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**‘A qualitative study exploring how a child’s
gender influences their play choices in an
early year’s setting’**

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Abstract

This qualitative study looks at the ways gender influences the play choices of preschool children in a private provision. Viewing a feminist post structuralist lens, it utilizes theories of power in society to explore how gender is developed and identified in children's play and questions if gender is a constructed form based on social behaviour, language, theories of agency. With the Mosaic approach Fuling the notion that children are unique when viewing the world, their acquired knowledge reflects an epistemological standpoint supporting genders evolution through learning and the ways in which children interpret and develop it.

Connell and Pearse (2015) define gender as ‘The way human society deals with human bodies and their continuity, and the consequences of these ‘deals’ in personal lives and collective fate’ (Bolshaw *et al.*, 2020, pp3). The gendered child, however, is more specific in early years contexts, this notion can be seen as the battle between predominant issues of innate biology and that of socialisation or environment. The play choices that challenge a child’s perception of gender or in many ways, define it, are key to understanding how an environment influences the stereotypes that occur within it. Bolshaw *et al.*, 2020 discuss how it is customary practice for an adult to consider a child's gender when engaging in play situations or arranging play activities for them. This, however, is sometimes more damaging as a child's play defines how they experience learning, and the barriers of gender can stop this.

With this study, the purpose and aims are to explore and develop current ideas when attempting to understand the different perceptions of gender and play for children in Early years provision. In addition, it has intention to explore what is considered an appropriate toy / play activity for a specific gender. Alongside this, it would be beneficial to scrutinise the advantages and disadvantages of attempting to increase the children’s awareness of these views, allowing a greater participation in learning and expression of gender through play. (Alderson and Morrow, 2011).

As quality lead, Deputy manager and preschool lead in a private nursery setting, it is suitable to undertake a small-scale investigation (SSI) for this planned research; owing to the perception that learning is a fundamentally collaborative process between the child, an informed adult, and their peers. The 'Listening to Young Children' Project (2018) is a direct reflection of how the Early years is constantly changing and in a time of consistent change, it would seem prudent to want to give the developing child more autonomy and agency in their own lives. Children’s opinions are more valued than ever, and it is beneficial to learning and development to enable them to be partners in their own learning journeys.

Studying for a master's in childhood and youth presented many interesting and crucial themes that appeared favourable for this small-scale investigation (SSI) in the focus of the early years; concepts of agency and participation, children's voices and the ideas predicated in children’s rights were at the forefront. Particularly those enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1987). Alongside this, the acknowledgement of ethics when working with children and young people posed important when linking to the themes of researching with young children. Under this circumstance, it is appropriate to acknowledge childhood and youth as valuable stages of life and not as the primary preparation for adulthood. It is not just about what children say, but about the sounds they

make, drawings they create, visual representation through their play, and of course their body language and interaction with others.

Exploring the voices of children and their play choices in relation to gender preference would be a start when hoping to learn about the world of the child and enable them to develop in an interactionist view. Bruce., (2005. pp.5) Considering the role that a practitioner plays in the lives of children, it is relevant to consider the literature and policy that is continually evolving within the early years, and in practice practitioners must look to the past to establish strong links for the future. To effectuate current ideas and thoughts is to in turn enable the early years sector to develop and expand in its knowledge of children and their views on the world.

An SSI allows a hands-on exploration of the children's views and experiences and gives benefit to the setting moving forward in terms of evidence collected. For example; potentially helping the setting decide upon resources, quality management and changes in practice. With all the factors discussed, it would be a good opportunity to use the SSI to explore in qualitative terms, how a child's gender influences their play choices in an early year setting. Therefore; To organise the research, it would be prudent to sub categorise the research into the following sub questions:

1. How is play presented in an early year setting?
2. What areas of play in the early years provision provide cross gender play and interaction?

The topic of gender and play within provision links directly to culture, society, and the aspect of the child as a participant in their own learning. Within the exploration of children and young people, it is important to value the authentic voice of the child and their contributions towards research. The amount of research within early childhood is centred around the adult's perspective, with little referring to how the children gain concept from their experiences. Raising the voices and values of children in research allows researchers to take a large step towards believing the contribution a child can play within practice and policy.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

Play origins: The history of play

In order to establish how gender influenced play is designed within the early years, it is important to give reference to the origins of play; the many theorists that have implemented

their ideas upon the early years are still being used to offer accounts, functions and to create policy and documentation today, for example the early years foundation stage curriculum (EYFS, 2021)

These origins are also known as 'Play Theory.' Lowenfeld (1991) identifies play as 'The expression of the children's relation to the whole of life, no theory of play is possible that is not also a theory that will cover the whole of a child's relation to life; play is a multidimensional construct that varies in meaning across time, culture, and contexts' (Moyles (2012.,Pg. 1) Play is vital to a child's holistic development and their ability to process the world around them. It aids development, confidence, self-efficiency and offers an approach to pedagogy that is easily adapted by provision. Active learning through play links directly to practical hands-on involvement with children at a preschool or nursery level. Moyles (2012) suggests that being in this environment is where experimental learning thrives, first-hand knowledge is stimulation, and the world is displayed through a child's play and the guidance of a familiar adult. The experience of this environment makes it relevant to link theory to the practical day-to-day experience in the field of a child's play.

Fredrich Froebel (1837) was one of the first formal educators to initiate the link between children's play and their ability to develop functioning reasoning and cognitive skill. Froebel proposed that childhood play directly contributed to development and learning physically, emotionally, and intellectually and the play engages the child and transforms first-hand, direct experience and physical movement into meaningful symbolic action, which then lifts the child to a higher level of functioning. Play is a resource for flexible, adaptive thinking, and provides children with extensive opportunities for abstract thought, which can then provide tangible experiences in childhood. These ideas focus on education as the centre of the child's world and his theory of 'gifts' support the notion of free play, in which the child creates the play experience without intervention, to meet their own needs (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005)

Play underpins the EYFS. It also underpins learning and aspects of children's development. Through play, children develop language skills, their emotions and creativity, social and intellectual skills. Early years matters (2023) define play as a 'Physical or mental activity that is done primarily for fun, without any other purpose in mind.' For most children, play is natural, spontaneous, or unstructured, it derives from their own imaginations and occurs in groups and alone. Unicef (2023) define unstructured play as 'Children having full freedom to play in whatever way they want. They are free to select their play materials, interest area and even the plot' However, some children may need extra help from adults to achieve a level of

involvement or direction, potentially with a specific task to learn a new skill. Educational resource centre Twinkl describes Structured play as ‘A form of play where an adult gives a specific purpose, task or learning objective, usually achieved through activities with a set of rules that children must follow’. This could be group work to complete a puzzle or the combined work to complete a task. Structured play, in early years, is one of the best ways to teach children new skills as it keeps them highly engaged and excited.

While learning within provision, practitioners use structured play to aid learning and encourage the practice of cognitive skills. However; The two definitions of play appear to be in conflict as it is hard to imagine play to be both spontaneous and structured. In this case, the practitioner must use and utilize their skills in order to ensure that learning through play is scaffolded and moulded to the child and their level of learning ability. As referred to by Jerome Bruner and Wood et al (1976), The ‘scaffolding’ theory encapsulates the idea that when children are given the support they need whilst learning something new, they stand a better chance of using that knowledge independently.

Play engages children with the skills to manage their thoughts, ideas, feelings, relationships, and physical selves, it helps them to know themselves and to relate to others around them, both in terms of social and emotional links with the wider world and in the development of themselves as a member of the community. Froebel suggests that play is the principle means of learning in early childhood and here, children construct their understanding of the world through direct experience with it. Like Froebel, Jean Piaget (1896-1980) holds significant weight in the origin of play with his ‘stages of development.’ The age-related stages are in Piaget's thoughts, sequential to one another - suggesting that a child cannot pass over a stage or return to a previous stage when learning. It is here that Macblain (2018) explains Piaget's thoughts that children move through sensorimotor cognitive growth, assimilation and accommodation, logical reasoning, and further cognitive development. In terms of this SSI, it would be prudent to focus on the ‘preoperational phase’ of children between 18 months and 7 years of age, where, like Froebel, Piaget suggests that symbolic meaning is developing, and therefore a child’s memory is beginning. At this stage, play primarily reflects pretend action that is based around representation, for example, when a child uses a brick from the construction area as a telephone, they know the shape and size of the object and will use representation to fulfil their play need, they are assimilating what is seen in the real-life experiences of the environment around them. Therefore, advocating that a child can reach

developmental stages earlier than initially suggested, and that a child can process development in various stages, rather than sequential. Following this, Piaget's work, although highly praised within research, has also been criticised for a variety of reasons. Amongst research, Babakr et al (2019) refer to Piaget's cognitive theory as having significant shortcomings, including an underestimation of the learning capacity of an infant and the neglect in cultural and social interaction factors in the development of his cognition and thinking theory. It is commonly known that Piaget based his theory on the development of his own children, giving him an element of bias in his thinking.

Boys and girls: Biology – the differences in play.

In terms of the way a child learns to be a specific gender, adults are usually a key starting point to how social interaction helps define the constructs of gendered play. For example, the dominance of female practitioners and the variants of adjectives used to describe boys (busy, noisy, and careless) and girls (kind, helpful, quiet) within early years provision. The consideration of language used with children can inexplicitly divide children into stereotyped genders. Basic claims from Lipsitz-Bem (1983) and Martin and Halverson (1981) indicate that children of the ages 2-3 years old are already starting to relate binary categorisations of male and female and attach meaning to information that they directly observe. Here, the main influences coming from those of their own sex, significant adults, and peers. This emphasis on acquired knowledge through social conditioning and modelling helps with the acquisition of gender roles prior to the development of any play-based knowledge. Tobin et al. (2010) is also a firm supporter of gender as a societal experience and one of the knowledge areas of the individual. Nursery and preschool settings are the first institutional examples of where socialisation happens, and therefore provide the models for children to learn gender through play. O'Brian et al (2000) observed that girls and boys learn and think in diverse ways based on the social contexts that are presented to them in their provisional setting; primarily this would be categorised by defined areas of play within provision; for example, the car area, kitchen role play area and/or baby area.

Rob and Ruxton (2018) suggests that gender identity is not a fixed term that a child is born with, but something shaped by their life experiences in varying diverse social contexts.

There is question that children are not able to immerse themselves in neutral experiences if they are subconsciously controlled by gender; and it becomes important to understand the experience and perspectives of all parties. Firstly, we must distinguish between sex and gender. Sex, by definition, is what separates male and female with the genes and chromosomes fixed at conception; determining biological sexuality. Gender is, however, more complex, describing the awareness and reaction to the idea of biological sex; it is directly influenced by psychological and social factors relating to how a child's expression, what they play with and whom they socialise with. This is the part that potentially defines them in terms of masculine or feminine (Bailey and Featherstone 2010) Sexuality is then further defined by Nayak (2018) 'As a vehicle for strong emotions and origins, the term 'sex' indicating both an act and category of a person'. These definitions base the foundation of exploring gender in the early years and the implications it holds for children every day.

During this time, play in the early years is an incredible way of defining how the child views the world. Hillard and Liben (2010) agree here when they suggest that a female heavy nursery staff cohort can thus influence the role of gender in a negative way, not establishing the particularly equal role of both males and females to young children. Opposing views are frequent within the literature, for example Shaffer (2009) suggesting the child is responsible for their own gender identity and that the assimilation of those around them is counterproductive when the child has the capability to establish their own ideas and rules on what they consider to be a 'gender' in their own mind. Consequently, the theme is easily debatable and is an invitation to research deeper.

Both free and structured play engages children with the skills to manage their thoughts, ideas, feelings, relationships, and physical selves, it helps them to know themselves and to relate to others around them, both in terms of social and emotional links with the wider world and in the development of themselves as a member of the community. Froebel believed that play is the principle means of learning in early childhood and in play, children construct their understanding of the world through direct experience with it. Like Froebel, Jean Piaget holds significant weight in the origin of play with his previously mentioned 'stages of development.' The age-related stages are in Piaget's thoughts; sequential to one another - suggesting that a child cannot pass over a stage or return to a previous stage when learning. In terms of this research, it would be prudent to focus on the 'preoperational phase' of children between 18 months and 7 years of age in this study as, like Froebel suggests, Piaget concurs that symbolic

meaning is developing, and therefore a child's memory starting to form his/her own judgement. At this stage, play primarily reflects pretend action that is based around representation, for example; what is seen in the real-life experiences of the environment around the child. Within provision of the early years sector, the environment can aid the representation of real-life experiences, and this is where the most valuable research can be found.

Whether boys and girls play differently is a widely contested idea according to Meland and kaltvedt (2019). Bryan, (2018) suggests that boys have a more gendered way of playing, due to their brains being analytical as opposed to girls, who are deemed to be more empathetic in their play. These play differences, or play behaviours, can be attributed to research suggesting that girls are usually considered more compliant and therefore do not express their play needs as a boy would. Bryan (2018) draws on previous research in this field, noting that 'teachers tended to praise boys for engaging in stereotypical boy activities (p.315), for example rough and tumble play, active play and superhero play themes. This work discussed by Jones and Glenn (1991) would identify as out of date in terms of modern research, giving way for more exploration needed on rationale for this study.

Aside of the way boys and girls play and act, the most contentious point to consider is the differences in the brain and physiology that determine their engaged play choices. Boys' and girls' educational developments differ hugely in terms of the brain structure, and the topics of biology vs socialisation emerge as nature versus nurture. Although longstanding, it is deemed to be too simplistic in modern literary stances, with the advancement in knowledge and science. Lewicki et al (2018) draw on Eagerly and woods (2013) when they use nature and nurture to understand the child's gendered choices and how they are intrinsically interwoven; Josephidou and Bolshaw (2020. p21) reiterate that the gender of a child is only one aspect that links directly to play choices.

A Feminist Post Structuralist Approach

Fernandez (2022) Martin (2012) and Blaise (2005) support gender as a social construct and this model is reflective of many Early years setting. The key ideas being the practitioners and choices within it. The Feminist post structuralist lens utilizes theories of power relations in society to create ideas on how gender is developed and identified and the view of gender as a 'constructed form' is based on social behaviour, language, theories of power and that of agency.

Through practical experience, this proving to be visible in provisions, both intentionally and accidentally, Needless to say; young children are susceptible to this. The main link that this approach will play in my research is the importance of observing children during their play, but also observing the interactions with peers and practitioners and uncovering if boys and girls do play differently, and more importantly what type of play choice determines that gender divide. As a researcher, I can relate to the Feminist post structuralist approach and concur that social constructs play a huge part of the early years provision. However, it is questionable to suggest that the divide lays between social construct and biology. When considering social construct and Feminist Post structuralism, it is useful to link a child centred curriculum into the ideas of gender and gendered play - it is how a child works, how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning. Josephidou and Bolshaw (2020)

Mosaic approach

Alongside other theories that draw play and gender together, the mosaic approach is the primary piece of literature that provides both analysis and method to the concepts. Clark and Moss (2011) compiled the project with the aim to find practical ways to contribute to the development of services and are directly responsive to the voice of the child, recognising the competencies, paying close attention to concept and practice. Drawing on inspirations from pedagogical documentation in the preschools of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy, The Reggio Emilia approach supports children to use their cognitive, gestural, or symbolic communication that allows reflection of their own ideas, behaviours, and culture (Edwards et al., 2012; Moss, 2016; Rinaldi, 2004a). Similarly, Nutbrown and Abbott (2009) and Brandao & Theodotou (2020) highlight the benefit of this approach as it allows children to be creative in the different modes of communication and expression, the approach values their interests and promotes child responsibility, empowerment, and autonomy.

The Mosaic approach was developed as a multi-method approach in which children's own photographs, tours and maps can be connected alongside talking and observing to gain a

deeper understanding of children's perspectives on their early childhood settings and experiences. With this, the concept of children's perspective is portrayed in their own learning. By doing these things, the Mosaic approach promotes a range of multimodal teaching and learning and has been introduced in academia as a research method of its own, one which places information together to enable young children to develop different skills and experiences. According to Clark (2005), this includes a variety of methods to listen to children's voice and supports the firm need for participation and listening in children's research.

Chapter 3 - Research Design and ethical considerations

Methods

Part of the structure of a research study involves choosing the methods that will be used to collect and analyse data. The decisions in which will depend on the paradigm and methodology that best fit the situation of the study. As quality lead, assistant manager, and preschool lead in a private nursery setting, it is suitable to undertake an SSI, owing to the perception that learning is a fundamentally collaborative process between the child, an informed adult, and their peers. SSI allows a hands-on exploration of the children's views and experiences and gives benefit to the setting moving forward in terms of evidence collected. For example; potentially helping the setting when deciding upon resources, quality management and changes in practice. In terms of practicality and use of time and resources; it would be notably more beneficial than synthesising a range of literature to try to offer a new perspective of gender and play as an EP.

Material on gender and play is already readily available and considered out of date; a fresh perspective would be more constructive under these circumstances. Typically, an EP does not require any new data and is potentially suited better to researchers without direct access to potential participants. As a result; Small-scale studies tend to be more relevant in exploratory

purposes and aim to develop ideas; especially within a provision. Material on gender and play is already readily available and considered out of date; a fresh perspective would be more constructive under these circumstances.

Provision

In terms of size and location, this particular provision is small; a 71 -place nursery consisting of four small rooms in a converted house with large outdoor grounds. The main area of research was confined to the pre-school room, with children aged 3 years 2 months up to 4 years 7 months, with a sample size of 21 children. This provision is based in a rural area of Berkshire and has a mix of ethnicities and religions running through it. Within the preschool room, 21 out of 29 children will be included in the research study and the ratio of boys to girls is 12:9. The ethnic background of the children range across White British, White European, White Arabic, Pakistani and Punjabi, with a range of languages spoken both as English as a first and English as a second. (Portuguese, Italian, Bulgarian, and Spanish) The aim of the investigation is to potentially improve conditions and understanding for children and staff in the provision when considering the views on what is deemed an appropriate toy for a specific gender, and the advantages and disadvantages of increasing the children's awareness of these views; thus allowing them a greater participation in learning and expression of gender through play. Because of the subcategorised gender-based toys and activities, the rationale for the research is to explore how the children respond to the notion and the influence that their gender, or understanding of gender, influences play. For example; Are the children aware of the gender subdivisions in toys and are they influenced by them. Saunders (2022)

Mosaic Approach

With Moss and Clark's (2005) revolutionary mosaic approach being the main source of literature for this study, the understanding that within this is the notion that the child is held as unique and considered an individual when viewing the world and acquiring knowledge within it. In turn, an epistemological standpoint here mirrors the mosaic approach; as each child will inevitably view the world differently and constantly evolve through their learning and the ways in which they interpret and develop it. Using Roberts-Holmes (2011) description of paradigms and the work done by Choen, Manion and Morrison (2000) It would be appropriate to frame the research within an interpretivist paradigm, using a qualitative data set and methodological

approach, emphasising in-depth analysis of small sample groups using methods including narrative observation, children's drawings, roleplay observations and photographs from walking tours.

Mukherji and Albon (2018) postulate that Interpretivism is a more 'people-centred' approach to research, which acknowledges the researcher's own integration within the research environment and linking directly to the natural free play and free choice aspect an ethos which the provision promotes.

Purposive sampling is appropriate in this study, the small nursery already provides examples of both neutral and gender specific play. It is also convenience sampling due to the nature of the researchers connection to the provision. As a researcher, the aim is to gain detailed knowledge regarding gender and play, rather than statistical inferences. Black (2010) writes in support of a researcher relying on judgement when deciding on participants in a sample, It is also more relevant as the population of children within provision allows only 21 out of 71 of them fitting the criteria and being within the ages of 3 and 5 years.

As it is now common practice to refer to people who serve as data sources for research as the participants, gaining consent from the parents is necessary prior to any data collection. Recognising the parents and children's active role and eliminating derogatory terms such as 'subjects' ensures that they are agents rather than passive recipients. Potter (2006)

In order to gather information on children, it is important to include both practitioners and parents where possible, without trying to remove the inclusive child led method. However; it was deemed more important to remain child centered and not include parental or practitioners voices. It is documented that Parents are the first step for children's development and it is fundamental to work in partnership with parents and/or careers (EYFS, 2019). Because of this, it is important to inform parents that their consent to the study was all that was required from them. Within research, it is important to include a cross section of ethnic backgrounds to establish the range in learning or developmental expectation, especially when children learn through watching others, and this includes the cross section of cultural backgrounds.

The mosaic approach, alongside a Feminist post structuralist lens as discussed by Baxter (2003) develops a shift in power relationships and theory of power relations in society and uses them to create ideas on how gender is developed and identified, leaving a view of how

gender is a 'constructed form'. In turn, these shifting power relationships further develop children's experience of gender in the preschool setting. These ideas are primarily drawn on social behaviour, language, power and that of agency and participation. Through practical experience, this is visible in provisions, both intentionally and accidentally.

Whilst various approaches support the idea that knowledge is justifiable and based on how an individual rationalizes it, it is pragmatic to suggest that one's own ideas regarding the child as their own meaning maker directly mirrors that of Moss and Clark's 2005 research. Alongside the Mosaic approach, it is important to consider Fernandez (2022) Martin (2012) and Blaise (2005) as a support for gender as a social construct and this model is reflective of many children centered curriculums. This links into the use of play theory to support research approaches. In childhood, play is considered vital to holistic development and the ability for a child to process the world, it offers an approach to pedagogy that is easily adapted by the practitioner in provision. Active learning through play links directly back to the three main literature choices selected for this study.

With direction from familiar adults, the EYFS (2021) guidance emphasises a child centred curriculum that validates each child as independent learners who deserve a curriculum tailored to their specific needs instead of a formal script that is devised by and upholds, strict models of learning. Moyles (2012) discusses the benefits of such an approach when considering decision making and problem solving, development of confidence, independence, and a contribution to self-respect. However, it is prudent to understand that the divide may subsequently lay between social construct and biology.

When considering social construct and Feminist Post structuralism, a child centered curriculum helps to organize the ideas of gender and gendered play, and Josephidou and Bolshaw (2020) question how a child interprets the concept of gender, how they learn and how they demonstrate their learning. To do this, the research proposal must factor in the importance of observing children during play, observing the range of interactions with peers and potentially those of practitioners, the skill will lay after, when using the insights of the child to uncover if boys and girls do play differently, and more importantly, what type of play choice determines a potential gender divide. Using the Feminist post structuralist approach to underpin research is more viable as social constructs play a huge part of the early years provision. Due to the nature of subcategorised gender-based toys and activities, the rationale for the research is to

explore how the children respond to the influence that their gender, or understanding of gender, determines the way that they play.

Tools for listening:

The first step in the research will be *gathering information*, the children will each be given an iPad with a camera and asked to take the photos of the things they really enjoy playing with, the friends they really enjoy spending time with and given the opportunity to photograph anything that they find both interesting and boring in the nursery. This would be a supervised activity but with the freedom of the children's choices to be expressed, it is not required for the adults to prompt or suggest. The children would express ideas and make comments that would be written down by the researcher to be used as both the comments and child observations, it is important that the children are given the opportunity to talk as they photograph so it remains informal and flexible in their favourite spaces and with the favourite people. Similarly, the observations of the children, taken by the researcher will consist of written descriptions of the children's play with their peers. There is only one main question that will be posed in the child observations, following along the same lines as the Mosaic approach "What do you like to play with / not play with at nursery?"

After this, the second step is the *collation and discussion* regarding the evidence that has been brought together. This would happen in three ways, firstly the audio recordings, video and observations will be collated, and examined to identify continual themes, discrepancies or interests and then cross examined against current theory relating to gender and play. Next, the children will be invited to discuss their drawings and photographs. With the researcher as lead, photographs will be presented and the children invited to help present them in their own words, based on ideas of things they like, dislike and how they enjoy activities. With this, the researcher will add comments alongside the photographs and provide pencils for the children to mark make their ideas alongside this. The children's voices are imperative here and this vital exchange of ideas will provide the basis for moving forward to embed their voices within the room. To finalise the collation section, the children's thoughts and the collective observation notes would be analysed together to identify similarities, difference, and any discrepancies. The children would be involved here also, with the researcher asking questions to confirm or deny interests. The children would be given the opportunity to further discuss things, and this would then potentially form an idea of how to further facilitate play and or gender within the setting. Adults and children can then productively work together to implement the ideas that

were apparent into the room, creating spaces for the children's individual interests and collective views.

To follow this research, it is important for the room to remain the way the children desire it, although looking dishevelled to the adult eyes, its awe and wonder will show through, expressing the children's embedded desires and voices. The extent of the children's representation in the study is incredibly hands on; the children should be taking ownership of this project with the subtle guidance of the adults supporting them.

Ethical considerations

Approaching and gaining permission from the gate keeper (see appendix 4 for gate keeper consent form and appendix 5 for ethical appraisal form) was straightforward in terms of approval to move forwards. The British Educational Research Association (2018) states that *"Provisions have an interest in research, and ought to be considered in the process of gaining consent. Researchers should ensure that they approach gatekeepers before directly approaching participants, and discussions should be had to adopt an institution's own ethical approval and safeguarding procedures."* The discussion was easy and involved many backs and forth conversations regarding the pros and cons of such a research project within the setting. Firstly; Being a well-established member of the team who is known to families and holds a managerial role within the provision came with its own layer of confidence and potential success.

Alongside this, already knowing the participants is useful as they have a prior knowledge of the researcher, they are more trusting and working fulltime in the setting already allows direct access to the children and their parents. Engaging with them in familiar surroundings would be significantly more beneficial than being an outside researcher. Further discussion highlighted that as an inside researcher, one prominent advantage is that one will not be leaving the setting after the research process, giving the children a more natural approach to closure, and primarily reducing the chance of them feeling rejected or betrayed. They will have minimal feelings of loss or abandonment. Having a working knowledge and interest in the children and their families at this setting, allows direct and practical aims for the research.

Knowing the children prior to research is useful as a researcher as the children are familiar and have trust in exploration. Being involved in the setting already allows direct access to the children and their parents; therefore, engaging with them in their familiar environment would be beneficial according to Alderson and Morrow (2011).

In research, the intrusion into the children's lives should be noted and it should be highlighted that as an insider this opens possible bias conflicts. The interpretations and findings may be subjective to the information that is already known on the participants; for example, the children's interests, hobbies, and preferences, therefore being cautious of this will aid the research process from jeopardising the participants. It should also be noted there is potential role conflict with other staff and being seen as an advocate rather than a researcher. It is imperative that initial researcher views may be present and that a potential change in viewpoint is expected. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002)

Additionally, as the research will form part of the children's usual time in provision, there is more of a relaxed approach to it, removing any anxiety. Alongside this, a benefit of being an insider is the practitioner connections, support, and potential implementation of the study findings; with a direct and approachable link to fellow management and staff and become what Mukherji & Albon (2018) refer to as *'in tune with the pertinent issues and context'* of the setting. The aim is to aid the development of quality and assurance throughout the curriculum and environment.

It is important to assess risk to the child during any provision-based study and remember to acknowledge that social research is considered 'expansive' in this current and rapid time of educational change. This thought process has shaped ideas to expand exploration of gender and play, and the assumptions these draw in private early year's provisions. In terms of change for the provision and the implementation of research findings, there may be an element of policy variation needed or a change in attitude towards certain issues, especially if it deems important to alter resources and practice. Discussions with the gatekeeper were challenged in terms of ethnicity and religion; owing to the ideals that some families hold regarding what toys and games the different genders should be experiencing. It would be ethical to suggest caution here, as to not offend or disturb cultural or traditional views.

A drawback to research in this instance is the intrusion into the children's lives during the research process and consequently respect should be adhered. For example; as educational establishments are neither private nor public places, the legal position on the law on privacy

and intrusion about photography and videoing in public and private places is vague in the United Kingdom, allowing for researchers, teachers, and managers to feel they have 'ownership' of their spaces in provision. Thus, allowing them to believe they have professional autonomy over the child's rights. Nind et al (2005)

The badged course 'Becoming an ethical researcher' offered by the Open University (2022) holds a key insight to what need is identified regarding permissions. For example; in this instance; approaching parents to gain permission for their child's participation. (See appendix 6 for this badged course information) Also, asking permission from the gatekeeper is prudent, and for the gatekeeper to help assess risk to the researcher and the children as potential participants. It is also important to consider the consent from parents as being 'informed;' as the children will have limited capacity, their parents will act as their consent in this study. All parents will receive a letter and consent form detailing the aims and research methods involved in the study prior to the data being collected, parents will be given the option to opt out of their child's participation. (Appendix 3)

BERA (2018) guidelines suggest that this type of participation and consent suits the free play aspect of this study and the fact that observations are 'naturalistic' supports Mukherji & Albon (2018) when suggesting research should take place during normal curriculum activity. Wicks et al. (2008) suggest that this type of study would be 'Action research'; also described as a 'living inquiry' owing to its real-life experiences and the underpinning of the child's involvement.

When data is recorded and/or photographs taken, the images and audio will be password protected on a provision laptop that is borrowed. The notes taken during observations and the and notes from discussion will be filed in a locked cupboard and taken out when adding or revising elements of the data. Documents will be photographed and stored on the protected laptop, with the originals shredded in confidential waste bins. To reinforce this, adhering to The British educational research association (BERA) is appropriate; stating that information about identifiable living individuals can be recorded both in written form and on a computers and in relation to the storage and use of personal data as further stipulated in the UK by the Data Protection Act (1998) and any subsequent similar acts, including, from May 2018, its replacement: the much stricter General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) this ensure files are backed up but still comply with policy. (Potter 2006)

Listening to the children: Participation and autonomy.

There have been many studies exploring how early years practitioners listen, engage, and encourage the voices of children under five in nursery provision. The ideas about talking, and listening are embedded in debates about the children's rights, particularly concerning autonomy and the rights to welfare participation. Many areas within research are expressive in ideas about how a child can share their ideas and experiences with an adult and the concepts of listening and participation are closely entwined. Whilst there is a large volume of literature based on the benefits of including children under five in the participation of their own lives, this study will look at the way the children individually process gender within their play.

The focus of this study aims to look at the ways in which children are given individual choices of play, regardless of their gender. It aims to consider and implement thought processes to develop the pedagogy forwards. It will explore how children's gender play preferences, their ideas and views are embodied in the provision and aims to explore the key policy and theory behind this. More young children than ever before are spending their time in some form of early childhood service and whilst there has been a move to take children's views into account more generally, very little attention has been given to listening to young children below the age of eleven, this study will primarily focus on the gap in research being those children under UK school age, formally referred to as 'Pre-school'.

UNCRC and the link to provision

The 1991 UK ratification of United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; 1989) increased the policy emphasis on children's voices in England, with the intent to establish stronger links between the child's thoughts, their experiences and that of the provision they were in. Ironically, since this, it has been a limited area of exploration regarding research papers and evidence. Shaw (2019); Cooper et al (2019) and Brooks & Murray (2018) argue collectively that UNCRC place significant emphasis on policy surrounding the child's voice, but do not give the substance to its implementation within settings; suggesting that the strong influence of education policy highlights contradiction in the links between policy and practice in England. CRAE (2014) and Wrigley (2014).

For example, the nursery' regulator Ofsted (2015) writes that 'Inspectors will use all the available evidence to evaluate what it is like to be a child', yet its ability to do so is constrained by its own judgement criteria relating to standards set by government, developed without direct consultation with children. Coleyshawe et al. (2012) also highlight discrepancies in the depth of a practitioner's ability to notice and respond to young children's voices regarding their educational experiences due to lack of training or being attuned to the needs of a child. Considering that participation is typically associated with listening and voice, Kellett (2009) notes the complexities and constraints that suggest a more evolved level of scrutinized understanding of need when the child is not considered to have the same level of power as an adult. 'Participation can mean so much more than listening, it is becoming actively involved in something...It implies agency and encapsulates the theoretical basis of the UNCRC' (Cooper et al, 2019) Whilst the underpinning of children's agency and participation is a fundamental right in Article 12 of the UNCRC, It suggests that opinions and voices are heard regardless of age or circumstance, including that of a child's evolving capacity when taken into account their general marginalised position within society.

However, it is important to note that the voices of some young people are harder to obtain. In these cases, The UNCRC; being more concerned with protection- does not emphasize the responsibilities which go along with rights. Webb (2018) concurs with Cooper et al (2019) when it is discussed that children who are noticeably young, and those that have complex needs or are seen as vulnerable are often not given the chance to be fully heard by adults, thus then counteracting the main aim of the convention. The professional, teacher or social welfare agency will often, apply a child's voice to ensure information or assessment is correct, regardless of acquiring all the information. Where the EYFS (2021) recognises young children as unique individuals and provides opportunities for their voices to emerge through learning led by exploration, play, critical thinking, creativity, and active learning, it is respectful of children's rights regarding not only education, but also freedom of expression and emotion, giving due weight to views of any kind. (OHCHR 1989). This, therefore, suggests that to have a voice one must first be protected, and then, with authority; be given agency to succeed. In a practical way in provision; Children are given the chance to learn that with the rights of citizenship come responsibilities, and; to learn these responsibilities, they need to engage in collaborative activities with other persons- including those who are older and more experienced than themselves. Which plays back to the flaw in the UNCRC; a child has little weight in participation without an adult to advocate for them. Much of the work outlined in the UNCRC can be deemed as tokenistic, as the level of

successful outcomes suggest that participation may have potentially occurred, rather than ensuring initiatives to mandate it.

Chapter 4 - Data Presentation and analysis.

The research consisted of the gate keeper consent, 20 sets of parents giving full consent for the children to be involved in narrative observations, audio/visual observations and to be involved in the drawing of photographs and walking tours. One parent denied consent for their child to be involved in audio recordings of his voice but could be involved in the other methods of research, including observations with no sound. (see appendix three for consent form to parents) Furthermore, no other adults were observed in the play of the children, so no permission was required to include adults in the study. The research project generated many findings in various forms. Owing to the method being based on Clark and Moss's (2011) Mosaic approach, it included observations, photos, videos, walking tours and children's drawings; with the aim to piece together a mosaic of evidence regarding the way in which this cohort of children use and see gender influences in their play environment and how, if at all, it influences their play choices in their early year setting.

To organise data and enable codes and themes, it seemed prudent to use Braun & Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis as a process of identifying patterns within the data. Thematic analysis provides researchers with useful tools for conducting many kinds of analysis, with specific advantage in education, learning and teaching. Braun & Clarke (2006; 2013) consider the process to be a method rather than a methodology. This means that, unlike many qualitative methodologies, it is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective, it a flexible method with a considerable advantage given the diversity of work in learning and teaching. The process of coding qualitative data is an important part of analytical process when analysing research. It was apparent that the generated data required some form of coding to ensure the required interpretation, organisation, and structure to the written, video clips and walking tour observations. Alongside this, photographic evidence to support the written observations and interpretation of children's drawings needed to be structured into themes and

coded according to the type of play, size of the group and the activity. These then needed to be cross referenced against current and meaningful theories. Maguire & Delahunt (2017) suggest that coding in qualitative research allows the researcher to be reflexive, critical, and rigorous with findings; and as this was Ethnographic research, it needed to be coded systematically to allow for the expression of the participants thoughts and views. Owing to the age of the participants in their preschool setting environment, with the benefit of already understanding their way of life, it was cogent to code according to play theme; for example, physical play, role play, construction play and fantasy play. It was important to including how they see and interact with the world around them.

The SSI produced 11 written narrative observations, 3 walking tours, 17 video observations and three children's drawings. From analysis, it was not necessary to present all data and findings, owing to the ethics of identification in photos and videos and owing to the number of items that were unrecognisable in terms of children taking their own photos. The need to reduce data was apparent and therefore, observations, both narrative and video based were coded into the following themes, showing the number of times this theme was identified: (Please see appendix 1 for narrative observations

)

Theme	Colour
Boy only grouping	(8)
Girls only grouping	(2)
Mixed gender group play	(6)
Physical outdoor garden play	(4)
Stationary sitting play	(4)
Superhero play	(3)
Fantasy play	(7)
Occupation play	(4)
Construction play	(9)
Creative Arts	(4)
Roleplay	(14)
Technology play (ICT)	(1)
Mathematics/Numeracy play	(3)
Literacy play	
Emotion: Happiness	(2)
Emotion: Conflict	(8)
Rough and tumble play	(7)

Figure1. Coding colour key for Written and audio/visual observations.

These coding themes (See appendix one for example) were developed based on the children within the room, the areas of the preschool room and the EYFS (2021). The coding helps to

see patterns, similarities and then makes it easier to transfer into larger themes to provide the analysis and discussion. The coded themes were then grouped into play genres, based on the frequency of each play experience, noting the number and the sex of the child engaged in this activity.

Play experience	Number of	Number of	Mixed gender
	Girls	Boys	play
Technology play	0	2	0
Superhero play	1	6	0
Fantasy play	1	8	1
Occupation based play	1	8	1
Physical play	2	6	0
Creative arts	2	3	0
Math based play	2	4	0
Rough and tumble play	2	8	1
Literacy based play	2	5	0
Construction play	5	15	2
Roleplay	11	5	7

Figure 2. Frequency of play experiences based on gender groupings

The narrative and audio-video observations were successful during the study, as per the usual method of recording information on children's activities within the provision. Due to the familiarity of the narrative form, the children involved in the study had little objection to participation. The nature of the Interpretivist standpoint, according to Mukherji and Albon (2018) postulates the 'people-centred' approach, acknowledging the researcher's own integration and links directly to the free play and choice aspect of the children's environment. The benefit here, allows the researcher to follow movements of children and be fully submersed in their activities.

Playing the role: Boys Vs. Girls

The primary results concluded that the children spent majority of their time either engaged in some form of role play activity, construction activity or physical/rough and tumble play. With groupings varying towards boys taking part in most of the construction play and the rough and tumble play, as well as involved in large gross motor skill activity, for example outside play, physical play, and technical motor play; whereas the girls engaged in family and lifestyle-based role play, literacy, and creative activities. The activity that produced the most engagement in

mixed gender play was roleplay. Regardless of the embedded idea of family or culture-based role play within the preschool provision; it emerged that boys played a larger part in the aspects of the role play than first thought; despite it being deemed as a girl play experience by Kristensen (2006). The main finding suggesting that the boys were often *assigned* their character roles by their female counterparts, suggesting that they play a less dominant role when in a mixed grouping than they would be in a male only group. This is in a vast comparison to figure 7; where two boys play harmoniously together with no conflict, each adhering to the joint game rules and undertaking collaborative play.

The underlying idea that girls have the controlling power with role play activities can be linked back to the peer culture perspective of Corsaro (2003) when it is suggested that children are ‘dynamic and active subjects negotiating their own unique culture within an adult world’ The observations alone gave conformation that the theory relating to stereotypical gendered play is still relevant, as discussed in the literature review. Drawing on one particularly insightful observation the following conversation happened between two children, boy x and girl y.

Girl X "Today the teacher is on holiday, so she said we need to do the work. Our teacher is bossy, she's a bossy girl - but I am not bossy so that's good. Our teacher is a girl like me and her name is dingdang"

Girl X "This is your homework, time to do the work now. Boys need to learn their phonics. Lay out your phonics cards"

Boy Y collects up his bag and sighs, he stands up. "I'm going home!"

Girl X "No! you can't its not time"

Boy Y walks away and Girl X follows him "You cannot! The teacher will be cross. I'm the teacher now, you sit down over there and write your letters out!"

Boy Y sighs again and makes his way back to his place in the book corner. He sits and unpacks his bag and lays out his two phonics cards.

Figure 3. Transcript of a mixed group role play, gender roles defined by sex.

Figure four (below) shows the same group of children playing the school-based role play game together, the children are using current interests, namely being their school transition area, to fuel their play. The written observation indicates here that the children are replicating the phonics and sounds portion of their learning, and the register being taken at the start of the nursery day. The one boy present in this observation appears to be participating in the game by

choice but is a secondary character in relation to his female peers. He remains in the game despite being shouted at and given firm instructions to sit away from the group; however, he is a prime example of Hedges (2015) theory explaining that a gender role is defined by social construct and how girl X is using her pre-existing knowledge, power and experience of both being a female or experiencing a teacher to construct her gender role within the play. This girl is also displaying signs of expressing her 'power' and is embedding a tougher than usual feminine attitude by initiating emotion, themes, plots, and stories to the play.



Figure 4. Mixed group playing schools

Similarly, another group gathering that occurred shows four children (3 girls, 1 boy) playing outside in the garden, (screen shots of an audio/visual observation) they are roleplaying a camping holiday in the mud kitchen area of this natural space, they have built a campfire and have a very detailed plot with outlined characters and themes (Figures 5 & 6 below) - mostly devised by one child, a girl, who appears to be 'in charge' of this particular game. The one boy that is included in the game has been given the role of 'collecting the firewood' whilst the three girls busy themselves cooking, take care of the baby and chatting. Whilst it is suggested that these are stereotypical boy and girl roles within the play, the aspect of the boy being more a submissive player is one that was very prominent in this setting throughout all the research methods. For example, the main 'in charge' girl appears to get terribly upset with the boy after he says that he is not getting any more firewood. She stands with her hands on her hips in a dominating nature (figure 6.) much like the play in figure 4; Supporting the ideas of Cosaro

(2003) and the child's expression of their own cultures and the order of culture in self-organised play. This supports research regarding female dominance in role play experiences. However, the concept of the play having little equipment and being based on primarily natural resources means the characters and themes are overridden by the idea that both genders enjoy playing with 'loose parts' such as the bark chippings, stones, twigs, and leaves- rather than stereotypical boy/girl orientated toys. It is prudent to agree with Wood & Kilvington (2016) when they suggest that loose parts and non-gendered items can enhance children's development and promote non gender segregated play. Both genders were interested in these and that did not differentiate through the plot of the game if anything it mutually bound the game.



Figure 5. Outside roleplay



Figure 6. 'Dominant' play

In terms of social play research Sutton-Smith (1979) found that girls tended to prefer the domestic routine in their play, which is evident in the two observations analysed, however; the social dominance literature goes against the findings in this study. This older literature suggests that boys and girls differ in how they attempt to influence play. According to Serbin et al. (1982), girls are more likely to make indirect demands on others in play, using terms such as '*could you* give me the toy' whilst boys make more direct demands such as '*just* give me that toy'. This is interesting research, however outdated, as it suggests that males had a higher dominance over females in the play agenda back then. This, however, has not been identified within this research study. Alongside this, the research by Segan and Pickert in 1980 highlighted that when in triads of play activity, boys made more bids toward one another than girls did during play demand and dispute. Due to the age of this research, it is apparent that

things have changed within contemporary society and the current themes of femininity within provision and culture has promoted the strong, independent girls of society. Therefore, linking back to the literature review, we continue to ponder on Meland and kaltvedt's (2019) ideas of gendered play and especially when Bryan (2018) suggests that girls are deemed to be more empathetic in their play. The figure below (7) is a photograph taken of play that occurred alongside the camping game, with only two boys. It demonstrates a stark comparison in the play scheme and indicated that in this instance, boys 'alone play' reflects more harmoniously, with agreement and without conflict.

The one primary aspect that evolves from these observations is the use of language as a source of gender power and peer control. The girls in both observations used their ability to communicate to talk down to their male counterparts and dominate the gender dynamic. In contrast, the two males in the picnic photograph used very minimal language to deduce their interaction.



Figure 7. Harmonious boy only roleplay.

Childrens drawings:

For the children that were willing to partake in an activity like this, the question asking them to draw things they liked or didn't like to play with at nursery seemed to be slightly daunting, alongside this, it goes against the ethos of the setting in which it is preferred that adults do not suggest activities or themes to the children but to fully support them in their individual ideas regarding activities. With many children choosing not to participate, only one of the three that did willingly agree provided an in-depth drawing that would have been useful for the research

process. Like prior research in this field, it remained the child's provocative to provide information on their favourite activities and the child that participated explained that her favourite things to do were 'drawing' and 'making princess stories' This led to the drawing in figure 8.

This child (Girl Z) embellished on her fantasy story of a princess who had her ball taken away but was not able to find anything apart from her crown to wear, and because of these two things, she was sad. Although potentially a mix of personal experience and fairy story, the girl shows that the empathy, literacy, and creative research that supported the previous research into girls and their gendered play. Josephidou and Bolshaw (2020) suggest that girls are more driven towards fantasy play, with complex evolving characters and storylines, focusing on feelings, emotions, and the relationships of play rather than the objects of play like their counterparts. The method of using drawing as a tool for research was supported by this child's ability to use drawing as an outlet for communication of ideas in a more symbolic way, giving the adults a chance to listen and really hear underlying issues regarding the children in their own worlds. Girl Z went on to explain that the series of drawings were her family and friends, including her new brother, who in her words 'Was the new prince, he had her princess crown and wouldn't give it back'

The drawing aspect of the mosaic approach was limited in this setting and does not hold a vast amount of weight against the question of how a child's gender influences their play choices in an early year setting. However, it does allow for a further research topic into the way both boys and girls use their drawings to navigate their feelings, emotions, and position within society, with a link to their gender identity. A child's drawing arises out of their exploration of the world and can carry a wide range of potential meaning with it; some of which may be missed as contemporary play by the modern term 'mark making' instead of 'free drawing.' Howard et al (2011)

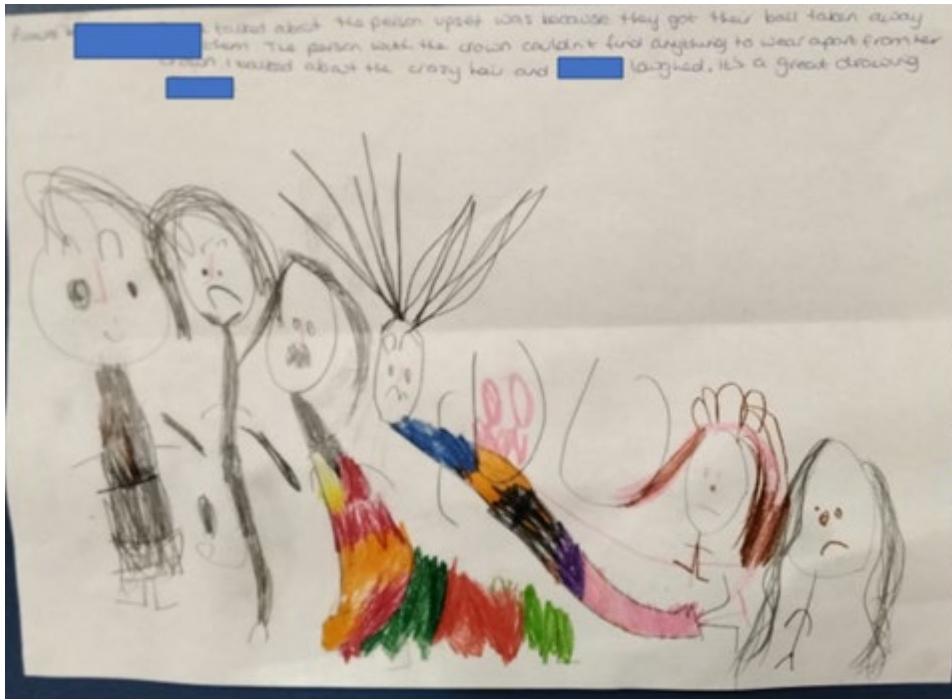


Figure 8. Princess drawing

Walking tours – What do you want to photograph?

Unfortunately, the walking tours were not a success within the study, the children did not want to participate and were not really interested in breaking their play to aid the research. After many attempts at asking, only three walking tours were done, with each child having five minutes to capture the photos of the things they both liked and disliked in the nursery provision. The researcher not having any influence on the decision-making process or passing comment or suggestion on the choice of photo to be taken. Each child then sat with the researcher and was given the opportunity to discuss their reasoning for taking the photograph. This information was then placed into one of two columns indicating a 'like' or 'dislike' of it within the nursery. Two girls and 1 boy were willing participants, and it was explained that the teachers and I, as the researcher wanted to discover the things that were good and bad about nursery to try and make it better. The children were incredibly responsive with their explanations and many themes evolved. (appendix two)

The results, despite being a small sample size; were different to that of the narrative and audio/visual observations. It was noted that girls enjoyed more construction play, with small motor skill requirement, literacy, and art/creative activities. With a preference for explaining

why they did not like activities. For example, ‘the glue being too messy, my hands get sticky, cars go fast but I only like bicycles and the small magnets do not build good houses’ it was noted that the girls found more complaints than the boy participant, the girls also gave a greater detail in their reasoning for these complaints. The male participant was able to take more photographs in the time limit and explored the room in greater depth than the girls, ranging his list of things he liked from stereotypical themes including dinosaurs, cars, bikes, magnets, Lego, outdoor play cars, the garden, fire engines, bricks and football to a range of art activities, colouring, cooking roleplay and baby/family role play. Both sexes took advantage of the selfie mode on the iPad and used their friends in the photo taking process,

Girls identified their friends, families, and favourite adults' multiple times during the walking tours, with details of why they liked and disliked them, including rational based on experiences “He did this because...” and “She said this....’ this insight marries up with the ideas mentioned previously and strengthens the theory behind girls being more emotional driven than their male peers. Due to the nature of ethical research, many of the photographs taken by these children cannot be published as they contain images of children whose parents did not give consent, or of family and adults within the setting who were not approached for consent. Also, as the children are so young, many photographs were taken without justification – for example photographs of the tables, walls, ceilings, and toy boxes. The children were not able to rationalise why they had taken the photographs; this leads to the conclusion that they were done out of excitement or error.

To achieve complete clarity in the research process it is important to set the data out using the questions that were identified within the introduction to this study.

What areas of play in the early years provision provide cross gender play and interaction?

Within the research, it was explicitly evident that the provision provided incredible choice in cross gender interaction. The layout of the room for example; open plan, with no substantial barriers to educational area, with the flow of interests weaving amongst the equipment and the way in which the children moved about in the space gave no clue to specific gender areas.

The children moved freely amongst the indoor and outdoor space with no indication of areas that classified themselves as strictly boy or girl activities. Alongside this, the children’s groupings did not point towards a specific gender-based play either; With six observations done

on mixed gender play, it was evident that the children were happy to integrate during their free play activities. The majority of the cross-gender interaction resided within role play, occupation play and fantasy play, with most derived from experienced based activities; with examples being ‘mummies and daddies’ ‘superheroes’ and ‘schools. Cross gender plays also occurred in the garden spaces, with children congregating in the nature areas, enjoying mud kitchen play, wildlife plays and in physical activities like football, large pedal bikes, and scooters. The provision had readily available school uniform, dressing up in various forms (princess, spiderman, doctor, paw patrol) and a large basket of material offcuts to represent a non-binary costume set up if desired. Some of the males engaged in fancy dress play using princess dresses, but girls engaged in spiderman dress up also. The continuity of cross gender play was equal within the room and opinions were never voiced from children or practitioners regarding a child’s choice of outfit, in any activity.

How is play presented in an early year setting?

In this setting, gender was not presented in any form. The room was natural in terms of wooden toys, low lighting, soft furnishings, and equipment. There was no distinct plastic pink or blue toys, nothing that would suggest a definite segregation of play areas. The play that was engaged in followed the direct line of interest of the children and the impression given from this research is that many of the children had little interest in areas or toys that were specifically gendered. For example, girls played with construction, with cars and experienced moments of loud, physical behaviour. Similarly, the boys engaged with literacy, art and in role play groupings, fantasy play and with their counterparts in small world play too. The amount of ‘rough and tumble play’ was leaning towards male participation, but did not exclude females, with 8 incidents of it in males versus 2 in the females.

The one interesting thing about this study was one child’s presentation of their sense of self. Child XX is male, 4.9 months old and has been attending the setting for the last 2 years. In himself, he is a quiet boy, with little interaction with the ‘rough and tumble’ boys. He prefers the literacy, small world play and drawing aspects of the room. One observation involving him was distinct in the manner that he played with a large set of plastic my little ponies.

Initially playing as an individual, he took care to brush the horses' manes, smooth down their tails and line them up in order, giving each one a soft voice, with imitation to a story that he was narrating himself. He spends a moment or two admiring the animals and then

approaches me to ask for hair bands to plait the horses' tails. As the child peruses the box of elastics, he takes his time choosing the colours of the bands and eagerly watches and waits whilst the tail is plaited. He is excited and smiles, as he is joined by any children, he has the following conversation with the researcher:

Boy XX: "Can you please plait the unicorns tail?"

DMS "Of course! Do you like it when your unicorns have pretty hair?"

Boy XX: "Yes! Do you know where is the pink one?"

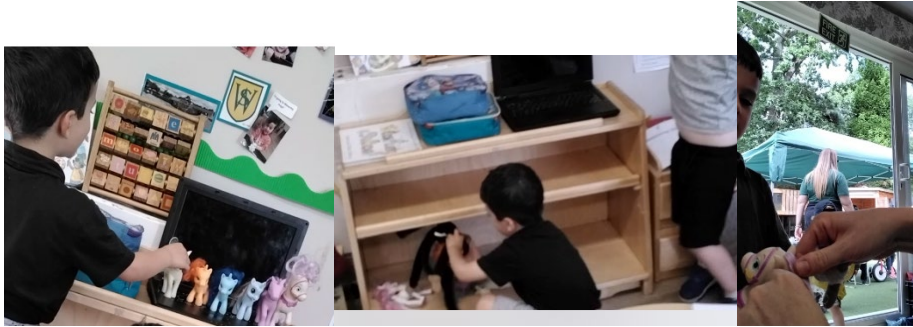
DMS: "I don't know, maybe someone else is playing with it..?"

Boy XX "We need a hair tie, this one does need a yellow hair tie! Don't tie a hair tie at the top hair, only on the tail hair!"

Figure 9. Unicorn plaits and hair ties.

He returns to his play, thrilled with his unicorns. After this, two other males approach him, and he quickly stands up and backs away from the unicorns. He looks at the boys and quickly collects a soft toy monkey from the floor, he uses the monkey to knock over the unicorns, he laughs loudly and starts to hit them with the monkey. The boys join in, and they start to have a loud physical play session of lining up and knocking the unicorns off the table and side unit. It was noted that a large dynamic change in play happened as the two males approached the boy playing and the interaction went from a soft and intimate one to a loud and boisterous one without any communication between the children. This observation gives some support to the aspect of peer culture on a child's choice of play. It initiates the ideas that gender directly affects the everyday lives of children and young people, this child cannot be seen to play with the unicorns in a calm manner, he is driven to perform the boisterous activity that other boys might. Jones and Mayhill (2004) help this study expand and prove that gender ideologies are present in early years classrooms and that children are becoming the replicas of stereotypical ideas. The generalisation that boys are 'loud and troublesome' and girls 'calm and compliant' reaffirms that sexism has not changed as modern-day culture has, and subsequently, challenges faced by children are real when adults provide minimal chance to explore differentials. It would be beneficial to mention here that this child stood out in terms of the play norms recorded in this setting, he displayed the most visible and comfortable cross gender play that was recorded. It is unclear as to his reasoning behind the change in demeanor when his male peers approached, it could be discussed that he had internal anxiety at being exposed as playing with unicorns, whether he has a particular toy preference for this type of activity or if his family / at home

experiences have predetermined him into this action. It would be incredibly interesting to pursue his play habits on a larger and more in-depth scale.



Figures 10. unicorns and rough and tumble

Chapter 5 – Conclusions and implications

The study attempted to show how the children in preschool provision explore their own perceptions of gender within their play, it attempted to establish how, if at all, the play would be either dominated by gender stereotyping's or if the gender barrier within the nursery even existed at all.

Even though the evidence from previous theory and literature revealed a gap within the research, it would be appropriate to suggest that the study did not draw any large conclusions or highlight any new or different information than previously thought. The smaller themes that developed supported previous literature but did confirm how society has changed in terms of the roles boys and girls play within the early years, and the roles they undertake between themselves during free play. The children playing together was a surprise, with them using one another's actions and continuous assessment of one another's behaviours and the ability to adapt social status to organise the play. The learning is seen as a collaborative process here, which was a pleasant surprise, with the subordinate children using the more dominant characters as their scaffold to expand the experience of gender and play.

As expected, the parents that were approached in this study were incredibly forthcoming with their permissions for their children's involvement, and this was expected due to the familiarity of the researcher within the setting. The children in the study were engaged and excited to give consent to their role within the research and as far as the researcher was aware, the children fully understood the reasoning for observations of their play. No child actively refused the researcher when completing observations, both audios, visual and narrative, but did refuse involvement in walking tours and drawing activities. Many children played in mixed sex groupings and whilst playing together they displayed a dynamic process of constructing hierarchical order. These were primarily based on emotion, language, femininity, and the use of objects to accommodate the social order of play.

When referring to the initial question asked in this study, it would be sensible to conclude that a child's gender bares little influence on play choices in this early year setting. Whether it be the provisions prior ethos, or the fact that the staff do not directly influence gender in play; the children were free when exploring the range of activities across the board; For example; girls often engaged in construction activities, preferring magnets, math or physical play and boys in literacy, writing, drawing or stationary art activities.

The use of the mosaic approach as a methodology in this study was incredibly beneficial, despite the shortcomings in child participation when it came to the drawing and

walking tours, the fundamental underpinning of the mosaic approach was visible in the belief that the young children were experts in their own lives and for them to understand that world, their actions were valid and strengthened their sense of identity and control. However, it is always advisable to approach criticism in research and to potentially obtain a better or larger range of results in further investigations, it would be prudent to broaden the sample size of children, or potentially engage in research in a range of different provisions that cover a larger demographic, cultural or religious background. It is important to add that the predominant white, British background with a wealthy family occupancy may have swayed the children's ideas on gender and in which way they should have or have had experiences in.

Due to the nature of children being unique, individual learners; their opinions are therefore changeable, and their significant lack of concentration proved that it is incredibly easy for them to become distracted from activities or interests - during the investigation there were times that the children chose to opt out or wander away from activities and observations, and although it disrupted methods of data collection, most of the data collected was insightful and useful, it gave way to create a positive and inclusive experience for the children and confirmed that in a modern society, gender is not consequential in the early stages of a child's preschool life. The children in this preschool do not require strict gender play to embrace the learning and knowledge for them to create meaningful interactions with their peers and staff.

The implications of this study would suggest that as an insider, it deemed to be more difficult to actively implement the research than first thought. For example; the study looked to highlight potential actions to help the provision respond effectively to change, however, this study did not highlight any need for further work within the provision based on play or gender. It was evident that the children learnt best when they followed their own agenda, interests and ideas and did not need to worry about specific boy or girl toys or activities. The main thought process being that these do not exist within the child's thought process or within the provision. For all intense and purpose, the toys, activities, and areas of the nursery appeal to both boys and girls and have a large significance of cross over in terms of how the children play.

Chapter 6 – Narrative Critical reflection

During the research process, it was incredibly difficult to be both a member of staff and a Researcher. Within the setting I had responsibilities to uphold as both a member of staff and as a researcher. As a member of the core staff in this provision, many circumstances arose when it was required that in a managerial capacity, my time was needed elsewhere. In this case, research aspects were inevitably cast aside to maintain the correct supervision of the children and ensure the daily running of the setting. When this did happen, it was hard to request

additional staff to uphold legal ratio supervision and it then fell on the gatekeepers to advise and deny my research. Two incidents accounted for unexpected emergencies, one being a fire alarm mid observation and the other an adult illness. In these cases, my priority was then as a member of the staff rather than a researcher. Upon reflection, if there was opportunity to redo this research, it would be more beneficial to use a setting that I have no prior connection too and disengage with the role of being an employee and well as a researcher. However, this would then open a separate set of ethical considerations for discussion and no longer being an insider in the study. Moving forward, the Mosaic approach worked well, but the lack of participation in walking tours and children's drawings did not allow for a full range of data to be analysed. This issue may well have been due to the cohort of children and their lack of wanting to pursue my agenda over their own.

In journal entries throughout the E822 module, I documented the prospect of an SSI as both daunting and exciting. The module had all the aspects of policy that I enjoy, the depth of theoretical and political debate that engages me as a learner and it offered the advantage of these things applying to everyday practice and context within the profession of working with children and young people. Thinking about conceptual, professional, and personal concepts of the module was exciting but my concern was engaging in reflective work, consequently, I feel like I have not progressed in this area. My aim was to try and achieve a deeper level of reflective practice and ensure a critical review of both my own practice and knowledge and that of others in the field.

Feedback from my tutor in TMA 1 & 2 was positive, (See appendix 8) with these being the highest marked grades I have achieved within study of modules E808, E809 and in E822. I struggled with was the narrowing of sub questions and the focus that these needed to be to help answer the question appropriately, alongside this, the ramifications of benefits of adult interviews in the study. Initially I wanted to get practitioner thoughts to support my study on gender, but with some trepidation, I decided to only use the children's voices as per the mosaic approach as a method; giving me more of an opportunity to focus on the child as a central participant. As a student in this journey, I do feel regret at not utilising my tutor to the fullest during the research process. Having been offered 1:1 discussion and opportunity to discuss sample literature I only really used the opportunity in a small way. I think that this must have been due to anxiety and embarrassment of failure or of being a hinderance. I did, however, take full advantage of tutorials and group discussions on the forums and in small group workshops.

Another challenge faced was the introduction and creation of a Gantt chart. Having never experienced or heard of this method of time planning; I was not able to engage with it as a timekeeper or as a plan of action (See appendix 7). A Gantt chart is useful because it allows simplification of complex projects into easy-to-follow plans and tracks the status of tasks as work progresses, however I did not find it accessible as a tool. Like this, adhering to the confidentiality and privacy laws when handling data regarding participants and breaching this was incredibly stressful. In this case, the badged course ‘Becoming an ethical researcher’ offered by the Open University (2022) helped provide information to what I as a researcher would need to identify in the persons or people from whom permissions would be sought before undertaking the study, for example; in this instance; approaching parents to gain permission for their child’s participation and for the safety of documentation and photographs.

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