratives that explore diverse understandings about the role of the practitioner and the values that underpin practice.

## 6.6 Summary of Chapter Six

Chapter six provided details of my approach to analysis and presented analysis of data and findings. In seeking to answer my research question and aims, analysis has been directed by an ethical commitment to authentically representing individual participant narratives. Including space for individual participants to be recognised was an important part of the presentation of data and hence the chapter included a synthesis of individual narratives. These micro narratives were then connected to explore macro narratives, organised through four overarching themes (Figure 1). Findings revealed the complexity of participation rights and how these are understood and promoted with the youngest children. Participants understand participation rights through a construction of the young child as both vulnerable and capable. They highlight the importance of responsive relationships that prioritise opportunities for listening to and responding to the voices of young children. The enactment of participation rights is vulnerable to a range of factors that create barriers for pedagogies of listening and sustained, meaningful interactions with young children.



Chapter Seven will now provide a discussion of findings, linking data from my study to related research.

## Chapter Seven: Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapter seven provides a discussion of findings, with consideration of the research question and aims and how these have been addressed through analysis. Three core findings from the project are stated, establishing my contribution to knowledge within the field of participation rights in early childhood. Each of these three findings are then discussed, with reference to related literature thus positioning my study within the wider body of research literature.

Through data gathering and analysis my research was directed by the research question, '***what beliefs do graduate practitioners working in ECEC settings in England hold about the participation rights of young children (aged 0-3), with specific reference to Article 12 of the UNCRC?***' and underpinned by four core aims (1.3). In completing this research and identifying key themes from the data I have contributed to wider knowledge and understanding about the participation rights of young children aged 0-3 in ECEC settings. Whilst an existing body of research has expanded understanding of participation rights in educational contexts of school aged children (for example: Alderson, 2000; Wyse, 2001; Sebba and Robinson, 2010; Robinson, 2016) and research contributions from within the field of early childhood have considered participation rights of young children aged 3-5 in nursery and school settings (Cremin and Slater, 2004; Clark and Moss, 2005; Nutbrown and Clough, 2009; Waller, 2014; Lydon et al, 2019; Shaw, 2019) exploration of participation rights of babies and toddlers in ECEC settings in England has been less prolific (Wall et al, 2019). The findings from my study provide insight into perspectives held by ECEC practitioners and how they understand, negotiate and enact participation rights for the youngest

children in their care. I acknowledge that the participants included in my research are not representative of a wider, national or international perspective but rather present an opportunity to examine the values and beliefs of a particular group of practitioners (5.4).

The discussion is framed around three core findings:

1. *Practitioners viewed participation rights through a lens that conceptualises young children as both competent beings and vulnerable becomings (7.2).*
2. *Participation rights are enacted through responsive relationships where the adult is a facilitator of the young child's voice through close, attuned interactions (7.3).*
3. *The enactment of participation rights is complex and vulnerable to a range of internal and external factors that make it difficult for practitioners to sustain responsive relationships (7.4).*

These findings highlight the positionality of young children as both competent (6.5.2) and vulnerable (6.5.1), recognising the value of embracing developmental and sociological constructs of childhood as a conduit for understanding and promoting participation rights with babies and toddlers. Findings highlight the central role played by adult carers in establishing relationships of attunement (6.5.3), thus creating the conditions for participation rights to be enacted. Participant narratives explored a range of challenges to enacting participation rights in ECEC settings, indicating that optimal conditions for participatory practice are often compromised by a range of internal and external factors that create barriers for the implementation of rights-based practice (6.5.4). The discussion will explore findings from the study and situate these within the wider field of discourse relating to participation rights in early childhood.

## 7.2 Young children as both competent beings and vulnerable becomings

Participation rights of the youngest children are understood and enacted by ECEC practitioners through their construction of the child as both capable and vulnerable. Participants in my study moved between these images of the young child, celebrating both the abilities of young children to be capable decision makers whilst recognising their unique vulnerabilities and dependency on adults. For example, Jess spoke about her need to nurture the youngest children in her setting, recognising their vulnerability, whilst also appreciating the capacities young children have in communicating their needs and navigating relationships with adults in the preschool (6.5.2). This reflects research conducted by Elfer and Page (2015), exploring the perspectives of nursery managers in relation to baby room practice. They highlighted the dual construction of the infant and the role of attachment relationships as “responsive to fragility but also facilitative of competency” (Elfer and Page, 2015, p.1772). Rejecting binary characterisations of young children as the ‘fragile novice’ or the ‘resilient competent’ being, Kalliala (2014, p.4) draws on observational data gathered from her study of toddlers in play situations in day care settings. Consistent with the narratives gathered in my study, Kalliala (2014) observed the duality of both more *and* less competent children. The construction of the young child as both ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ acknowledges their own agency in relation to transitions to adulthood (Uprichard, 2008). Celebration of the youngest children as capable, social actors is thus not jeopardized by an acceptance of their developing abilities. Examples of this were illustrated in the reflections of participants (Holly, Amanda and Alissa) who explored the role they have in widening children’s experiences so that they develop a greater repertoire of interests to inform decision making (6.5.1). These participants expressed appreciation of the evolving nature of capabilities alongside an interdependence with adult caregivers who navigate the balance between safe, broadening environments that also leave space for children to express their voices.

Underpinning theoretical perspectives informing the daily practice of participants in my study were drawn from both developmental psychology and sociological perspectives on childhood. In relation to the developing child, participants framed capability around multimodality and the competency babies

and toddlers demonstrate in communicating their perspectives and initiating dialogue with others. For example, Jen reflected on the multiple ways in which the youngest children express themselves, highlighting body language, communication through play and through interactions with peers (6.4.6). Aligning with Malaguzzi's concept of the 'hundred languages of children' (Edwards, Gandini, and Forman, 2012, p.3), participant narratives revealed the multiple ways in which the youngest children communicate their worlds. The positionality of young children as competent communicators reflects research conducted by Trevarthen (2003; 2015) that demonstrates the intentional sociability of babies. Trevarthen (2003, p.239) argues that infants possess a 'relational capacity,' engaged as actors in reciprocal encounters with their primary carers. Observing infants with their mothers, Trevarthen (2015, p.403) characterised interactions as a 'dance' in which the mother acts as a "supportive partner...following the communicative motives of the baby." The baby as instigator of social interaction aligns with sociological constructs that position young children as capable, active protagonists (Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt, 2013).

Practitioner beliefs about the construction of young children as active agents, instigating social connections and demonstrating preference in their learning and care experiences is clearly articulated in my research findings. The data told a story of babies and toddlers who demonstrate ability to engage in decision making, express interests and take a lead in having their needs met. For example, Jess described the proficient ways in which the youngest children in her setting express their needs through instigating responsive encounters with adults (6.4.7; 6.5.2). This data reflects findings from research in neo-natal units examining the status of participation rights of premature babies, highlighting the ability of very young, pre-term babies to demonstrate capability as "informed choosers, agents and contributors with views" (Alderson, Hawthorne and Killen, 2005, p.47). Findings from my research question the legitimacy of accepting a narrow view of babies and toddlers as passive, helpless humans in the making, and instead welcome acknowledgment of the youngest children as able decision makers. Whilst much research exploring the abilities of young children to be

active decision makers focuses on children over the age of three (for example, Cremin and Slater, 2004; Nutbrown and Clough, 2009; Shaw, 2019), findings from my study highlight practitioner beliefs in the capacities of children under the age of three to form and express views. For example, Ava described how a young toddler with very little verbal language is able to express needs through physical movements. This was echoed by Amanda and Alissa who highlighted the capabilities of babies to demonstrate preference and make choices through their physical engagement with the learning environment (6.5.2).

Alongside a celebration of the young child as an active protagonist in their ECEC environments, participants equally explored the vulnerabilities of babies and toddlers. Without diminishing their ultimate belief that rights apply to the youngest children in their care, participants often viewed such rights through a developmental lens. As competent beings, babies and toddlers confidently communicate their perspectives and engage in decision making. However, as vulnerable beings very young children are dependent on adult carers to ensure their safety and provide enriching experiences through which their horizons can be broadened. Alissa highlighted the need to create opportunities for decision making within safe boundaries (6.4.1), a position echoed by Holly who explored the role of the adult in offering manageable choices, aligning with capabilities, that ensure young children are protected. Andy framed this around control and the need for the adult to maintain safety and protection of the young child (6.5.1). Jen reflected on the vulnerability of babies and toddlers and the role of practitioners in addressing care needs such as nappy changing (6.5.1). Alderson (2010, p.95) advocates for recognition of rights from birth whilst accepting a 'continuum' of competency, where children are supported to develop the ability to engage in more complex decision making. Acknowledgement of evolving capacities does not threaten the existence of rights from birth, however questions the "biological reductionism" of traditional theories embedded in developmental psychology that fail to embrace the influence of social relationships and cultural context (Gabriel, 2011, p.207).

The dominance of developmental psychology in ECEC has positioned development as individual and universal, limiting opportunities to appreciate the social and cultural (Fleer, 2008). Developmental narratives feed into an ideology for ECEC that favours “certainty, replication, mastery, objectivity and universality” and a construction of the child as a passive receiver of education directed by the all-knowing adult (Moss, 2017, p.15). Such perspectives overlook the agency of the child and their status within the social dynamic, perpetuating problematic narratives that position the adult as always competent and the child as completely lacking competency. Participants from my study explored the enactment of participation rights within social contexts where adults promote opportunities for decision making within nurturing and reciprocal relationships. The active position of the young child in this relationship echoes modern research within the field of developmental psychology that highlights the infant as a social being, seeking connection with adults (Trevvarthen and Aitken, 2001; Trevvarthen, 2004; Burman, 2008; Salamon, Sumison and Harrison, 2017). The construction of the child as both ‘being and becoming’, through a transition to adulthood, acknowledges both current and future competency (Uprichard, 2008, p.303). Babies and toddlers are thus acknowledged as people with rights, whilst recognised as dependent and developing humans.

The relationship between development and participation rights was illustrated through narratives exploring school readiness and the role practitioners play in preparing children for the next stage of education and learning. Participants highlighted the role of ECEC in establishing behaviours that lead to successful learning, and how such practices present affordances and challenges for the enactment of participation rights (6.5.2). Whitebread and Bingham (2011, p.5) suggest that school readiness is underpinned by children’s executive functioning and ability to self-regulate; attributes that are enhanced by “feelings of autonomy, competence and ‘relatedness’.” Executive functioning, or the ability to manage impulses, manipulate and retain information and develop flexible thinking, is developed through “responsive caregiving” where children are encouraged to make choices and direct their own learning (Centre on the

Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011, p.6). Participants in my research explored their roles in laying the foundations for positive learning behaviours, through opportunities for increased decision making. For example, Jen (6.5.2) described how decision making is scaffolded, with increasing opportunities for young children to make choices as they become more independent. Such an approach does not deny young children the right to be active participants, but rather nurtures decision making within environments that foster opportunities for children to develop greater independence as learners.

However, the construction of school readiness around the development of learning behaviours that promote active participation contrasts with an alternative vision of school readiness that prioritises measurable outcomes. Participants were frustrated by an increasing focus on the development of academic skills in preparation for school, and how such pressures are filtering through to their work with the youngest children (discussed further in 7.4). Holly (6.4.5) positioned the school ready agenda in opposition to her focus on the development of speaking and listening and supporting young children to become well rounded humans. Willow (6.4.10; 6.5.3) shared her concerns about the emerging dominance of academic targets in ECEC, and how such school readiness narratives conflict with her pedagogical beliefs that position the voice of the child at the heart of practice. Willow acknowledged the young child as 'becoming' but viewed this in relation to the emergence of skills and attributes that enable young children to engage as competent members of their communities. She rejected notions of becoming constructed around the development of a narrow set of measurable skills and knowledge. The EYFS aims to promote 'school readiness' (DfE, 2017a, p.5) but fails to define this. Understanding about school readiness remains elusive (Brooks and Murray, 2018). Findings from my research suggest that concepts of school readiness should be considered in relation to the emergence of skills linked to active participation. Such perspectives acknowledge the young child as becoming more adept at decision making whilst appreciating the baby and toddler as capable beings, engaged in their ECEC communities.

### 7.3 Participation rights enacted through responsive relationships

Participants emphasised the importance of close, attentive relationships with babies and toddlers as a means through which participation rights can be realised. Through these relationships of attunement, practitioners actively listen to the voice of the young child. Even in the absence of verbal communication, babies and toddlers demonstrate the ability to express their needs through gesture, eye gaze, bodily movements and sounds, that are then interpreted by practitioners who attune to these subtle forms of communication (6.5.3). These findings reflect a wide body of research confirming the importance of responsive relationships for positive development of children aged 0-3 in ECEC settings (Trevarthen et al, 2002; Mathers et al, 2014) and the development of close attachment relationships that create a loving bond between the child and key person in the setting, in concert with the parent or primary carer (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2012; Page, 2018). Whilst the EYFS defines the key person role as one that ensures the developmental needs of young children are met (DfE, 2017a), participants widened the scope of responsibilities to include the facilitation of children's rights. Thus, key person relationships reach beyond the promotion of attachment and psychological wellbeing (Bretherton, 1997) and can additionally be constructed as a primary conduit for the facilitation of children's voice. The young child is not viewed solely as vulnerable and in need, but rather as an active contributor within a dynamic relationship. As the key person, the ECEC practitioner becomes the "dedicated listener," able to promote participation rights (Lundy, 2020, 12:47). Such responsive relationships reflect an 'ethic of care' that is underpinned by "receptive listening," where the carer demonstrates intention in understanding the needs expressed by the cared-for (Noddings, 2012, p. 780).

The broadening of understanding around key person relationships between young children and their carers was expressed through participant narratives that easily celebrated vulnerability and capability as interlinked aspects of the young child's persona, as described in the findings chapter. Data from my study



acknowledged dependency on adults whilst also highlighting the active role babies and toddlers have in contributing to the caring relationship. For example, Jess explored the intentionality of young children in seeking out interactions with practitioners (6.4.7). The primary caregiver approach has been characterised as one that supports healthy attachment relationships in ECEC settings, enabling children to develop emotional wellbeing (Ebbeck and Yim, 2009). Degotardi and Pearson (2009) advocate for a widening understanding of the nature of relationships within ECEC settings, as practices that prioritise traditional attachment relationships fail to capture the complexities of relationships that exist between children and adults. For example, the construction of the traditional attachment relationship positions the young child in a passive role, 'fuelled by innate motivations and emotional needs' rather than acknowledging babies and toddlers as active protagonists in the care relationship (Degotardi and Pearson, 2009, p.149). Attachment theory is firmly embedded in ECEC policy and practice, providing a framework to acknowledge the importance of responsive care giving through the key person approach (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2012; NCTL, 2013; DfE, 2017a). However, findings from my study suggest the current application of attachment theory to key person policy often fails to capture the multiplicity of child/adult relationships in ECEC settings and the potentiality of key person relationships to promote rights-based practice.

Participation rights of the youngest children are contingent upon enabling practitioners who act as facilitators, able to celebrate young children as rights holders and capable decision makers. Findings highlight the importance of practitioners actively listening and responding to the multiple modalities that babies and toddlers employ to communicate their worlds. The ability to enact participation rights rests upon a pedagogical approach that appreciates the young child as a competent meaning maker and views the role of practitioner as a fundamental enabler for voice and participation. This is captured eloquently by Andy (6.4.3) when he highlights the central role of the caring adult as the person to hear and sensitively respond to the voice of the young child. In the absence of an enabling practitioner, the voice of the baby is at risk of becoming

marginalised or lost. The pivotal role of the practitioner as an enabling force for the realisation of participation rights reflects the philosophy of Malaguzzi and the schools of Reggio Emilia, where the image of the 'rich child' is held by practitioners who conceptualise their role as co-constructors of knowledge, engaging in dialogue, research and experimentation with young children who are viewed as capable protagonists from birth (Moss, 2016, p.171). Such connectedness between the young child and practitioner highlights the interdependence of adults and children and the construction of rights-based pedagogy through a relational ethic of care (Cockburn, 2005; Kjørholt, 2013). Care is acknowledged as "receptive attention," in which the carer and cared-for are jointly engaged in a caring relationship (Noddings, 2002, p.13). The role of the adult in such relationships is to create listening contexts that are underpinned by "reciprocity, reflexivity and intersubjectivity" (Murray, 2019, p.2). Such listening contexts were explored by participants, including the richness young children bring to the caring relationship when their voices are heard. For example, Joyce described her mutual connection with Rowan, established through her commitment to engaging with his subtle, non-verbal communication (6.4.9) and explores a thoughtful interaction that arose when she was able to listen to and respect Penny's questioning (6.5.3). Through these examples Joyce illustrated the enactment of participation rights through an ethic of care that celebrates the child as an equal member of the caring relationship. Participation rights are thus enacted with babies and toddlers within close, respectful, responsive relationships.

Responsive interactions between practitioners and young children are characterised by participants as respectful encounters, where the young child's perspective is acknowledged and valued. Participants articulated their commitment to being open to alternative perspectives held by children, valuing their inputs even when such views challenge adult agendas. For example, Ava provided a thoughtful account of an interaction with a young child when she failed to accept his point of view and how later reflection helped her to consider the importance of hearing and valuing children's contributions (6.5.3). MacNaughton, Hughes and Smith, (2007) argue that ECEC pedagogies dominated

by developmental psychology present limitations in terms of realising rights in early childhood as professionals hold on to notions of dependency, reinforcing narratives that position the young child as vulnerable and not able to fully express their views. Practice that advances participation rights rests upon a rejection of the practitioner as expert and instead reimagines practitioner/child relationships as collaborative (MacNaughton, Huges and Smith, 2007).

Participants from my study were able to hold notions of dependency in tandem with an image of the young child as competent, recognising their role in providing responsive care-giving within a dynamic that values the contribution of each partner in the relationship. A collaborative relationship between teacher/child reflects the pedagogical approach in Reggio Emilia and the construction of the teacher as a learning partner, engaged in a shared, intellectual encounter with the child. As a collaborator in learning, the role of the teacher is characterised by “inspired listening and stimulation of children’s dialogue, co-action and co-construction of knowledge” (Edwards, 2012, p.152). The depiction of the educator as a listening partner is reflected in my study, as participants highlighted the importance of observing, acknowledging and responding to children’s perspectives within respectful and attuned relationships (6.5.3).

Participant narratives repeatedly acknowledged observation as a tool used to foster responsive relationships with young children. Practitioners who understand the relational and responsive nature of their role draw on skills of observation to know and understand the young child and appreciate their perspectives about their learning and care experiences. Observation is a long established and respected practice in ECEC, included as a fundamental aspect of the teaching and learning cycle (Early Education, 2012; Smidt, 2015; Palaiologou, 2019). Early pioneers in ECEC such as Susan Isaacs were strong advocates for the observational method, approached as a mechanism for developing rich understanding of the child’s perspective (Solly, 2018). Through observation, practitioners come to know the child, interpret their multiple ways of communication and anticipate their needs. Andy (6.4.3) presented the example

of practitioners using close observation to understand and pre-empt the needs of the baby, for example through understanding what is being communicated through particular movements or vocalisations. However, whilst observation was cited by participants as a primary method through which they come to understand the world of the child, participants equally spoke about the gathering of observational data for the purpose of record keeping as a barrier to responsive interactions with children (discussed further in 7.4). Perhaps unhelpfully, 'observation' is used by participants to label contrasting aspects of practice; observation as a relational endeavour and observation as an administrative accountability task. The pedagogical philosophy of Reggio Emilia embraces observation as part of a "reciprocal relationship: an action, a relationship, a process" between adult and child (Rinaldi, 2006, p.128). Observation is central to a pedagogy of listening that draws on 'pedagogical documentation' as a reflective tool to make visible, co-constructed, democratic and collaborative learning processes (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence, 1999, p.145). This contrasts with documentation that is gathered for the purpose of record keeping, with no involvement by the child (Mereweather, 2018). Such perfunctory documentation is often referred to by participants in my study as 'observations' (Andy 6.4.3, Jess 6.4.7, Holly and Ava 6.5.4) but is framed around assessment and accountability requirements, often in tension with a relational engagement with observation that is part of listening and responding to young children (Andy, Alissa, Joyce, 6.5.3), discussed further in 7.4.

Whilst close observation was highlighted as a primary method through which responsive relationships can be forged, findings also highlighted the role of parents as interpreters of children's voices. The importance of responsive relationships extended beyond the practitioner/child dyad and included recognition of the parent as a conduit through which the voice of the child is navigated. Participation rights of very young children were thus positioned within a "triangle of care" between practitioner, child and parent (Brooker, 2010). Whilst some participants acknowledged the parent as a primary authority, able to interpret the voice of the child with ease (Andy 6.4.3), contrasting narratives highlighted the complexity of promoting participation

rights when the voice of the child appears in conflict with the voice of the parent (Holly, Jess and Willow, 6.5.3). Participant narratives explored the ways in which practitioners come to know the world of the child through close partnership working with parents (Josie 6.5.3). They equally raised concerns about parents who articulate a differing agenda to the child and consequently the obstacle this creates for the enactment of participation rights (Holly 6.4.5).

Such tensions provide an opportunity to examine the status of the baby or toddler within the parent/practitioner/child triad. Appreciation of the parent as the primary vehicle through which the voice of the baby can be heard sits neatly within an attachment framework that positions the baby in close connection with the primary carer/parent. Attachment theory presents the child as vulnerable, in need of protection from the adult who is “conceived as better able to cope with the world” (Bowlby, 1988, p.29). The parent is positioned as the expert, best able to understand the needs of the child. However, this perspective may limit opportunities to acknowledge the young child’s agency. Noddings (2002) acknowledges the reciprocal nature of the caring relationship. Whilst Noddings (2012, p.772) accepts the caring relationship between mother and infant is not equal, as the child is more reliant on the adult, nevertheless “both parties contribute to the establishment and maintenance of caring”. Thus, an ethic of care provides a framework to acknowledge the young child as an active agent in the caring relationship.

Brooker (2010) highlights power dynamics within the triangle of care between parent/practitioner/child, raising issues about who holds expertise in determining and agreeing care routines. Participants in my study navigate these tensions, finding compromises between their own positionality, the perspectives of parents, and the voice of the young child. Clearly articulated in the findings is the status of the baby or toddler as a stakeholder. For example, Holly, Willow and Jess provided accounts of occasions when conflicts have arisen between the wishes of the parent and the voice of the child, and how they often prioritise the voice of the child when such tensions arise (6.5.3). Participants, whilst respecting the unique knowledge that parents have about their young children,

equally celebrate babies and toddlers as experts in their own lives, able to competently express needs. It is through the responsive, attuned relationship that the adult comes to know the child and thus respond appropriately to their voice. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) advocate for parent partnerships that are situated within environments embedded with democratic practices where all contributors, including practitioners, parents and children, are equally respected as competent participants. However, the reality of baby room practice in England reveals tensions between parents, practitioners and the needs of babies, particularly in respect of care routines (Powell and Gooch, 2012). Participant narratives from my study highlighted the challenges of achieving collective agreement where all voices are heard and respected, suggesting that the ideal of democratic institutions are not always played out in ECEC contexts in England.

## 7.4 The complexity of enacting participation rights in ECEC settings

Findings from my study revealed a complex range of challenges that limit opportunities for participation rights to be fully realised with babies and toddlers in ECEC settings. The ability of the practitioner to actively promote the participation rights of the youngest children is constrained by internal and external factors that create barriers for the development of responsive relationships. Such barriers are complex and layered, presenting a narrative that demonstrates the fragility of participation rights within ECEC settings. The availability of the practitioner to listen to and connect with the young child is contingent upon ECEC environments where practitioners can confidently thrive in their roles as responsive care givers. Whilst practitioners competently develop responsive relationships that create conditions for participation rights to be enacted (as discussed in 7.3), findings highlighted the vulnerability of practitioners in terms of having the capacity to sustain attuned and responsive interactions with young children.

Participant narratives revealed three core challenges that impact on their capacity to enact participation rights with the youngest children; the physical and emotional demands of their caring roles; the macro policy context which imposes relentless accountability measures that impact on practitioner time; and the lack of shared values informing rights-based pedagogies. These complex barriers, discussed below, present ongoing challenges for the realisation of participation rights with young children in ECEC contexts. However, alongside this vulnerability was a strong articulation from participants that they are committed to nurturing respectful relationships of reciprocity, where children's voices are valued.

#### *7.4.1 Physical and emotional demands*

Findings highlighted the physical and emotional demands of work with young children in ECEC settings and the resulting barriers in terms of enacting participation rights for babies and toddlers. Opportunities for sustained interactions that enable the voices of individual children to be heard and understood are marginalised by the ongoing physical constraints of caring for large groups of children in settings that are often structured around established routines and tasks. Participants who had experienced both group care and childminding settings were able to reflect on the flexibility created in smaller, home-based settings and the constraints they observed in nursery settings where higher numbers of children combined with strict routines created limitations in terms of responsive caregiving that enables the voices of young children to be heard (Josie and Ava 6.5.4). Participants based in group settings spoke about the challenges of responding to individual children's voices in contexts where organisational constraints, such as structured daily routines and rotas, create barriers for responsive interactions (for example, Amanda 6.5.4). Whilst participants aim to create spaces for active listening and responding to children's voices, they are equally aware of organisational routines that direct their daily practice and the multiple demands that take attention away from sustained interactions with babies and toddlers. This is consistent with research conducted by Powell and Gooch (2012, p.116) who collected narratives from

baby room practitioners who expressed values about wanting to meet the needs of babies but highlighted the challenges they face from multiple “spheres of influence” that direct priorities within settings. Joyce (6.5.4) explored the multiple demands on her time that impact on her ability to enact participatory practices. This was echoed by Amanda (6.4.2) who likened her practitioner role to plate spinning, and the challenges of meeting competing demands on her time.

Alongside physical constraints, participants explored the emotional complexity of work with very young children and the resulting challenges of listening to and interpreting the voice of a young child. The voice of the baby can be difficult to hear, in part because of the emotional messiness of listening to a crying baby or toddler. Baby room practice can be emotionally challenging as practitioners work in close, intense relationships, balancing the needs of very young children and their families (Goouch and Powell, 2013). Whilst many of my participants viewed administrative tasks as an unwelcome distraction from the important work of listening to children, Andy and Joyce (6.5.4) recognised that some practitioners appear more comfortable to engage with routine tasks possibly as a way of avoiding the emotional complexity of responsive interactions with babies and toddlers. Thus, routine tasks, such as administrative paperwork or cleaning tasks, may become prioritised by practitioners as a protection from the emotional challenge of listening to young children. Their narratives clearly referenced the “logistical and emotional complexity” of caring relationships within nursery settings and the absence of systems of support to manage these complexities, which Page and Elfer (2013, p.564) highlight in their research. Responsive interactions with babies and toddlers may evoke uncomfortable feelings on the part of the practitioner, resulting in a desire to avoid close interactions and engage with routine tasks requiring less emotional engagement. Drawing on social defence system theory, applied previously to nursing contexts, Page and Elfer (2013, p.560) explore the difficulties practitioners experience in managing “powerful but often unspoken feelings”, and the deliberate strategies used to provide protection from emotionally challenging work that emerges in caring contexts. Such responses to complex emotional work were explored by Joyce and Andy who have observed practitioner avoidance of the emotional



intensity of responsive interactions with babies and toddlers, directing their attention to routine tasks requiring less emotional involvement (6.5.4). However, many other participants in my study see the primary focus of their role as being with children, making time to listen and respond to their voices, and consider routine tasks and inflexible routines as a distraction from the important work of listening to babies and toddlers. For example, Amanda (6.5.4) reflected on “*amazing moments*” of practice that are at risk of being missed because of routine tasks that take practitioners and children away from sustained interactions, suggesting that for her, close interactions are the aspects of practice most valued by children and practitioners alike. Thus, the data presents a diverse picture of practitioners who move towards close, sustained interactions with young children and those who avoid the emotional complexity of responsive relationships.

#### *7.4.2 The demands of accountability*

Participant narratives repeatedly highlighted relentless accountability regimes that do not align with their values around responsive practices but nevertheless dominate their working day. Sustained episodes of connectedness between young children and practitioners are jeopardised by assessment requirements that often take practitioners away from meaningful interactions with their key children. Participants in my study were adamant that time with children is their priority (for example see Jess 6.5.1). However, they also raised concerns about ongoing accountability demands, often citing Ofsted, and how these are unwelcome distractions from the important work of listening to children (for example, see Ava 6.4.4). The expectation to document learning and provide evidence of progress in meeting developmental milestones creates environments where learning experiences are shaped around policy expectations and practitioner time is monopolised by data capture. Observation is the first action undertaken by practitioners as part of data gathering centred on aspects of children’s development that can be easily tracked, measured and analysed. Such performativity measures are situated within a wider educational context that has promoted a ‘technology of performance’ where educators normalise engagement

in self-surveillance activities (Ball et al, 2012, p. 514). Researching the prevalence and use of attainment data in early years contexts in England, Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury (2016b, p.127) reveal tensions that teachers experience when their underpinning values are compromised by relentless data gathering as part of the 'school readiness assessment regime'.

Navigating wider accountability requirements whilst maintaining a commitment to personal pedagogical philosophies is a tension that is clearly reflected in participant narratives from this study. Participants highlighted the demands on their time and the resulting tensions when trying to find time for meaningful interactions with young children. For example, Holly (6.5.4) reflected on accountability measures that drive her to artificially recreate moments with children to gather documentary evidence of development for children's files and how such encounters are at odds with the real work of listening to and responding to young children. She related her work to juggling (6.4.5) as she navigates excessive external demands that impede on her time with children. A pervasive culture of performativity in education in England has penetrated ECEC and created a process of 'datafication,' whereby increasingly the work of practitioners is directed by excessive data collection, with a particular focus on narrow aspects of learning relating to literacy and mathematics (Bradbury, 2019). In a drive to produce an 'Ofsted story' that demonstrates attainment and includes evidence of interventions to support disadvantaged children, schools and early years settings have become focussed on producing 'narratives of progress' through the gathering of data (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2016, p.943). Ofsted deny the existence of any prescriptive expectations relating to paperwork and insist all documentation should be done to support teaching and learning, not solely for the purpose of inspection (Jones, 2017). However, Bradbury (2019) argues that the increasing move to utilise digital data capture in ECEC settings has created a system where the production of data informs pedagogy and creates a particular set of values underpinning practice. Thus, a tension arises between the need to produce evidence to satisfy accountability measures and the desire to prioritise children's needs (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016a). Clark (2020, p140) highlights the contribution of 'slow

pedagogy' as an antidote to the hurried child and hurried educator, dominated by neoliberal agendas that prioritise escalated learning as a vehicle to maximise economic growth. Slow pedagogies provide an opportunity for uncertainty, wonder, listening and cooperation between children and adults (Clark, 2021), thus creating spaces for sustained interactions and responsive relationships. Participants in my study endeavour to create meaningful encounters with children, with a focus on listening and responsiveness. However, the challenge of maintaining sustained interactions arises from excessive accountability measures that encroach on practitioner time.

Working in a policy context that increasingly places an emphasis on measurable outcomes and does not explicitly set out responsibilities in terms of children's rights has not prevented practitioners from striving to enact practices that prioritise listening and responding to young children's voices. Participants were unanimous in their respect for participation rights and commitment to establishing rights-based pedagogies. Narratives revealed the ways in which participants negotiate the challenges of responding to macro policy and how they aim to embed rights-respecting practice. For example, as owner of her setting, Jess (6.4.7) has taken the decision to staff her setting above statutory ratio requirements to ensure they have enough practitioners available to meet children's needs. This creates time for practitioners to complete necessary paperwork, whilst limiting the impact on responsive caregiving. However, this does have a financial cost that presents ongoing concerns for the viability of the setting. Josie and Willow (6.5.4) reflected on their use of the EYFS as a guide, but confirmed their approach is underpinned by their own pedagogical beliefs and values. Osgood (2006) explores the role of practitioner agency in resisting standardised approaches that are oriented toward accountability and performativity measures. At local levels, educators have a degree of autonomy to mediate potentially constraining curriculum and assessment regimes and implement pedagogical approaches that align with inclusive values (Florian, 2008). The enactment of 'quiet activism' within ECEC settings is demonstrated by practitioners who reclaim practice aligning with their own values in response to policy reform (Archer, 2020). As such, educators become 'tempered radicals',

positioning themselves within the policy context by identifying compromises they are willing to make and practices that are 'non-negotiable' in light of strongly held values and beliefs (Macblain, Dunn and Luke, 2017, p.161). Goodson and Rudd (2012, p.12) use the concept of 'refraction' to problematise the relationship between policy structures and individual actions. They argue that education policy is mediated by educators who interpret national frameworks through their own values and beliefs, and thus practice evolves through the intersection of micro responses to macro structures. Although participants from my study highlighted the challenges posed by macro policy structures and how these present obstacles for the enactment of participation rights, they nevertheless continue to find ways to negotiate responses to wider assessment, accountability and curriculum pressures. Assessment and accountability requirements were spoken about as an inconvenience they are made to navigate, but the focus of their work is centred on observing, listening to, and knowing young children (6.5.3).

#### *7.4.3 Lack of shared values*

Participants explored tensions arising from differing concepts about the role of the practitioner and the limitations that emerge within settings lacking a shared vision for the implementation of participation rights. Individual mediation of policy may provide space for practitioners to reflect their own values in practice, however, this individualised approach presents challenges within settings when there is a lack of shared commitment to rights-based pedagogy. Findings highlighted the challenges practitioners experience when working alongside colleagues who may hold differing values about practitioner roles and responsibilities, the purpose of ECEC and contrasting images of the young child. Whilst individuals may promote practices that celebrate the youngest children as competent decision makers, this becomes more challenging within group settings where colleagues may not extend participation rights to babies and toddlers. Amanda (6.4.2; 6.5.4) reflected on differing approaches demonstrated by colleagues, suggesting that beliefs about the capabilities of young children inform the ways in which practitioners respond to babies and toddlers. This

aligns with Malaguzzi's (1993) belief that the image held of the young child by the adult directs practice in particular ways. The image of the child, as a cultural, political and social construct, determines how their rights are regarded in ECEC contexts (Rinaldi, 2006). Findings from my study reflect research conducted by Robinson (2017), examining the translation of human rights education in school contexts. The potential for inconsistencies of experience of school children is revealed as teachers bring individual interpretations of rights-based curricula to practice. Robinson (2017, p.134) argues that practitioners draw on their own "thoughts, biases and prejudices based on ways in which they construct children," and such individual beliefs result in inequitable experiences for children in school.

The setting managers participating in my study highlighted the challenges they face in creating a common set of values that underpin practice across the setting (for example, see Joyce 6.4.9). The data revealed inconsistencies in the ways in which participation rights are understood and enacted. Largely privatised childcare for children under three creates a system of "contradiction, complexity, uncertainty and confusion," focussed on the priorities of individual organisations rather than built on a robust analysis of the needs of babies (Powell and Gooch, 2012, p.113). A system open to individual interpretation, without an agreed commitment to participation rights, creates tensions for practitioners who wish to prioritise opportunities for young children to be active decision makers, but are constrained by the lack of shared values within their ECEC settings.

Arguably, the current early years policy context in England does not provide a framework to establish common values relating to children's rights in ECEC settings. The early years curriculum in England is framed around three core aspects of practice: learning and development, assessment, safeguarding and welfare requirements (DfE, 2017a). The EYFS directs practice towards a developmental approach, prioritising a focus on children's progress in meeting developmental milestones with no acknowledgement of children's rights and how these might inform practice. Whilst the emphasis on safeguarding provides a policy context that acknowledges protection rights, there is little balance in the

document, with no consideration of participation rights. ECEC policy in England is dominated by neoliberal objectives favouring global competition and future economic growth, marginalising opportunities for democratic practices centred on “communication, participation, information exchange and cooperation” (Sousa, 2020, p.152). Challenging the dominant discourse in ECEC that privileges predefined curricula and standardised outcomes, Moss (2017, p.20) advocates for a “resistance movement,” advanced through dialogue and alliance, that embraces alternative narratives, creating opportunities for practices rooted in democracy. At a local level, participants in my study exercise resistance in their endeavours to embed participation rights. However, the lack of a common set of early years values, rooted in rights-based pedagogy, presents ongoing challenges for consistent rights-based pedagogies.

## 7.5 Summary of Chapter Seven

Chapter Seven has included a discussion of findings, drawing on data from participant narratives and linking these to wider research and theoretical perspectives within the field of early childhood education and care. The discussion has been organised around three core findings; the positioning of young children as both competent beings and vulnerable becomings; the role of responsive relationships as a mechanism through which participation rights are enacted; and the factors that impede responsive relationships thus creating barriers for participation rights of young children to be embedded in ECEC settings. These findings contribute to understanding about the participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC contexts, and the unique considerations that inform participatory practice with children under three. The research highlights the fragility of participation rights, exposing multiple constraints that impede opportunities for practitioners to employ responsive pedagogies that promote opportunities for the voice of the youngest children to be heard.

The next and concluding chapter of the thesis provides a summary of key findings. A reflection on the strengths and limitations of the research is included with consideration of future research within the field of participation rights of children under three. Consideration of the relevance of findings to ECEC policy and HE qualifications is explored. The conclusion offers a final reflection on my doctoral experience.

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

The final chapter of the thesis provides a reflection on my doctoral research, considering key findings and how these contribute to wider debates within the field of participation rights of young children. Strengths and limitations of the project are discussed. The potential for further research within the field of participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC settings is explored. Policy implications are highlighted, with consideration of the ways in which participation rights could be protected and promoted in ECEC curriculum policy in England. As my professional context is situated within HE, the conclusion examines the contribution my findings could make to the development of graduate level qualifications for ECEC practitioners in England. The chapter, and thesis, ends with final reflections on the doctoral study and a wider reflection on the importance of my findings within the current global context.

### **8.2 Summary of Findings**

My study contributes to research within the field of children's rights, specifically highlighting the status of babies and toddlers as holders of participation rights in their ECEC contexts. Findings have been identified in response to the research questions and aims (1.3). Participation rights are understood in relation to Article 12 of the UNCRC, concerning opportunities for babies and toddlers to be active decision makers in their own learning and care through a commitment to listening to and acting upon their voices. The study explores understanding of the young child as both capable beings and/or vulnerable becomings and how such dual constructions inform practices that promote opportunities for participation rights to be enacted. Exposing challenges, the study confirms the vulnerability of participation rights and the complex issues facing practitioners in the field as they navigate participatory practices alongside internal and external constraints.



Findings highlighted the dual construction of the young child as both competent and vulnerable. Participants recognised babies and toddlers as capable beings, with capacity to act as active participants in their ECEC settings, competently influencing social dynamics and demonstrating preference in their learning and care experiences. However, participants equally highlighted the vulnerability of the youngest children, their dependency on adult carers and unique needs that direct practice in particular ways. Participants agreed that babies and toddlers can, and should, be included in decision making about their learning and care, but also require the support of adults to provide safe and enriching environments through which young children develop a greater repertoire of experiences to draw upon when exercising choice.

Participants emphasised the significance of attuned care giving as a conduit for enacting participation rights. Participation rights are promoted through responsive interactions in which practitioners prioritise opportunities for listening and responding to the subtle and multiple modalities of the youngest children. Listening relates to the strategies used to know and understand the world of the young child, contingent on respectful relationships with children and parents. The use of observation as a mechanism through which practitioners and young children engage in reciprocal relationships, provides a framework for listening that celebrates the child as an active participant in their learning and care. Relationships between young children and their primary carers were explored by participants as relationships of knowing, attunement and responsiveness. Through this knowing, the voice of the child can be heard and acted upon, thus creating conditions for participation rights to thrive.

Participant narratives explored the importance of such strong relationships of responsiveness, highlighting the role of the carer as a facilitator of participation rights. The role of the key person in ECEC policy and discourse is often framed around attachment theory (Read 2010; Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck, 2012; NCTL, 2013). This compelling and widely accepted theory examines the special relationship between a baby or toddler and their primary carer within ECEC

settings. Findings from my research reflect original understandings of attachment theory that position the child as an active participant, engaged with primary carers as partners within the attachment relationship (Ainsworth, 1969). Understanding of the key person relationship, underpinned by attachment theory, reaches beyond needs and vulnerability, emphasising the active agency of the child and the centrality of listening and attunement as core elements supporting the voice of the youngest children to be heard. Emphasis on needs, vulnerability and protection through the lens of attachment theory may present barriers for the enactment of participation rights unless understanding of attachment relationships include consideration of the practitioner as a facilitator of voice.

Participant narratives illustrated practitioner expertise in navigating complex relationships with children and their families, promoting opportunities for the youngest children to be active decision makers whilst providing caring contexts that recognise the vulnerability of babies and toddlers. However, such practices are situated within a challenging landscape that creates barriers for respectful and responsive caregiving. Working with babies and toddlers is physically and emotionally demanding work. Creating space and time to engage in attuned interactions in which the voice of the young child can be heard and acted upon is challenging as practitioners manage structural constraints alongside the emotional demands of listening. Whilst participants acknowledged the multiple ways in which they prioritise pedagogies of listening, they explored the difficulties of working in contexts where values of listening are not always consistently shared. This is compounded by a policy context that frames ECEC within a particular neoliberal ideology, prioritising accountability measures that often direct attention away from children.

## 8.3 Strengths, Limitations and Further Research

### *8.3.1 Strengths of the study*

Throughout the research process, one of the key strengths of the project has been the congruence between the research question, methodology, methods and analysis. My study was underpinned by a commitment to voice and listening, driven by my own beliefs about the importance of feeling heard. Voice became a strong thread connecting the research question to the methodological approach, informed by my epistemological and ontological positioning. I felt I could not fully appreciate how the voices of babies and toddlers are understood and captured in ECEC settings without listening to the voices of the practitioners who work closely with them. Morse et al, (2002, p. 18) highlight “methodological coherence” as a characteristic that demonstrates the reliability and validity of qualitative research. Narrative inquiry revealed itself as a robust methodological approach that could address my desire to position voice at the centre of the project, thus maintaining a commitment to my research question and aims.

The centrality of listening as a driving force throughout the research has been firmly rooted in my commitment to, and interest in, ethical research practices. My professional practice as an educator, both in early years and in HE, learning relationships, has been directed by a pedagogy of listening. As a researcher, I have brought my understanding of listening as “an ethics of encounter built on welcoming and hospitality of the Other – an openness to the difference of the Other” (Dahlberg and Moss, 2006, p.15). A strength of the project has been the ethical intention and actions undertaken to preserve the integrity of the project whilst prioritising opportunities for the voices of participants to be heard. Inspired by Sikes and Goodson (2003) I have approached my project with an overriding desire to conduct research that is ethically and morally sound, and in so doing position the voices of participants at the centre of the research process. Whilst I recognise the limitations of my own emergent skills in interviewing, I believe I have been successful in prioritising opportunities for listening to and sensitively representing participant narratives. Through engagement with the doctoral research I have come to appreciate the centrality of listening as a tool for understanding and have worked on the development of my own skills as an active, respectful listener (chapter 5).

Maintaining my commitment to voice has presented challenges and has required a reflexive approach as I have continued to navigate a balance between the voices of participants and my own voice as the researcher. Moen (2006) argues that narrative research includes an interpretive process whereby the story is created through dialogue, which is then theorised by the researcher to reveal greater insights. The inclusion of aspects of my own narrative (chapter two) has helped me to position myself within the research and maintain a reflexive approach to the data, as I explored how my experiences intersected with the research. In constructing the final analysis and discussion, my role has been to “elicit implications” from the data in order to develop a greater understanding of the research topic (Kim, 2016, p.190). This has been a challenging aspect for me, as an early career researcher. My lack of confidence in my research voice has often fed into self-doubt during analysis, and indeed has driven me to question the authority I have to bring my meanings to participant narratives. This is an aspect of the research that feels somewhat unresolved at the time of writing. The development of my confidence as a researcher will undoubtedly continue beyond the reaches of this thesis.

### *8.3.2 Limitations of the study*

There are several potential limitations relating to the research design that may have prevented different understandings from emerging. The study is located in the South East of England and thus does not provide the opportunity to explore wider national or international variation. The findings tell us something about the perspectives of practitioners working within a particular cultural context and thus cannot claim to represent practitioner perspectives more widely.

Participants were all graduate practitioners and thus the data is limited to the narratives of practitioners leading practice rather than a wider view of practitioners with differing levels of education. However, the EdD research emerged from my own professional role leading graduate qualifications for ECEC

practitioners at the University of Brighton, and as such it was relevant for me to explore the issues within my context.

I acknowledge the potential limitations of restricting the focus to participation rights. Lundy (2019, p.595) argues that children's rights are increasingly under attack, resulting in a children's rights discourse that has been "substituted, truncated and diluted." She cautions that children's rights research should not be focussed solely on participation but rather should consider the interrelated nature of rights, locating specific rights within a wider spectrum of articles set out in the UNCRC. This study has taken a focus on participation rights as a way to develop greater understanding of the status of children under three as active decision makers in their own learning and care, emerging from issues raised through my professional context and the wider policy landscape in ECEC in England (1.2.1 and 3.2). Whilst the focus of this study is on participation, I acknowledge the need for wider research within the field of rights of children under three in ECEC settings. I hope this project will contribute to greater understanding of babies and toddlers as rights-holders and appreciate the importance of extending rights-based research in ECEC contexts beyond participation and Article 12.

My decision to focus on adult participants rather than include child participants in the study could be viewed as an additional limitation. Arguably, research exploring participation rights of young children would be well served through methods that include young children as participants. Including the voices of young children in research through meaningful and appropriate methods has increasingly been an area of focus for research in early childhood (Arnot et al, 2020; Arnot and Wall, 2021). However, my own doctoral project was informed by my research question that sought to develop greater understanding of practitioner perspectives. My own experiences of working with ECEC practitioners in HE contexts has led me to observe that they often feel marginalised and unheard within the wider education sector. Graduate practitioners hold a wealth of understanding about young children and my research aimed to gather their narratives as a way of capturing, acknowledging

and understanding their experiences working with the youngest children. As a lecturer in HE, I wanted to focus my EdD studies on my own professional role and use the research as an opportunity to explore perspectives held by practitioners working in the field with the hope that findings might inform and enhance the ways in which I work with future students.

The participants included were selected from a group of graduate practitioners who have previously studied with me and therefore findings cannot be generalised to the wider population of graduate practitioners across the country and beyond. This is a potential limitation, however my commitment to narrative inquiry led me to amplify individual voices and understand the perspectives of the participants selected for this research. Findings from my research present opportunities for further examination of the enactment of Article 12 of the UNCRC with babies and toddlers in ECEC settings in other jurisdictions.

### *8.3.3 Further research*

When considering future research, I have thought about further studies that might be considered in light of findings from my project. I have additionally considered the areas of research that I am interested in pursuing with respect to my development as a researcher.

As discussed in the findings, responsive relationships between practitioners and young children lie at the heart of practice that promotes participation rights. Such interactions take time and are compromised when practitioners feel pressured to prioritise assessment and accountability tasks. Further research exploring the young child's lived experience in a nursery setting and how their time is spent might provide greater insights about their participation rights and the extent to which the voices of babies and toddlers are heard and acted upon in ECEC settings. Observing interactions between practitioners and young children would illuminate understanding about how time is used and what this might

mean for the realisation of participation rights. The contribution of ideas relating to 'slow pedagogy' would provide a helpful lens through which such experiences could be analysed and understood (Clark, 2020).

Challenges faced by practitioners in enacting and facilitating participation rights was a strong theme throughout the narratives and it would be fruitful to develop further research that can specifically explore these individual issues in greater detail. One challenge highlighted by participants was the difficulty negotiating roles and responsibilities when working in settings where there is a lack of shared values. There is undoubtedly a challenge navigating differing value systems, particularly in a climate where the macro-policy agenda is not necessarily aligned with children's rights. Further research considering how values relating to participation rights can be embedded in ECEC settings would be useful in supporting ECEC leaders to establish harmonious practices that are underpinned by rights protected by the UNCRC.

In relation to my own development as a researcher, I am drawn to qualitative, participatory research methods that create conditions for participant stories to be heard and celebrated and would like to develop my skills in narrative interviewing. I am interested in walking, or "bimbling," as a research method that promotes research encounters where participants feel comfortable to recall and share experiences (Anderson, 2004, p.257). Walking methods can reduce power imbalances between participants and researchers, and potentially put participants at ease as they are not confronted face to face but rather walk alongside the researcher (Kinney, 2017). Walking interviews undertaken in meaningful locations create conditions for participants to reflect upon, recount and share lived experiences (O'Neill et al, 2020). The practice of using walking tours as a method to capture children's perspectives of their environments is well established as an aspect of the Mosaic Approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001). Tours, guided by children, provide opportunities for children to take the lead and express their own preferences (Clark, 2017). I would be interested in applying a similar walking and talking method to interviews with

practitioners, exploring the material environments in ECEC settings and how these give rise to participatory practices.

## 8.4 Implications for Policy

Findings from my study expose tensions between current ECEC policy and the implementation of rights-based practice with the youngest children in ECEC settings. Practitioners included in my study are sometimes overwhelmed by accountability measures and often find the expectations of curriculum delivery and assessment in conflict with practice that advocates for the young child's voice. Driven by requirements to document children's progress, time for meaningful and sustained interactions between practitioners and young children is compromised. Recent developments to the EYFS in England have been framed around a desire to reduce teacher workload, streamline assessment practices and remove excessive reliance on evidence to justify assessments to give teachers more time for interactions with children (DfE, 2020f). However, the revised EYFS falls short in terms of advocacy for children's rights and continues to present a curriculum progress model for learning and development. As such it perpetuates an image of the young child as a becoming, focussed on future academic achievement.

The absence of explicit recognition of the UNCRC and the participation rights of young children in ECEC curriculum policy in England creates room for misunderstandings about the rights of babies and toddlers in care settings. A review of the EYFS conducted by Pascal, Bertram and Rouse (2019) highlighted the need to develop aspects of the Understanding the World area of learning in the curriculum to ensure children have opportunities to develop greater understanding of citizenship, participation and voice. Findings from my study suggest the weaknesses relating to participation rights in the EYFS go beyond curriculum content and the knowledge base children are exposed to. The current EYFS lacks clear articulation of values linked to wider commitments established



in the UNCRC and provides scarce guidance about the role of the practitioner as a listening partner.

Lansdown (2011) argues for training for practitioners to develop greater understanding of the full extent of Article 12 of the UNCRC and how it can be applied in practice. Such training has the potential for enhancing the realisation of participation rights in educational contexts. However, the inclusion of specific training for ECEC practitioners relating to Article 12 is unlikely whilst the UNCRC is absent from ECEC policy. As a lecturer delivering EYITT my teaching was bound by the constraints of the TSEY (NCTL, 2013) and the EYFS (DfE, 2017a). Whilst practitioners have a degree of agency in following pedagogical approaches that align with personal values, and therefore on an individual level may promote rights-based practice, there remains a gap in policy that potentially creates space for misinterpretation, inconsistency and a lack of commonly understood principles for the enactment of participation rights.

Findings from my study highlight the pivotal role that practitioners have in facilitating participation rights when they develop responsive relationships with children. Whilst the EYFS (DfE, 2017a) establishes a statutory requirement for all children to be allocated a key person, there is limited guidance about the role of the key person. Future revisions of the EYFS would benefit from greater clarity about the role of the key person and the need for attuned relationships through which the voices of the youngest children can be heard and acted upon. The most recent draft of the non-statutory, sector driven Birth to Five Matters guidance materials is framed by core principles that are underpinned by the UNCRC, defining the young child as an “active agent” and decision maker who is supported through experiences that promote “agency and autonomy” (Early Years Coalition, 2021a, p.19). Such characterisations reject the positioning of babies and toddlers as becomings, and instead celebrate the youngest children as competent beings, actively involved in their own learning. The statutory framework would benefit from similar, explicit guidance, raising the status of

children's voices and the role of the practitioner as an active listener and facilitator of participation rights.

## 8.5 Implications for Higher Education

My research celebrates practitioner narratives as worthwhile stories that provide insights into the complexities of work with babies and toddlers. These stories have the potential to shape discussions and reflections for future ECEC students in HE contexts who may be grappling with their own understandings of participation rights and how these can be applied in ECEC settings with the youngest children. Narratives offer a reflective tool for educators to examine professional practices and consider the development of their own professional identity (Gillentine, 2006; Hayler, 2011). Osgood (2006) argues that education and training in the field of ECEC should move beyond limited discourses around technical practices, providing opportunities for critical reflection to enable practitioners to explore their own positionality in relation to early years policy. Engagement with narrative inquiry through the process of my doctoral studies has highlighted the value of listening to practitioner narratives and how opportunities for the co-construction of narratives provide reflective spaces for practitioners to consider underpinning values and how these shapes practices with young children.

Findings from my study can be used to inform graduate level learning for ECEC practitioners, with an increased focus on the participation rights of the youngest children and how these are enacted in ECEC settings. At the time of writing the thesis the landscape in relation to graduate qualifications in ECEC in England is complex and messy. Early Childhood Studies with Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPC) and the Teacher Standards (Early Years)(TSEY) both provide a framework for professional practice with children under the age of five (NCTL 2013; ECSDN, 2018). However, the two documents present contrasting ideologies about the purpose and function of ECEC. The ECGPCs position the advocacy of children's rights and participation at the

forefront of practice (ECSDN, 2018). In contrast, the TSEY (NCTL 2013) reflect the Teachers Standards (DfE, 2013c), with a focus on planning and assessing children's learning and development to ensure good progress, including a specific focus on early phonics and mathematics. The values embedded in these two disparate documents are not clearly aligned and thus present challenges for students and staff in HE who are navigating professional qualifications to inform practice with young children. The findings from this research present an opportunity to reflect on the values underpinning graduate level qualifications for ECEC practitioners.

## 8.6 Closing Comments and Reflections

Reflecting on findings, I have returned to earlier events in my own life that have directed me towards an interest in this field. For example, as a student volunteer in a nursery I found it difficult to understand why all babies were put in their cots for naps at the same time, even when some were clearly not tired and spent most of the time wide awake, waiting for practitioners to return. At that time the subject of children's rights was not within mainstream discourse and the UNCRC had not been ratified in the UK. I was not yet able to link my observations to children's rights, but instinctively felt uneasy about the dehumanised way babies were treated and the lack of agency they had in their nursery lives. My research provides insight about practitioner understanding of the participation rights of the youngest children in ECEC settings. These are complex issues, not easily resolved. The promotion of participation rights are contingent on environments that recognise the capabilities of young children as active participants whilst prioritising opportunities for responsive care giving. Such conditions are fragile as practitioners grapple with a complex web of challenges. My hope is that this research will contribute to understanding of participation rights for very young children in ECEC contexts, raising the profile of babies and toddlers as rights holders and the importance of practitioners as conduits for the enactment of participation rights.

As I come to the end of my doctoral studies, we are living through the Covid-19 pandemic. It feels pertinent to acknowledge this in the thesis and consider how this landscape relates to my doctoral studies. In response to successive lockdowns, a 'catch-up' narrative has taken hold as policy makers plan a response to the impact of school closures on learning. Addressing concerns about the perceived gaps in learning that will emerge, the government has appointed an Education Recovery Commissioner as part of a wider education recovery package (DfE, 2021). The 'catch-up' narrative is particularly seductive when focussed on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and the necessary response to prevent these children from falling further behind their peers. However, it is prudent to remember that Covid-19 has not created inequalities but rather exacerbated the impact of pre-existing poverty (Rammelt, 2020). The British Psychological Society has urged for caution and a rethinking of the 'catch-up' narrative, advocating for a plan that prioritises wellbeing and time for play as children are able to socialise outside of their family groups (BPS, 2021). Such a focus on the whole child resists the 'catch-up' narrative that positions children as behind, always in a race to catch up to a socially constructed measure that aligns success and development with a narrowly focussed set of skills and particular curriculum attainment.

A worrying feature of the 'catch up' discourse is absence of any consideration of the impact of the pandemic on children under three. The £700 million Covid recovery package directs funding towards primary and secondary school initiatives; however, no funding has been allocated for preschool aged children in ECEC (Gaunt, 2020; DfE 2020g; DfE, 2021). Government Covid response has demonstrated baby "blind spots" in which the needs of the youngest children appear to have been given less priority (Reed and Parish, 2021, p.7). With the potential impact of Covid related stress on mothers, and in turn their babies, there is demand for research and directed care services that prioritise the needs of infants as we emerge from the pandemic (Venta, Bick and Bechelli, 2021).

If we are to honour commitments set out in Article 12 of the UNCRC then children's voices must be included in the Covid recovery strategy, including the

voices of the youngest children. Policy decisions relating to children's lives and the measures employed to mitigate the impact of the pandemic must be foregrounded with children's perspectives. Initial research exploring children's experiences of the pandemic have called for a longer-term commitment to including children in post pandemic decision making (Chamberlain et al, 2021). In addition to existing research capturing the perspectives of children (for example, Pascal and Bertram, 2021), a concerted effort must be made to include the voices of babies and toddlers so that we can understand the impact of Covid-19 on citizens who have lived most of their lives through a pandemic. ECEC practitioners play a crucial part in this, as effective listening partners able to interpret the voices of young children.

As I complete the thesis, I have the participants who so generously shared their time and narratives with me sharply in my mind. It is not an understatement to admit that the doctoral journey has been challenging. At many stages I felt it impossible to carry on. However, I kept coming back to my commitment to "radical listening," the ethical underpinnings of this and the importance of engaging in research that results in action (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012, p.102). As an early years teacher myself, and through my work with early years students, I have keenly felt how silenced our sector is and how marginalised the voices of practitioners working with the youngest children are. Clough (2002, p.67) reminds us that research is tasked with "turning up the volume on the depressed or inaudible voice." The voices of babies and toddlers will only be heard if we value the voices of the people who care for them. I promised my participants that I would share their stories, and I have kept this promise.

**Word Count:** 68,208.

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## Appendices

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## Appendix 1: Overview of Stage One Professional Doctorate in Education

Overview of Stage One Professional Doctorate in Education	
Stage One Assignment Details	Implications for Stage Two
<p><b>Assignment One: Literature Review</b>  <i>“Meaningful participation with babies and young children: What role do early years practitioners have in facilitating children’s rights?”</i></p>	<p>The first assignment provided an opportunity to identify the researchable problem and explore existing research within the field of participation rights in early childhood.</p> <p>The assignment helped to develop my skills in searching for relevant literature and making links with wider theoretical concepts. It helped to clarify the resulting research question that informed stage two of the doctoral process.</p> <p>The reflective element of the assignment laid foundations for the use of my reflective journal and ability to think reflexively. This supported reflection on the wider ethical implications of qualitative research.</p>
<p><b>Assignment Two: Exploring Methodology</b>  <i>“An exploration of practitioner perspectives on the participation rights of young children”</i></p>	<p>Assignment two provided a critical reflection on methodological choices. I explored and defended my own ontological and epistemological positioning. I investigated narrative methodology and used related methods, piloting unstructured interviews with two participants. I also trialled the use of a pre-interview task to support participants to explore their narratives. This assignment impacted on my subsequent decision to return to narrative for the final, stage two project.</p>
<p><b>Assignment Three: Small Scale Study</b>  <i>“A Case Study Exploring the Participation Rights of Young Children in an Early Years Childcare Setting”</i></p>	<p>For the final assignment in stage one of the doctoral process, I elected to conduct a case study of an early years setting in South East England. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, observations of children in free flow play, and document analysis of setting policies and pedagogical documentation, I explored the enactment of participation rights.</p> <p>Whilst the gathering of observational data was rich and provided insight into the ways in which participation rights are played out in everyday encounters in ECEC settings, there were issues that directed me to return to narrative for the final thesis. Engagement with assignment three cemented my desire to focus on practitioner perspectives. I knew that I wanted to utilise a methodology in the final piece of work that would provide a framework to listen to practitioner stories and create spaces for them to be at the forefront of data collection. I was frustrated with the semi-structured</p>

	<p>interviews – quite possibly because of my own limitations as an inexperienced researcher, but also in terms of power relations between researcher and participant. I had found data collection for assignment two much more fulfilling and wanted to return to an unstructured, narrative approach. Additionally, I had ethical concerns about observation as a method. Whilst I tried to maintain a neutral, unobtrusive presence in the nursery, I did feel uncomfortable about observing children in their play. I tried to maintain high ethical standards and look for signs of children requesting I stop observing (which they did!) but all the time I couldn't shake the feeling of interrupting and intruding on their worlds as an outsider. I wondered if observation would work more effectively given a longer period of time to embed as an ethnographic researcher or conducted as a trusted and familiar practitioner/insider researcher. Both of these approaches presented limitations in terms of time scales and other professional responsibilities. My engagement with assignment two and three led me to follow a narrative methodology for the final project, and to focus attention on the participation rights of the youngest children (0-3) in childcare settings.</p>
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## Appendix 3: Scoping email to potential participants

Dear

I hope you are well.

I am writing to you to ask if you would consider taking part as a participant in my doctoral research. I am now working on my doctoral thesis and am seeking participants to interview as part of my research project. My research is in the field of children's rights, and in particular I am interested in understanding more about the capabilities of young children to make decisions about their daily lives in early childhood education and care settings. I am particularly interested in hearing the perspectives of practitioners working with the youngest children (aged between 0-3).

In terms of time commitment, I am looking for participants who would be able to commit to:

- A pre-interview task (optional, and quite open – I could talk to you about this)
- **One initial interview of about 1 hour** (timetabled between now and October)
- **One subsequent interview of about 1 hour** (timetabled between February-April 2018)
- Some time between interviews to read and respond to the transcript of the initial interview
- Sharing notes of reflections or thoughts that happen between interviews (optional)

I know how busy you are and appreciate your consideration of this. I would be more than happy to have a conversation about this if you want to ask any questions before you make a decision. I have attached a copy of the participant information sheet and consent form to this email, for more information.

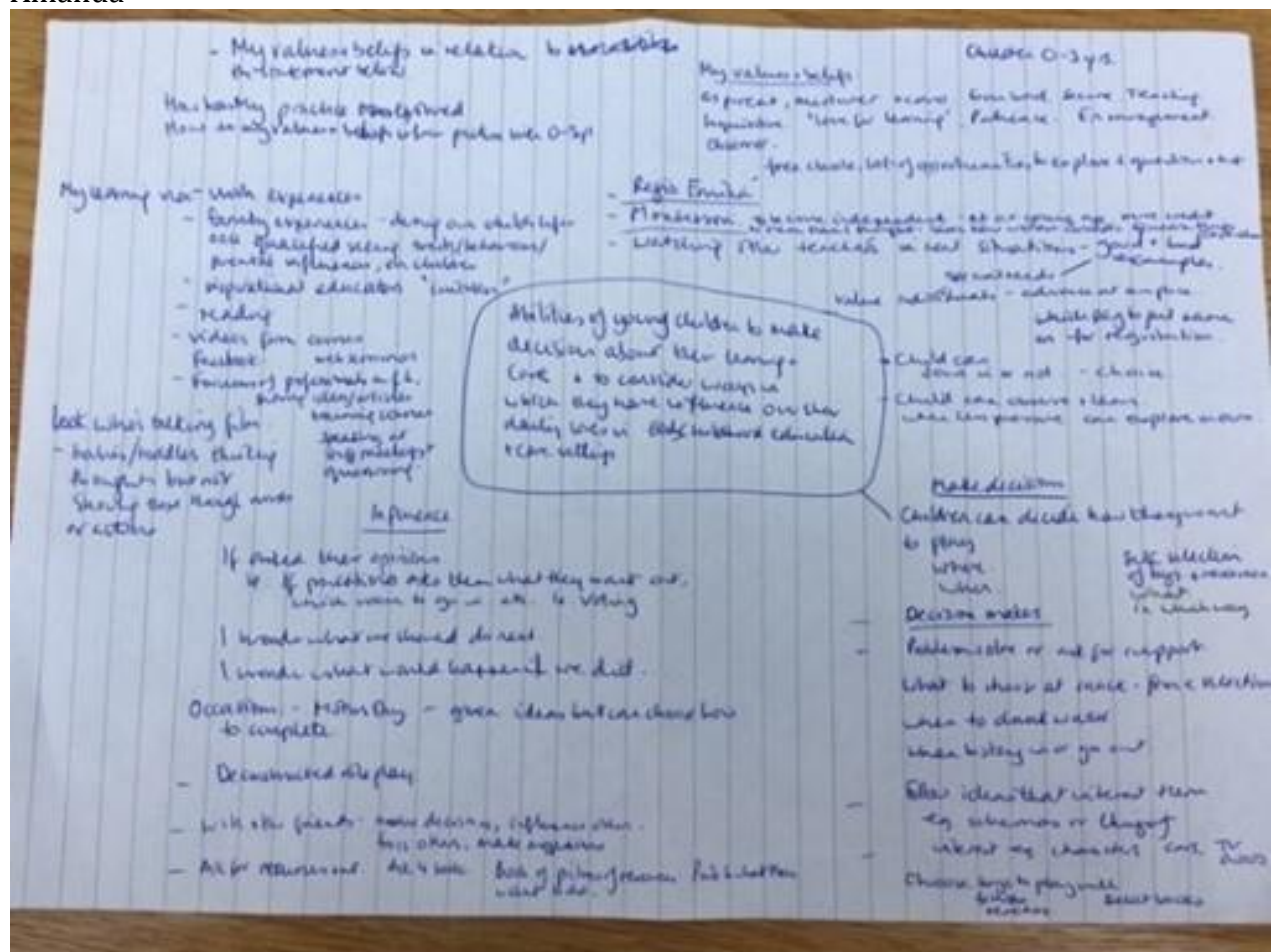
Thank you for taking the time to consider this request.

Best wishes,

Erica Evans

# Appendix 4: Pre-interview Task; Participant Responses

Amanda



### Some Thoughts on Children's Rights and their Learning


**EA** - Really begin to think about children's rights for the first time. Particularly with reference to debate around children's work and how in some parts of the world it arguably enables their education and what children themselves think about their work

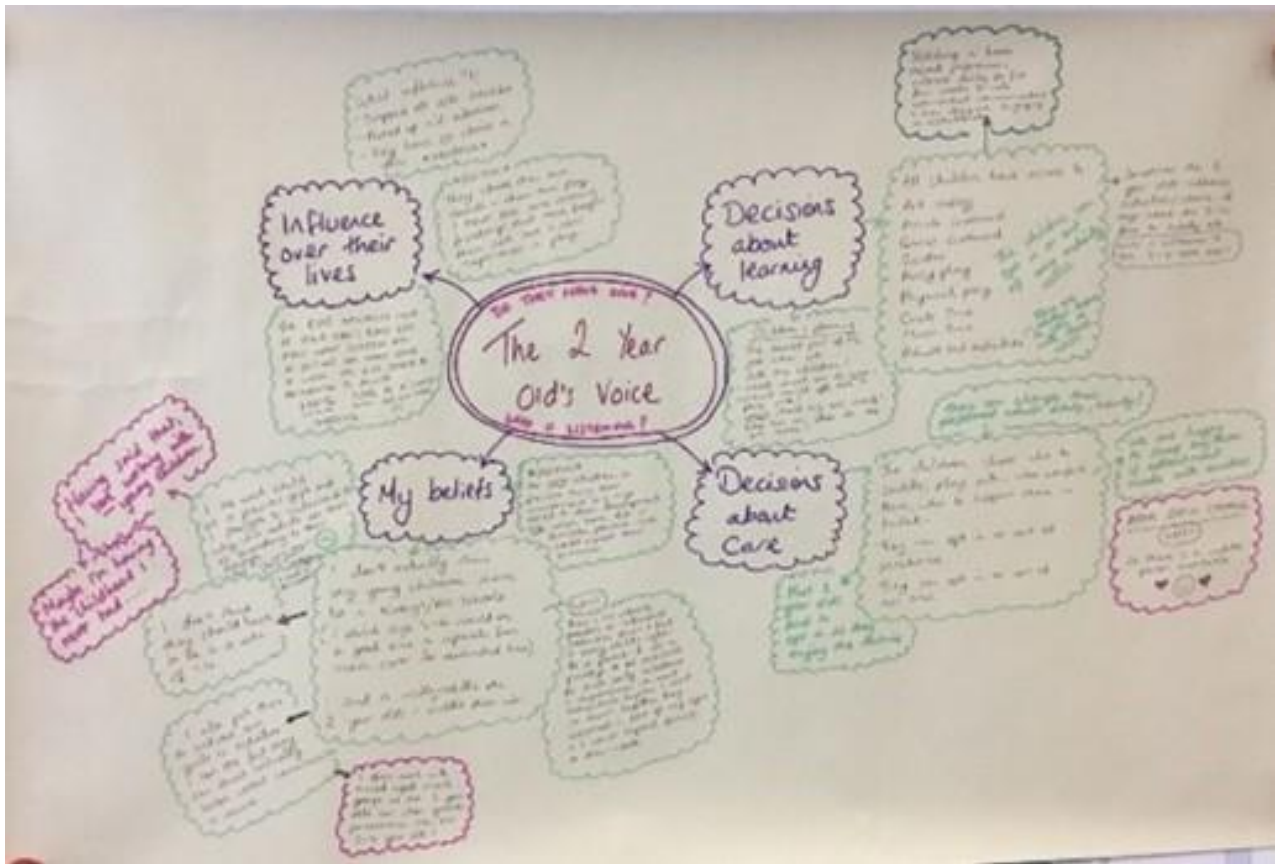
**In the UK EYF5** - Little mention of UNCRC  
Goals are identified that put pressure on settings to guide ch learning in particular ways. This combines with top-down pressure to prepare ch for school and leads to a particular narrative on learning that often leaves little room for ch to actively contribute to decisions about their learning. In whilst statutory requirements enable more ch in the early years to access learning, it is a particular kind of learning

Whilst ch have the right to express a view and be heard do adults sometimes need to act to protect them?  
Recently read an article that argued toddlers should be allowed to stay in soiled nappies until they want to be changed  
But, particularly for some ch, they get very sore quickly and might not understand the connection between not having their nappy changed, for example because they are playing, and getting sore skin  
Need to balance participation with other rights

**Children communicate in many ways**  
**Malagasi - one hundred languages**  
For participation to be meaningful practitioners need the time, awareness and skills to listen to the many ways ch communicate - Mosaic approach

**Construction of the ch**  
Rights based perspective can be individualistic but what about ch as part of a community?  
What is most important - upholding the rights of the individual or the group?  
How do we enable every individual ch to learn in the way they want in a group setting?





Joyce



## Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

### Participant Information Sheet

I am a Senior Lecturer in Education and am currently studying for my Professional Doctorate in Education. I would like to invite you to take part as a participant in my research study. Please take time to read the following information, which sets out the aims of the research and key information for participants.

#### ***What is the aim of the research?***

The aim of this research is to understand more fully the abilities of young children to make decisions about their learning and care and to consider ways in which they have influence over their daily lives in early childhood education and care settings. I am particularly interested in hearing the perspectives of practitioners working with the youngest children (aged 0-3).

#### ***Why have I been invited to participate in this research?***

I am interested in the perspectives of practitioners working with young children who have engaged with the national professional standards for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) or Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS).

#### ***Do I have to take part in this research?***

No. It is your decision to take part in this research.

#### ***What happens if I change my mind and don't want to continue taking part in the research?***

Your participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason.

#### ***How will the research be conducted?***

I will be interviewing current practitioners who are working in early years childcare settings and who have experience working with young children aged 0-3. Each participant will engage with two, 1 hour interviews with myself. Between interviews participants may wish to keep notes to record any emerging thoughts or reflections.

Prior to the first interview I would like participants to reflect on their own values and beliefs in relation to the abilities of young children to make decisions about their learning and care and the extent to which they have influence over their daily lives in early childhood education and care settings. Participants will be invited to create a visual representation of these beliefs, including some of the key moments or life experiences that have influenced their thinking. The format for the visual representation can be decided by the participant, but could be a map, picture, illustrated poem, collage, etc... Participants will be asked to talk through their visual representations at the initial interview.

During the interviews I would like to learn more about practitioners' views on the capabilities of young children to make choices and have influence, and gain a better understanding of the unique perspectives that individual

practitioners bring to their work with young children. I will ask participants to talk about how their own practice has evolved and how their values and beliefs inform their practice with young children.

Each interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed. Following the initial interview, I will send you a summary to review (each participant will only see the summary of their own interview). The second interview will provide an opportunity to revisit key ideas from the initial interview summary. In addition to this I will invite each participant to record thoughts that occur between interviews.

***Are there any possible disadvantages and/or risks in taking part?***

There are no overt disadvantages or risks involved with this research. This type of research seeks to understand your views and involves personal memories and experiences. As the participant you will decide which memories and experiences you talk about. As the researcher I will respect your boundaries.

***What about confidentiality?***

All information collected will be treated as confidential. The names of all participants will be anonymised, as will any references to early childhood education and care settings. The data will be held in my personal university data storage area, which is password protected, and it will be destroyed after a maximum period of 10 years. Any printed notes will not contain your real name or the name of your care setting.

***What will happen to the results of the research?***

The results of the research will be explored in my doctoral thesis. The thesis will be reviewed by my doctoral supervisors and external examiners. The thesis may be used to inform the development of further academic publications. In all cases, no reference will be made to your name or your setting.

***What do I do next, if I decide to take part in this research?***

If you would be happy to be involved as a participant in this research, please read and sign the attached consent form and return to Erica Evans (contact details below). Erica will be in touch to confirm details about the first interview.

***Further information and contact details:***

For further information about the research, or if you have any concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted please contact:

Erica Evans (doctoral student): [ee24@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:ee24@brighton.ac.uk)

Dr xxxxxxx (doctoral supervisor): [xxxx@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:xxxx@brighton.ac.uk)



## Appendix 6: Participant Consent Form

### Participant Consent Form

- I agree to take part in this research which is exploring the perspectives that early years childcare practitioners have in relation to the abilities of young children to make decisions about their learning and care and the extent to which they have influence over their daily lives in early childhood education and care settings.
- The researcher has explained to my satisfaction the purpose, principles and procedures of the study and the possible risks involved.
- I have read the information sheet and I understand the principles, procedures and possible risks involved.
- I am aware that I will be required to answer questions through an initial interview and subsequently one follow up interview. In preparation for the initial interview, I am aware that I will be invited to create my own map, picture, poem or other visual/graphic representation of some of the key points in my life that have influenced my values and beliefs.
- I am aware that the researcher will provide me with a summary of the data collected during interview one. In preparation for the follow-up interview, I am aware that I will be invited to review and respond to the key points raised during the initial interview.
- I am aware that I will be given the opportunity to record any thoughts that occur outside of the interview process and I agree to share these reflections with the researcher for the purpose of analysis.
- I understand how the data collected will be used, and that any confidential information will normally be seen only by the researcher and will not be revealed to anyone else. However, I understand that the researcher may need to breach confidentiality if I disclose information which could potentially cause harm to myself or others.
- I understand that the researcher will provide me with an opportunity to read, review and comment on the interview data, and key findings.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason and without incurring consequences from doing so.
- I agree that should I withdraw from the research, the data collected up to that point may be used by the researcher for the purposes described in the information sheet.

Name (please print) .....

Signed .....

Date .....

## Appendix 7: Example First Interview Summary

### Ava Interview One Summary

#### **How practitioners promote participation rights in practice with children under 3**

- You said that your role is “*fundamentally and foremost about the children...I’m focussed on what the children need*” – participatory practice puts children first
- A familiar, safe environment provides children with the security to be busy and make choices. “*It’s a safe and secure environment...it’s that security*”
- Supportive adults who help children to negotiate choices
- Adults who really know children and are responsive to their needs and interests. Adults who can pick up on the ‘signals’ children give by interpreting their body language/actions: “*I think Danny and I are quite sensitive to our children, we know what they like to do and don’t like to do and where they are, without writing it down, we know that. So we get stuff out...that we think is quite interesting for them. If we find that’s not going well, we’ll clear that away and get something else out that they might choose to do*”
- The importance of taking on board children’s requests and explaining when/why they can’t be met. This involves a trusting relationship between the adult and child. “*We’ll never say ‘no, you can’t do that’. That’s not in our ethos. I don’t think that’s good for any child. But if you actually explain to a child why.*”

#### **Choice relating to control**

- Choice is about having control over one’s life
- Controlling adults and environments result in less opportunities for choice and decision making for children “*So I think the less controlling the environment, the more children are able to express themselves and be themselves.*”

#### **Reasons to promote participation rights with young children**

- It is a natural part of development, where children develop understanding of their awareness of themselves as independent beings “*I think choice and control go together....beginning to exert control over their environment and part of their natural development, to realise that they’re independent from other people*”
- Young children need opportunities to be decision makers – this helps them to be more effective decision makers as they grow older, and this is related to the developing of thinking skills: “*So giving them choices very early on is starting to help them **think** and make decisions. I think if children don’t do that at an early age, it’s quite difficult to learn that as they get older.*”
- Through giving choice you support children to be independent thinkers which sets them up for later learning “*I want our children to come out of childminding practice able to get on really well with other children and respect other people, and respect other people’s views. But also be inquisitive, curious, a thinker and primed for the next stage of their life. It’s not squishing them and going ‘you must do this’, and encouraging them to be their own person.*”

#### **Challenges and limitations of participation rights with under 3’s**

- Time can be a factor – having the time to listen to children and respond to their choices. This takes time – but you felt able to give this time to children in a childminding setting.
- Managing the needs of the individual and the needs of the group. *“Because we have to deal with the needs of the group...because actually we’ve got all of these people we need to think about. So we’re always encouraging to think about the group”*
- Sometimes adults know best and have to override children’s choices. You gave the example of food, a child who wouldn’t eat lunch but then wanted snacks *“So again it’s that whole thing of, choice is fine, but it’s detrimental too. We try to explain to him that if he didn’t eat then he wouldn’t have the energy to play and that he would get very hungry”*
- Choices with limitations – not disturbing the learning of other children.
- In a large setting the voice of a young child might get lost. This is the advantage of a small child minding setting. Particularly for children who are not yet talking, you felt that they would get ‘missed and lost’ in a large setting. *“a quiet child, a child who goes under the radar and doesn’t make any problems, often is forgotten and lost. I don’t know how a large nursery deals with that. I would hope that with a key worker system they wouldn’t get lost and their key worker would focus on each of their children”*

#### **Young children as beings and becomings**

- Young children as capable and confident: *“They can’t verbally tell us what they want to do, they certainly can **show** you what they want to do, and one of our children physically drags us over to what she wants us to see or do or experience...she’s very confident with us” “I think even very young babies can tell you exactly what they need or want”*
- Young children as able communicators: *“one child who is about 17 months and he really has relatively little words but he still manages totally to get his ideas and opinions across. Sometimes it’s quite physical”*
- Young children as becomings who are becoming socialised through the support of adults who may need to make some decisions. You gave the example of supporting children to understand cultural norms/values, like meal times *“I think in society that’s how we eat and I want to encourage the sociable thing, that mealtimes we sit down and eat together.” “if you want to live in our society as it is at the moment, then you have to conform to society view points”*
- Young children as becomings who are on a road to becoming ‘school ready’ and the role of the practitioner to prepare children for school – that might sometimes limit choice *“the way our school system works, they have to be able to sit in order to concentrate, to work in a group, to be sociable....if you can’t get on socially with your peers then you’re not particularly pleasant to be around. So I think part of our job is to...if our ultimate aim is to get these children primed and ready for school...then we need to start bringing in those ideas for society.*

#### **Influences on participatory pedagogy**

- Observing other practice – nursery and childminding settings
- Nursery placement during EYP – helped to see other practice.

- Higher level study (EYP) helped to reflect and understand “*why we do things with children the way we do*”
- Learning from children themselves – how you have evolved as a practitioner through experiences with children. You gave the example of the child who wanted to say ‘witch’ for something on the farm (Old McDonald) and how you responded then, but how you might respond now. “*Being quite controlling initially and it’s going to happen like this – to going ‘oh fantastic’ Let’s celebrate that idea (from the child) and really go with it....that situation made me learn significantly. I was never going to do that again, whatever the child says I’m going to value and try and involve it in whatever I’m doing*”

## Appendix 8: Example extracts of annotated interview transcripts

and we do as Practitioners do that, so in some ways it may look as though we're giving the child choice - "look at these wonderful things that we're offering you", but actually we've got an agenda, bearing in mind we've got to gather this evidence and so that directs what we do a lot of the time, even more than what the child directs us to do.

2 I think you're right, I think often because the child is coming in to the same environment and maybe follows the same interests, often we think if we don't put something new there to interest, they're always going to be on that and how are we going to get maths in there, or how are we doing to build letters and improve their mark making if they may be want to play with dinosaurs and the sand tray? So I'm going to have to be clever and direct them away from their friends, where they want to be, so I can try and give them, even if it's two minutes, and over time it's really hard, because we are teachers and they don't know very much at the moment, and they're only going to know by being shown, or emerged into this environment. But we do know we've got paperwork to do and we've got to prove we're a good Setting because this form shows these children moving on. And if we could we probably would do what they do on television, on those Channel Four programmes. We would sit in a room and we would record them and say "isn't that right?" and they're learning, but they do need the adult input. They might not get that at home, as well. So we are having to direct them. It's really tricky, isn't it?

1 For the benefit of the audio - Anna (2) was moving her hands like a balance.

2 It is you know child led, adult led. Do we do enough of each, or are they really, is child led child led, or the toys we think they should be playing with today that's going to extend their maths or give them an opportunity to say some things. Where they actually want to be is outside digging and transporting planks of wood on their own, which is truly what they would want to do.

1 Yes, it's interesting isn't it, how much choice the children really do have? And I'd ask them if there are things that they really need to learn. There are things we need to teach, that's the message I get quite a few times, there are things that they need to do. I'm thinking of my daughter, who is 13, would like to be on her phone too much and given a choice, if I say to her "would you like to do this or this today?" - she'll say "No".

2 Actually, that's a bit like a toddler. Would you like to do this or this? No, I'm going to ignore you and carry on doing what I'm doing. And actually it's no different, but both ages don't know that there's a whole world out there and that there's a whole array of stuff you could be doing. How do you know you don't want to do that or go there? There might be so many opportunities and it's exactly the same for the toddler who doesn't know actually what you're talking about. He just knows what he is currently interested in.

8 widening children's experiences

*Handwritten annotations:*

- need to meet curriculum demands?
- our responsibility to widen children's experiences - manipulate their choices
- pressure to complete paperwork
- at what heights of adult led - children who may not get input at home
- disadvantaged children?
- children -> voice - adult led - child led
- choice - How much truly child led?

Challenges

tensions

(2) Which is a shame, because children's voice isn't just in the way they play. It's in everything they do. You could say 'nappy changing'. We could say to a child who is heavily involved in water play 'come on, it's your turn for nappy changing'. And actually that child was really in their moment playing, could it not have waited? But I've got this routine, this list. I don't want to be the person who misses that nappy off and actually that child has been in that nappy for six hours because I was doing something else, lunch duty or something and I missed that child. So I think we can interpret the child's play, which is their voice, in that moment, by having to be task-focussed as a Practitioner. And that might interrupt those explorations that might have led to an amazing moment.

task focussed as opposed to child focussed?

We also don't see all the child's voice because we're not there all the time. We're not a camera capturing everything. We only see bits of children's play and their day.

(1) And also what struck me is what you were saying about ages ago when we were ..... the film. We don't see all of that internal dialogue that they have or that we think they might have. So that's hard, because when I think about when I first started teaching in Reception, the children whose voice was really strong, and actually very articulate with the girls who could just come up to me and mmmmmmm and have lots to tell me. I knew their world and their perspective because I've had tons to tell me. But when you work with children who are much younger you have to unpick what's going on in their minds.

Missing moments to capture voice because of other demands?

Observation as an engaged act

(2) And often I think there are reasons why they are behaving in such a way. They can't tell us and it is lack of ..... isn't it? To ask the question to the parents, to watch, to see those interactions. And sometimes we make the mistake of not having the time. I think more today we need to be observers as Practitioners and that's often difficult. I think in my role now from Montessori and my EYT course, I'm learning that you can be sat in a room looking like you're not doing very much. But actually you can be listening and focussing in, and that's very different from a Practitioner sitting there yawning, being in the room but not being present in the room. That's a maturity thing, and an experience thing. That takes a while to learn.

Enabling -  
less about being present

(2) I'd love to have a microphone on loads of the children. I've watched quite a lot over the years those secret life of four year olds and I know their stage and I know that they're built to show different things. But I do find it fascinating to listen to whole bits of conversation, but often we go in at the end of a conversation or we might sidle up near and the conversation stops.

(1) Absolutely. And also is there an expectation that we should be moving them forward?

learning

(2) Yes, always extending, 'what could you bring to this, have you thought about?'. And that's hard, when to ask to be involved. And there are matching

naturally

alright here. Why don't <sup>can't</sup> you stay a bit longer and we'll play here? Everything's here and I'm good." And you can tell that when the Mums or Dads do that, they stay a bit longer and then they go "this child is happy". It's like all that lying I suppose. I suppose I'm thinking, "little one's been here all day, 9 til 2, and then Mum or Dad come". And instead of it being a "quick, let's get out the door", they stay a bit and the learning carries on, and there's a chance to talk to Mum and Dad. The child's sees the connection and has a sense of what is going on. They pick that up and they carry on playing.

(1) For the benefit of the ... <sup>and</sup> .....it's interesting, your body language when you're talking about that. Because you're gesturing a kind of sign I would take to mean contentment, bringing in, keeping together. I'm not sure... <sup>it's unity, community</sup>

(2) It is a bit like community. It's a bit like putting boundaries. **Boundaries is** another thing I realised I wrote about in my Memo. It's **all about those safe boundaries**. Because play is a children's right, children need to play, they need that like the air they breathe. And obviously the right of protection is an important right. But that whole thing, a kind of **carrying, all those things that children need together to make that play of safety**. Then that place of safety gets bigger, so they start out small and they navigate their little pre-school world, then **they navigate their bigger world, and again their bigger world**. And what you hope is that something can remain, that carries them through that core understanding. But, of course, it doesn't. Because I can contain my bit but I can't contain everything. So then I'm thinking "what do we need to do that **really develops that resilience?**" Because **once you have gone beyond that space of being able to offer something that's very safe and containable and good, how do we help the children do that?** Again I think it's back to looking at the children, **observing their body language, really promoting their language and their thinking, their sounds**. A lot of the children I work with, they don't have verbalisations, so you're looking at their eyes, you're looking at their bodies and how they're moving.

study -  
wonderability?  
challenging &  
moving  
children  
from  
play  
wonderability  
safety →  
independence  
+  
resilience

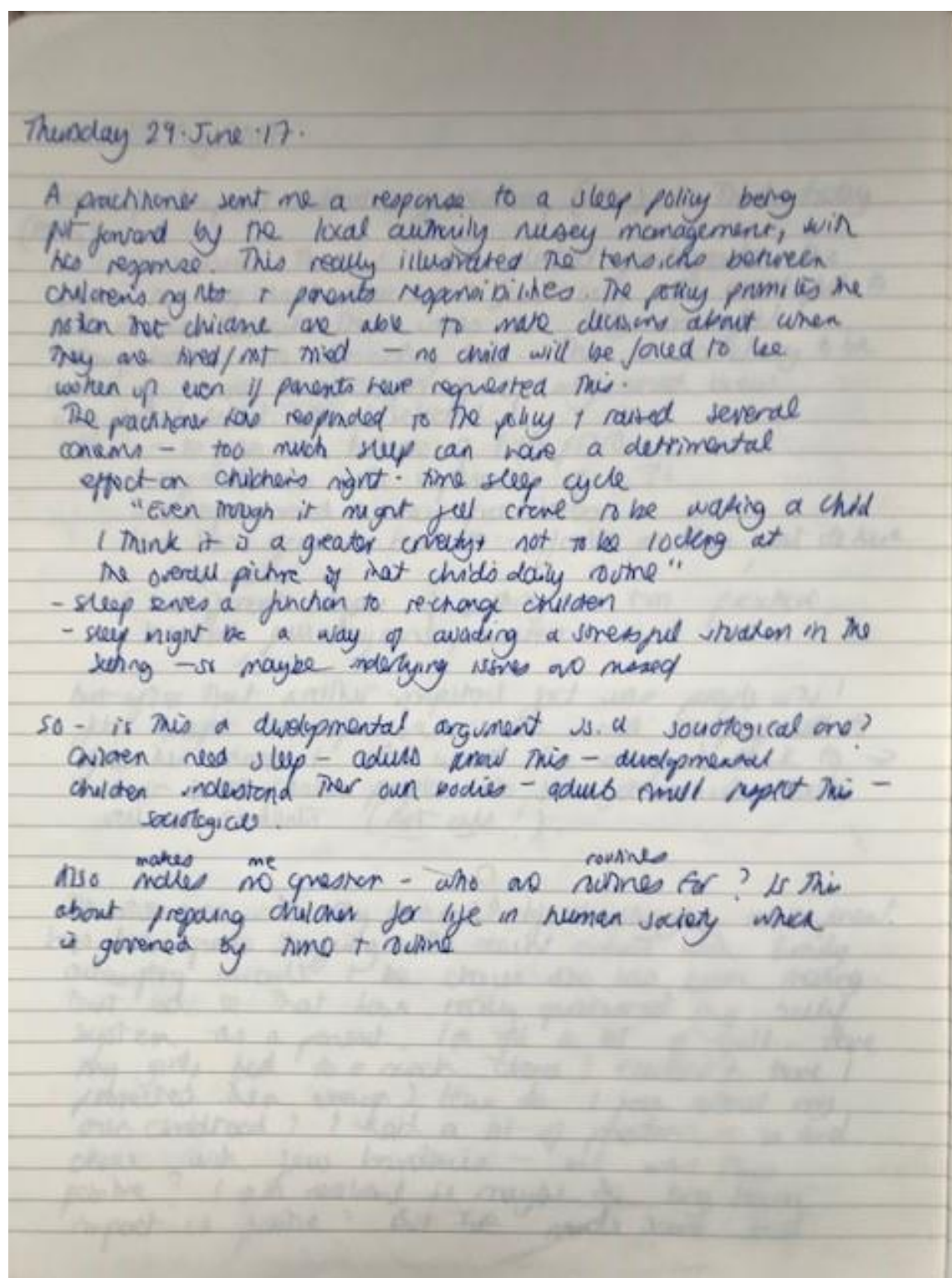
Multiple  
roles of  
practitioners  
widering  
children's  
worlds  
from  
point of  
safety

I've got seven month [redacted], he's doing really well but he's hugely frustrated - he can't make his body completely be a dog. He just can't do it! He's head's right down, and he's going to get there probably really soon. But it's all these sounds. His Mum says "I can't believe it, he should be shouting". Yes, I can understand that, it's probably "I've got to do it!". He's so delightful. It's all those sorts of things. **It's like watching, really watching and responding to what they're saying. That's really really important.**

observation  
body  
language  
eyes  
movements

Another example is [redacted] <sup>is learning? or observation not as opportunity?</sup> She was a very interesting little three year old. My Mum had made some cardigans, blue ones. She got the wool from Aidi, she made about nine of them. And we wore them to go to the park - ..... pets. And then I said to my Mum "do you fancy making some cardies for inside, a different colour, green please?" So we got the wool and I brought the cardigans in.

## Appendix 9: Example extracts from research journal





2 Sept 17

Interview with [redacted]  
I worry about putting words in the mouths of my participants. Sometimes when they are talking I make connections in my mind + share these with them - am I guiding it too much?  
But I do believe that this process is a construction of understanding together - it is dynamic - so maybe shouldn't be too cautious or worried.  
But other part of me feels very aware of my own power over perspective leading the discussion - am I perpetuating what I want to hear? Trying to be child's advocate.

[redacted] background very similar to mine - big decision makers in our own childhoods + the impact that might have on us. Confirmed that our own life experiences do inform the type of practitioner we become.

It keeps relating back to my own parenting + this can be challenging particularly at the moment with Emily.

Are children capable of making sensible choices  
How much do we control / scaffold this?  
Why might it be important to expose children to decision making at young age?

Tensions that exist →

Parent needs      Child needs      Practitioner needs

no black + white      ←      negotiating this tension

choices in my life - but other good choices

yesterday I said something like 'parents are fearful that children will make mistakes but this is how they learn. They have to make mistakes - it really had to allow children to make mistakes - but they have a right to be themselves'. It really hit home with the feelings I am experiencing around parenting teenagers. I've created a story the idea of 'balance' keeps coming up - knowing how to balance children's choices within a context of helping them to make good choices & be prepared for the next stage of life. I feel so strongly about childhood as a stage of life in its own right - but as a parent I am also anxious about the next stage - equipping the child with tools to be ready for greater independence & life.

being

becoming



Be adult - keeping balance?  
↳ in collaboration with the child?  
As dynamic relationship?  
|  
parents

3.17.

Emerging ideas

voice + interests - drawing on children's interests to facilitate voice.

Knowing children well -  
- relationships - observation  
- active ment, dialogue  
- parent partnerships  
- ex of making

How adults interpret voice

Developing pedagogy through  
- experience/good + bad  
- training/education  
- parenting  
- own life experiences

Time for children

Safeguarding school readiness - social conventions - about shaping children to be members of society with 'rules'

Control + containment - cultural differences

Choice -  
- opportunities to learn from mistakes  
- opportunities to develop thinking skills

Independence -  
choice + voice leading to greater independence

V.S "Anything for an easy life"

offering choice + communicating options to children

offering wide range of experiences so children develop bank of ideas

younger children have less experiences to build on so maybe need more guidance

balancing needs of children + expectations  
- practitioners  
- parents (making day cards) "times"

challenges/tensions -

- sleep
- eat
- toileting

1 - safeguarding - keeping children safe as priority

2 - school readiness (tension with older children - perhaps under 3's have more choice)  
- social con

facilitating choice -> motivation

reduces time to scaffold choice appropriately

17.9.17.

The interview with JC was quite different - very guided by her. She had lots to say. And it highlighted challenges + opportunities presented through the un-structured, narrative method.

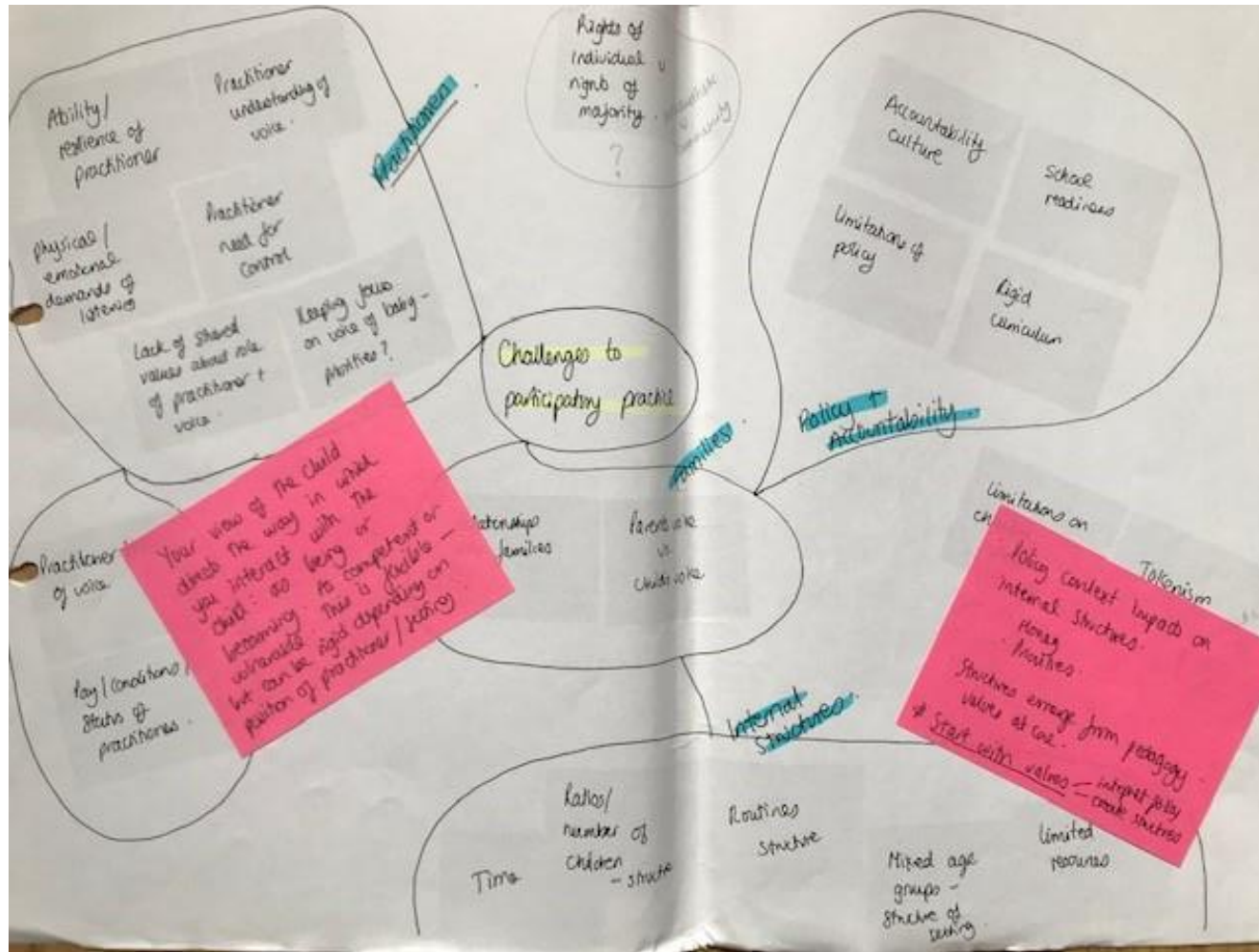
- At times I was worried about where the interview was heading. Was this becoming a sounding board for JC to use to explore all of her frustrations about the ET role? or should I move the interview on - or let her take it to places she wanted to go. I had to let it play out + see. And what I learned is that sometimes the assumptions + connections I am making about an issue are not the same as the thinking of another person. It isn't neat + tidy.

When listening to JC I had to concentrate to follow her narrative to see how it connected with the ideas I was musing - and the connections were there.

Had I used structured or prepared questions I would have been implementing my own assumptions on the research. Through the open approach I could begin to hear JC's perspective + this is what excites me - giving voice to a sector that is so often silenced + not taken seriously. The research has the opportunity for these stories to be heard. And this might help us to understand more clearly the complexities faced by ET practitioners - the challenges, tensions, frustrations, wishes, hopes.

But equally you could imagine the interview losing focus - creating unwieldy data sets that may be hard to analyse - we shall see!

## Appendix 10: Example Concept Maps Developed During Analysis





## Appendix 11: Screenshot of extract from excel spreadsheet used for coding

Participant	Data Type	Location	Quote/Note	Category	Codes
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"they need to be able to make their own choices, with the caveat of safety"	Limitations to choice/Balance	protection/participation
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"I see the adult there being able to facilitate it by providing for safe choices"	Strategies for participatory practice	Role of adult
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"but they have to make choices and make mistakes...to learn that actually that is part of life and that's how we learn"	Benefit of participation	choices enabling learning
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"But I think that even at a very young age they have their preferences and what they like to do"	Young children as beings	
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"You see it with the toddlers and the under twos, you put two or three activities out. They will choose which one they want, they don't just sit there and wait to be asked."	Young children as beings	Capable decision makers
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	own way."	Impact of limiting participation	Stifle development
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	would like...rather than just giving them an instrument, actually they might have a choice of instruments"	Strategies for participatory practice	Use of symbols
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"You would expect the little ones to not care which one they had, but they do"	Young children as beings	Capable decision makers
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"It's giving them a voice before they have a voice, really, Before they have a verbal voice."	Defining participation rights	Participation as listening and 'voice'
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"Because a lot of frustration with the under two's is when they can't speak. By giving them the choices it reduces that stress."	Benefit of participation	Reducing frustration
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.1	"Makaton and baby signing also, you see that, and that is giving them the choices as well. You see that. They can ask for more"	Strategies for participatory practice	Makaton/signing
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.2	there are lots of examples like that, I would say we make the choices without thinking them through"	Challenges to participatory approach	Time
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.2	"You need to give them that choice which broadens their horizons. It introduces them to things."	Young children as becomings	Broadening experiences
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.2	understand what the greater picture is."	Higher level training	Practitioner understanding of participatory approach
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.3	such and such....it has actually got quite a big impact if they don't get those skills early on"	Benefit of participation	Developing independence and responsibility
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.5	even broadened. They do need you sometimes to plan that seed for them. And if it doesn't go in the direction you want that's fine"	Young children as becomings	Broadening experiences
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.5	not letting them have any boundaries by choosing what they want to do....they are social norms and there are acceptable boundaries"	Limitations to choice/Balance	Choices within boundaries
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.6	comes in"	Limitations to choice/Balance	protection/participation
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.7	some textures and some tastes."	Young children as beings	Capable decision makers
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.7	"But it's introducing new things, they have a chance to try it."	Strategies for participatory practice	Role of adult
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.7	because if they don't learn when they need a sleep themselves, then again it has a knock-on effect if they're older. Bedtime routines."	Limitations to choice/Balance	Adults as more knowledgeable partners
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.8	"...comes down to parents putting themselves first. That sounds really awful isn't it, I shouldn't be saying that. But it does. They don't seem to understand...."	Challenges to participatory approach	Wishes of parents conflicting with children's choices
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.10	"the two-year olds are a challenge, I think. I think people underestimate the two and two-and-a-half year olds."	Uniqueness of two year olds	
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.10	"Even one to four ratio is really hard" [the need for appropriate ratios in order to support decision making]	Challenges to participatory approach	Ratios/number of children
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.11	or whether they want to do that inside"	Strategies for participatory practice	Free Flow
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.11	wrong, but finding out what that barrier is for them"	Strategies for participatory practice	Listening/observing and knowing children
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.11	"Everybody else was going and you can't just leave someone behind" [talking about managing the choices of individuals and groups]	Challenges to participatory approach	Individual v. majority
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.12	"It's...actually really knowing the children, taking the time to listen to them I think"	Strategies for participatory practice	Listening/observing and knowing children
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.15	easier to deal with"	Strategies for participatory practice	Teamwork/shared vision
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.15	"It's not until you do that higher level of training that you start to have the confidence in why you're doing things"	Higher level training	
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.14	we have on the children, understanding our role"	Higher level training	Reflective Practice
AG/Alissa	Int1	p.16	harder to get that knowledge with staff now."	Higher level training	