Perceptions of ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) practitioners on how their gender influences their approaches to play

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Abstract

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has the potential to impact greatly on outcomes for young children and improve their life chances. Children (0–5 years) in England benefit from a play-based curriculum although there is little uniformity in the ECEC settings they attend. One consistent element is that the adults who engage with them in these settings are predominately female. Some suggest this situation is detrimental to children's learning and development, particularly in the case of boys or for children where no male father figure is present in their home life. This thesis makes an original contribution by considering the perceived gendered roles that ECEC practitioners adopt when working within a play-based curriculum. It examines whether practitioners believe that their gender influences how they engage with children in play. Through qualitative surveys and open-ended interviews, practitioners shared their own definitions of play and approaches to play. Connell's framework of masculinities and Synodi's play labels were used as a lens for analysis. Findings reveal that practitioners use contradictory gender-blind and gender-binary scripts. They articulate both a perception that men can bring a 'missing pedagogy' and, also, an underlying tension between the child-centred curriculum and the practitioners' sense of agency. This thesis argues that gender sensitivity training is vital for both ECEC students and practitioners to ensure that a high-quality workforce is developed that can be gender flexible in its practices and pedagogy.

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List of abbreviations

ECEC   Early Childhood Education and Care

ECS   Early Childhood Studies

ELGs   Early Learning Goals

EPPE   Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project

EYFS   Early Years Foundation Stage

EYTS   Early Years Teacher Status

GST   Gender Sensitivity Training

MKO   More knowledgeable other

RTP   Rough and tumble play

SST   Sustained Shared Thinking

ZPD   Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1 Introduction

What is human is precisely the process of constructing oneself by choices that transcend given circumstances (Connell, 1987, p. 211).

Connell (2016) sets out a continuum for thinking and talking about gender. At one end are global issues such as femicide and militarisation, at the other, every day issues of 'intimate relationships, [and] personal identities' (p. 4). This thesis places itself on the continuum by exploring the gendered constructions of those who work with young children, recognising that what happens at one end of the 'gender thinking continuum' can impact on what happens at the other. It examines how flexible these practitioners are able to be in their professional behaviours. Thus, it makes an original contribution to an understanding of the perceived gendered roles that the ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) workforce adopt when working within a play-based curriculum. Practitioners discuss how they believe that their gender influences how they engage with children in play and this thesis asserts that they use contradictory discourses in so doing. Therefore, the argument of this thesis is a call for discrete 'gender sensitivity training' (Warin, 2015) to ensure that practitioners can critically reflect on gender issues in the world of ECEC. This will enable them to develop their practice into one that is both gender flexible (Warin and Adriany, 2017) and also highly effective for young children.

The ECEC sector is one that has seen little movement in terms of men choosing it as a profession (Mistry and Sood, 2015). The practices of this profession are informed by the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) (Department

for Education (DfE), 2017) that sets out seven areas of learning and development for children 0 to 5 years. As practitioners support children's progress in these areas, they are required to provide extensive opportunities for play. This thesis considers whether it is perceived that male practitioners have a specific contribution to make within this play-based curriculum. This first chapter will offer a context for the study, lay out the aims of the research, make explicit its purpose and signpost its contribution.

Research into gender will always be problematic and controversial in nature (Ashley, 2003; Rohrmann and Brody, 2015). The minute one begins to talk in terms of male and female one enters an ontological cul-de-sac. First, it is necessary to define what being male and female means. Next, the context in terms of geography and period of history has to be taken into account. In addition to this, the impact of class, ethnic background, education and religion on gender definitions must be considered. There are many ways of doing and performing gender (Butler, 1990) so taking an essentialist approach would be both anachronistic and uninformative. However, because this thesis explores perceived pedagogical practices of men working in ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) it is difficult to do so without referencing at times a binary approach. Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) offer one solution to this dilemma by suggesting that, instead of casting a simplistic spotlight on gender behaviours, a consideration of the 'usage of gender scripts allows for a focus on the subject positions that may be made available' (p. 6). In this thesis, I will examine the 'gender scripts' that my participants utilise to discuss their own practice and that of others.

The context for my study is the low percentage of men who choose to work in the ECEC workforce. In England, the number of men working in ECEC has stagnated at 2% (Simon et al., 2015). There are many reasons given to explain this reluctance on the part of men to become involved in working with young children. These reasons include the perception that it is women's work (Lupton, 2000), the lack of financial reward and an unfortunate view that there is something untrustworthy about men wanting to work with young children (Robinson, 2002). There is not an intention to explore these reasons in this piece of research but rather to see what the impact of this situation is.

Boys, especially those who may be lacking a male role model at home, are said to be affected the most (Wood and Brownhill, 2018) by this lack of male practitioners. Thornton and Bricheno (2006), Carrington and McPhee (2008) and Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) all suggest arguments and discussions exist around the links in the UK context between boys' underachievement, their disaffection with school-based learning and the fact that they have little opportunity to be taught by a male. However, they also propose that there is not always the evidence to support these assertions. Others claim that there is not only a negative impact for children but also for the workforce because of the current gender imbalance (Tickell, 2011).

The negative impact on the workforce arises from the fact that ECEC is a profession seen as 'women's work' (Lupton, 2000) and therefore of low status. This means it is attached to an unappealing salary and brings with it limited career opportunities. In consequence, the sector does not entice the high quality

and skilled staff that are considered vital to enable children to make good progress both at this age (0-5) and in terms of life opportunities (Nutbrown, 2012). Rolfe (2006) describes it as a workforce which over relies 'on young white women' (p. 103) asserting that such a 'gender ghetto' (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003, p. 3) 'is becoming increasingly unsustainable' (p. 103).

Rationale

The rationale for my study is a concern surrounding the alleged feminisation of the education system in both England and worldwide (Mistry and Sood, 2015). The idea of young children, and specifically boys, needing male role models has already been well explored (Brownhill, 2014; Warin, 2014). The research that underpins this thesis is intended to look at the perceived specific pedagogical behaviours of male and female ECEC practitioners. These professionals work with children from 0-5 years in a variety of ECEC settings. This section of educational provision has the lowest proportion of male practitioners and therefore is open to the greatest accusations of feminisation. The term 'feminisation' is used in this context to describe a way of teaching which has an 'assumed bias against boys' (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015, p. 64); it is therefore considered 'deficient and defective' (Skelton, 2012, p. 1). 'Feminisation' is perceived to be particularly emphasised in ECEC because of the care element that has been traditionally seen as the remit of females (Cameron et al, 1999).

The rationale for considering play behaviours in this context is because the very first curriculum these young children engage with in England is the Statutory

Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) (DfE, 2017). This is a play-based curriculum for 0 to 5-year olds which is underpinned by a child-centred focus (Adriany, 2015; Georgeson et al., 2015). As a framework, it offers some suggestions on the role of the adult although these are very much open to interpretation (Rose and Rogers, 2012; Robert-Holmes, 2014). One of the purposes of this thesis was to look at gendered interpretations of the practitioner role.

Aims and purpose

Goouch (2008) uses the term 'accompany' to describe how practitioners perceive and carry out their role when working with young children who follow a play-based curriculum. Some consider the lack of men to 'accompany' children's play as a great disadvantage (Rentzou, 2011) and this thesis explores this idea further. It questions whether children are missing out on a distinct approach to play that male practitioners might bring.

The question the research poses is: *What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?*

The thesis highlights the benefits of a more gender-balanced workforce (Warin, 2017). It also contributes to discussions about appropriate curriculum content for students studying to work in ECEC. Furthermore, findings contribute to training on play pedagogy (Nutbrown, 2012) and training which focuses on 'challeng[ing] gender and other inequalities', as outlined by the Early Childhood Studies benchmark statements (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2014, p. 5).

Thus, the findings of this thesis contribute to an upskilling of the ECEC workforce through suggesting ways practitioners could be supported through Gender Sensitivity Training in shifting from 'gender blindness to gender consciousness' (Warin and Adriany, 2017, p. 384). If practitioners are supported in recognising how gender can be socially constructed and performed (Butler, 1990), they can also be supported in challenging specific constructions and practices (Martino et al., 2004).

The gap in knowledge that presently exists in this research area is what perceptions exist about what male practitioners specifically bring to play in the context of teaching and caring for young children. There is relevant literature on 'fathering' and the specific behaviours that fathers bring when they engage with their children (Lewis and Lamb, 2003) though little on this juxtaposition of play and male practitioners. There is, however, research on how practitioners' perceptions of play can influence children's play behaviours (Chapman, 2015). The paucity of male ECEC practitioners has meant that research opportunities in this area have been limited. My research addresses this gap by considering any specific behaviours that male ECEC practitioners are perceived to bring to play. Research boundaries were established to ensure the process was manageable so, in setting out the scope of this study, I am not enquiring about the impact of any different play behaviours on outcomes for young children, the root of any different gendered play behaviours or what kind of men choose to work in ECEC although these are all important questions which can be addressed by building on this study.

The difficulty when writing about play, as with gender, is that it is a tricky, slippery concept to define (Moyles and Adams, 2000). In this introductory part

of the thesis, I will offer a description from the Rumbold Report (DES, 1990). This report looked into what quality educational provision for 3 and 4-year olds should look like and influenced the statutory framework presently in use (DfE, 2017). The report describes play as:

> an essential and rich part of the learning process…. a powerful motivator, encouraging children to be creative and to develop their ideas, understanding and language. Through play, children explore, apply and test out what they know and can do (DES, 1990, p. 7).

Overview of research

The methodology section (Chapter 3) will elaborate how practitioner definitions of play were captured firstly through qualitative surveys and then secondly by asking practitioners to talk about play using photographs as a stimulus. The participants took these photographs as part of the normal practice in their workplace to document children's playing and learning. This methodological strategy was intended to encourage an 'unrehearsed' element to the discussion because practitioners were talking about what they had already done rather than what they ideally would like to do. Connell's framework of masculinities (2005) and Synodi's play labels (2010) were used as a lens for analysis to consider the 'gender scripts' (Burns and Pratt-Adams, 2015) utilised.

Researcher identity

The impact of my own researcher identity on the research process will be explored fully in Chapter 3 (Methodology) but it is important here in the introduction to make the reader aware of my own perspective and its possible influence. I write as a female lecturer in Early Childhood Studies and Early Years Teacher Status who has a professional background of approximately twenty years teaching young children.

Contribution

My research joins the discussion on perceptions about men's specific contribution to the world of ECEC. On one level, it adds to knowledge about the gendered interactions of ECEC practitioners and so informs a 'gender-equal' pedagogy to impact positively on children's outcomes. Yet it is also important because, as it joins Connell's 'thinking about gender' continuum (2016), it can impact on the debate about gender inequalities at a more macro level. The information the thesis provides is useful in narrowing the gap between what we already know about men working in ECEC and their perceived approaches to play but it sheds further light on wider gender interactions and constructions (Connell, 1987). It argues that one way forward for this workforce is the introduction of gender sensitivity training which would open up these important debates about gender and thus support practitioners' ability to critically reflect on them and become more gender conscious (Warin and Adriany, 2017).

The thesis also contributes to discussions around the benefits of a more gender balanced ECEC workforce (Warin, 2017). However, it recognises the importance of not taking an essentialist approach when using the term 'male practitioner' and 'female practitioner'; there may be many different ways of presenting oneself in this role just as there are many ways of being male or female. Furthermore, increasing the number of men in ECEC can have a negative impact if practitioners continue to reinforce gender-binary discourses by their practices (Lyons, 2005; Warin, 2017). Therefore, the thesis contributes to an understanding of 'gender flexible' (Warin and Adriany, 2017) pedagogy and how this can be disseminated through Gender Sensitivity Training.

Terminology

Some specialist vocabulary has been used and I will define it here, both to support the reader's engagement and to avoid making assumptions that the reader and I have a shared understanding about key terminology. I have chosen to use the term **ECEC** (Early Childhood Education and Care) because this is the vocabulary used by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to describe the first few years of a child's life and the educational opportunities they have access to (OECD, 2012). This organisation continues to carry out extensive comparative research in this area so that the term 'ECEC' has become used and recognised internationally. As I intend to draw on international literature to situate my own research, the justification of which will be offered in Chapter 2 (Literature Review), it is appropriate that I too adopt this terminology. At the same time the research that informs this thesis is set in the English context and therefore concerns English settings where

practitioners work with children age 0-5 years following the EYFS (DfE, 2017). ECEC has evolved in a less than straightforward trajectory in England so that those who work within it have a range of titles and a range of qualifications (Nutbrown, 2012). I have chosen to use the word '**practitioner'** to define all those who work with children in an ECEC setting regardless of their level of qualification or specific job title.

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Chapter 2 Literature Review

The two key concepts explored in this chapter are those of **Gender** and **Play** considered within the context of ECEC. An aim of this research was to discover whether there was a perception that male ECEC practitioners draw on specific dispositions and skills when they work with young children within a play-based curriculum. Answers to the research question '*What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play*?' can contribute to two parallel discussions. One of these is the discussion around the benefits of a more gender balanced workforce (Warin, 2017) and the other a contribution to the debate about how to develop the best 'gender flexible' practice (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017) through Gender Sensitivity Training. The research is positioned within the English context, although in this review of the literature I have also drawn on research literature with an international perspective. I have taken this decision because, as noted in Chapter 1 (Introduction), the paucity of men in ECEC is a global issue. The international nature of the problem has led to many collaborative pieces of work (Emilsen and Koch, 2010; Brody, 2014; Warin and Gannerud, 2014; Brownhill et al., 2015; Rohrmann and Brody, 2015; Warin and Adriany, 2017) where researchers have looked to see what their own cultural context may learn from others. It is also important to mention that those either planning a career in ECEC or combining part time study whilst already employed in this workforce, predominantly study the subject discipline of Early Childhood Studies (ECS). This discipline is a fusion of 'history, psychology, education, health, welfare, sociology, social policy, cultural studies, the law, and political and economic

perspectives' (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), 2014, p. 6) and as such some of these influences will be seen in this review of the literature.

The two overlapping strands of gender and play within the context of ECEC will be considered in this literature review to demonstrate the relevance of the research question and the landscape within which it sits. By exploring whether ECEC practitioners perceive that their gender influences how they accompany play, an interesting juxtaposition emerges between the pedagogy of play and potential gender hierarchies. Thus, the literature review explores whether men and women perceive that they bring something different when accompanying children's play because of the way their gender has been constructed (Connell, 1987); this gender construction will affect how they perform their gender (Butler, 1990). Brownhill and Oates (2016) describe how men and women in this particular workforce can have gender specific roles 'imposed' upon them and may feel unable to 'disrupt them' (Warin and Adriany, 2017). Conversely male practitioners may feel less imposed upon because of their access to the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 2005, p. 79). Connell uses this phrase to describe the benefits men have accrued over time by maintaining their position as the dominant gender. Being the dominant gender could conceivably offer a greater sense of freedom and agency that would support male ECEC practitioners to develop their own distinct approaches to playful pedagogy. Uncovering these approaches would contribute to the requirement raised by Nicolopoulou (2010) 'to focus on designing and evaluating effective play-based practices in early education' (p. 3). She was writing in the American context

when she entitled her research 'The alarming disappearance of play from Early Childhood Education' (2010), but this same alarm is echoed in the English context as evidenced by the 'Too much too soon' campaign. This is a movement established by early childhood education experts to address issues surrounding 'an earlier and earlier start to formal instruction and an erosion of learning through play' (Whitebread and Jarvis, 2013, p. 1). Other writers have also endorsed the idea that childhood is evolving into a pressurised preparation time for adulthood (Palmer, 2007; House, 2011) rather than a unique phase of a person's life in its own right.

The EYFS (DfE, 2017) can be seen as viewing childhood as a rehearsal for later life when it highlights the importance of getting children ready for the next stage of their education. In this perspective play can be viewed in two distinct ways; it becomes either an optional extra or a teaching tool rather than the 'free, spontaneous, active, challenging outdoor play' that Frost (2010) argues is now under threat (p. 230) and which aligns more to an 'idealization of childhood' perspective (Woodhead et al., 1998, p. 3). Where the practitioner chooses to stand on this continuum will inform how they perceive their role in accompanying play (Goouch, 2008). They may believe it is their duty to provide an educational environment and then stand back and let play happen; conversely, they may believe they have a pedagogical duty to lead the children in play. Bennett et al. (1997) describe these two contrasting approaches as 'watching and waiting' or 'shaping and moulding' (p. 3) and Fisher (2016), recognising that the dilemma of which approach to take still existed 20 years later, describes how practitioners trying to find the most effective balance

between these two pedagogies can struggle between 'enhancing' and 'hijacking' children's play experiences (p. 3).

To support an effective discussion of these issues I have divided this chapter into three distinct sections. **Section 1: The world of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)** will set the scene in terms of the context for the research by describing the status of the ECEC workforce. Particular emphasis will be given to the role of men within the workforce and the 'moral panic' (Brownhill, 2014) regarding the paucity of men choosing it as a profession. The assertion that this leads to a perceived negative impact on the development and learning of young children (Rentzou, 2011; Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015; Brownhill and Oates, 2016) will also be examined. **Section 2: Male practitioners enacting masculinities in ECEC** will explore theoretical perspectives of constructs of 'maleness' and how these might be enacted in male responses to children in the ECEC workforce. **Section 3: Playful pedagogies** will concentrate on the importance of the role of the adult, within the existing debates on the importance of play. It will also consider the specific contribution male practitioners are said to bring to outdoor (Sargent, 2005; Cushman, 2008), physical (Tannock, 2008; Bosacki et al., 2015) and risky play (Sandseter, 2009).

Section 1: The world of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The status of the ECEC workforce in England

The history of ECEC has been a confusion and mishmash of ideologies, philosophies and social functions (Kwon, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Brownhill and Oates, 2016). Partly this has arisen because of the two competing perspectives of education and care that underpin it (Lewis, 2003; Warin, 2014b). Although these two perspectives are compatible in part, a tension can exist between them for practitioners who work with young children. Are practitioners supposed to be 'looking after' children or are they supposed to be 'educating' them? The one certain thing in this context is that the adult providing this education and/or care is female and often from a lower status demographic (Vincent and Warren, 2000; Osgood, 2009; Nutbrown, 2012). The statutory framework (DfE, 2017) which informs practice brings uniformity and a shared language yet both service users and workforce will operate within a diverse range of paradigms to interpret the official policy of this framework within the context of their own understanding and values (Rose and Rogers, 2012; Robert-Holmes, 2014).

This diversity is also reflected in the qualifications and professional skills brought by the workforce to the profession (Nutbrown, 2012). There are many reasons that people want to work with young children (Cooke and Lawton, 2008); some wish to have a positive impact on outcomes for young children's lives whereas others need employment that aligns with their own childcare needs. Another group have been directed to the world of ECEC because they have demonstrated no talent or skills in any other area (Osgood, 2009). In her

interim review of the workforce (2012), Nutbrown coined the term 'hair or care' to describe how 'less academic' girls were encouraged to take one of two routes when given career advice at school. One of the options was caring for children or the elderly, the other was hairdressing. Predominantly lower qualified staff (Moss, 2014), therefore, populate the sector. They may not see the benefit in studying further because, in all likelihood, their financial situation will remain the same (Osgood, 2009). There has been a drive to upskill the workforce by increasing the number of graduates within it (Cameron and Miller, 2016), for example by the introduction of the new qualification of Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) in 2014. This qualification was introduced to enable a career progression route for those wanting to continue working with children rather than taking on a managerial role in the ECEC setting. However, this qualification does not come with any financial reward attached. In this way, the sector's status as a poorly regarded 'women's work' profession continues to be reinforced (Bhana and Moosa, 2016).

The Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017)

ECEC in England has been impacted by the same performativity agenda that has influenced all other stages of the education system in England (Robert-Holmes, 2014; Adams et al., 2015). One of the ways this is manifested is in the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017), a policy designed to ensure uniformity of provision. This policy gives a brief overview of what children aged 0–5 years should be taught and, when it was first introduced in 2007, led to some accusations of the imposition of a 'nappy curriculum'

(Bradbury, 2011). It now includes seven areas of learning and development against which children are assessed when they leave this stage of their education aged 5 years.

The role of men within ECEC

A small section of those working within ECEC, and therefore using the Statutory Framework, are men. If Nutbrown's (2012) 'hair or care' assertion is correct, they will not have been advised to enter this profession because of their gender. However, some official or media discourses may have tried to encourage them to consider working with young children to address the moral panic surrounding young boys being raised without father figures (Ashley, 2003; Brownhill and Oates, 2016).

In England, the number of men working in ECEC remains entrenched at 2% (Simon et al., 2015). A similar pattern continues in the subsequent educational stage of primary school. Thornton and Bricheno (2006) state in this context that there is a three-pronged problem: i) how to get men to apply to become teachers, ii) how to get them to stay on the ITT (Initial Teacher Training) programme and iii) how to get them to stay in primary school teaching if they do succeed with the first two. The reasons given for this lack of men in primary education is mirrored in the reasons for the lack of men in ECEC (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006; Rentzou, 2011; Brody, 2014). These reasons include the perception that it is women's work, the lack of financial reward and an

unfortunate view that there is something untrustworthy about men wanting to work with young children (Robinson, 2002).

The workforce is consistently depicted as being both poorly paid and poorly regarded, and where its female workers often 'end up' because of a lack of anything more worthwhile to do (Nutbrown, 2012). However, once encultured into the sector, these female practitioners will often demonstrate a passion and commitment to their vocation which is at times taken advantage of (Colley, 2006). Male practitioners, on the other hand, will need to make a conscious, and perhaps 'brave' decision (Brownhill, 2015a), to enter a workplace seen as out of bounds to them. Once entered in the workforce there may be many obstacles to them remaining there (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006).

Section 2: Male practitioners enacting masculinities in ECEC

Before considering the perceived practices and behaviours of these male practitioners in the ECEC setting, it is necessary to offer some definition of the term 'masculinity' in terms of how this label might influence how a practitioner acts. At the same time, I reiterate the problematic nature of 'dividing the world into two categories' (Emilsen and Koch, 2010) to undertake gender research. Connell (2005) provides a useful theoretical perspective in her framework of masculinities that could be supportive in terms of how male practitioners position themselves and how they are positioned by others. It is a fluid, non-essentialist framework and dependent on the particular context that males may find themselves in.

Being male

Connell's framework of masculinities (2005) offers a useful lens to support an understanding of how male ECEC practitioners may practise gender in a predominantly female field. It can demonstrate how men position themselves in relation to each other and to women. Connell identifies four different positions that may be adopted by, or bestowed upon, men. She labels them as *hegemonic, subordinate, complicit* and *marginalised* depending on the context men find themselves in (p. 76). The four labels will be defined briefly below with a demonstration of how they could be relevant in the context of ECEC.

Hegemonic refers to how a particular culture defines the definitive man. Connell stresses this is a dynamic label impacted by time and context and that there may be very few men within a certain culture who achieve this 'accolade'. In the context of ECEC these could be men who take leadership positions by utilising 'the glass escalator', a term Williams coined to describe the 'structural advantages…which tend to enhance their careers' (1992, p. 253). Equally, it could be men who display dispositions and skills that are felt to be superior by other practitioners – such as leadership skills, the role of the disciplinarian, a projection of authority or a charismatic personality. However, Brody (2014) highlighted, through his case study work with male practitioners from a variety of cultural backgrounds, that it was often not the choice of men to adopt this hegemonic position themselves but rather they were compelled to do this by others (colleagues, parents, children) 'in order to avoid being identified with other subordinate masculinities' (p. 12).

Subordinate men are those who may be 'excluded from the circle of legitimacy' (Connell, 2005, p. 79) because they demonstrate character traits and dispositions normally associated with females. This could be something as simple as being emotional or prone to tears. It is a type of man who, Connell argues, invites labels such as 'cissy' or 'big girl' (2005); in ECEC these could be men who would rather engage in play which is seen to be stereotypically female, such as playing with dolls in the home corner, than the sports/outdoors activity that is often associated with the male. At the same time, within the context of ECEC, this could be seen as behaviour to be applauded as it depicts a willingness to be gender-flexible (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany; 2017) in one's practice and 'disrupt' gender norms (Butler, 1990).

Complicit men are those who may not 'meet the normative standards' (Connell 2005, p. 79) of hegemonic masculinity but nevertheless still benefit from it. As stated above, few men in a particular cultural context may achieve the hegemonic label, however many may still be rewarded by the 'patriarchal dividend'. In Connell's terminology, they are those standing on the side-lines at the sporting event cheering on the hegemonic players. They may also be men more inclined to use a gender-blind discourse (Hogan, 2012) which is reluctant to reflect critically on gender differences and their impact. In the world of ECEC, these may be men who engage in 'privileged irresponsibility' by becoming the fun figure (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005) of the setting. At the same time, they leave accountability (Robert-Holmes, 2014) and the less

exciting aspects of the job to female practitioners (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2015).

Marginalised men refer to those who are marginalised because of class, race or sexuality. As with the hegemonic status, this is fluid and context bound. In ECEC, this could mean men are presumed to be gay or 'other' (Sumsion, 2000) because they have chosen to work with young children. This choice becomes problematic for them when wider society equates homosexuality with paedophilia (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006; Brody, 2014; Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015; Wernersson, 2015) and so the male practitioner is positioned as one who has to be watched at all times. Apart from the emotional cost to the practitioner, if he feels hypervisible and under scrutiny at all times then this could influence how he feels about engaging with the children in play (Brody, 2014) and may limit the opportunities he feels he has to disrupt his own and others' gender performances (Butler, 1990; Warin and Adriany, 2017).

Connell also comments specifically on the gender structuring of ECEC because of the gender inequality in this workforce (2002). This will continue to be reinforced rather than challenged if the small number of male ECEC practitioners continue to 'practise gender' (2002) in specific ways by adopting a narrow range of roles or ways of positioning themselves (Warin and Adriany, 2017). Connell's framework, however, is not without its critics. Some suggest that the dominant forms of masculinities in certain cultural contexts do not necessarily reinforce gender inequalities so that it is necessary to look beyond Connell's lens and take a more 'intersectionalist' approach to understand

gender interactions (Christensen and Jensen, 2014). Furthermore, it is suggested that there can be a 'mutual shaping' when two characteristics such as gender and class combine – the positioning that is produced is a new element that is rather a transformation than a combination of the two preceding elements (Walby et al., 2012). Martino and Kehler (2006) highlight the inadequacy of focusing specifically on the gender of teachers when they address the moral panic surrounding the 'call for more male teachers' for young children and boys in particular (p. 113). On the contrary, they suggest a need to look more broadly beyond gender and consider the impact of other factors, such as class, age or culture, which combine to impact on how the practitioner's identity, and therefore behaviours, are shaped. Ashley (2003), too, had previously spoken of the 'gender angst' which had come to dominate a debate which would benefit from focusing on the more gender-flexible (Warin, 2017) qualities of an effective teacher.

Connell describes how her 'model of multiple masculinities' dominated the discourses on masculinity and gender when it was published in the seminal work 'Gender and Power' in 1987; subsequently it has invited 'serious criticism' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 829). She revisited the framework in her book *Masculinities* (1995; 2005) and also in a journal article with Messerschmidt entitled 'Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept' (2005). Here they addressed its critics asserting that the framework still had relevance and was a useful tool when considering both gender differences in the workplace and the transmission of gender. My thesis chooses also to adopt this optimistic view of the framework in terms of its usefulness as a lens. If men have certain practices

in the ECEC workplace, and these behaviours are beneficial both to the workplace and to outcomes for children, then the framework may help inform effective 'gender-flexible' practice (Warin, 2017). At the same time, if there are behaviours that contribute to gender inequality both in the workplace, and on a wider scale, then it would be beneficial for practitioners to be given opportunities to critically reflect on these and consider their practice.

Connell (2005) also warns against adopting too essentialist a view when using the terminology of the four labels aligning with Ashley's argument (2003) that by taking an unhelpful binary approach to what men and women do we are subscribing to the outmoded idea of gender being largely biologically fixed. This is not the premise of my thesis; the position taken is that there are many different ways of being male and female and that there are 'masculine femininities' and 'feminine masculinities' (Paechter, 2006). However, in the context of the paucity of men choosing to work in ECEC, Connell's framework can contribute to an understanding of how men who enter the workforce may be positioned, or position themselves, and what they specifically bring.

When I originally considered using Connell at the proposal stage of my research it was because much of the literature on men in ECEC seem to refer to her hegemonic label although there was often little reference to the other three. I tentatively used the framework as I began the analysis, I was prepared to put it to one side if my analysis became too forced or if there was little alignment between it and my data. However, as I proceeded it did indeed provide me with a useful lens to consider practices and behaviours. I appreciated the way it

allowed me to discuss behaviours in a respectful non-accusatory manner. One prominent critic of Connell is Anderson; he acknowledges the contribution Connell has made to gender studies yet suggests that the framework is 'unable to capture the complexity' (2012, p. 7). Elsewhere he even asserts that it is 'feeble' and 'very amateurish' in its attempts to describe the links between models of masculinities and patriarchy (Anderson, 2015). Yet Anderson still draws on some of Connell's terminology to describe gender positioning (2012).

Enactment of maleness in ECEC context

The male practitioner is described in the research literature in several different ways; he can be positioned as a super hero figure (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2015), a 'mischievous big brother' who brings humour (Brownhill, 2014), an important role model (Mills et al., 2004; Sumsion, 2005; The Sutton Trust, 2009) or a risk taker (Madge and Barker, 2007; Sandseter, 2014). Sumsion (2000) describes how he has to negotiate his 'otherness' as he reflects on the roles he is assigned by children, parents and colleagues as he constructs his identity in the predominantly female world of ECEC. For example, she discusses how he uses contradictory discourses in his self-positioning; in his interactions with parents he will emphasise the similarities between himself and his female colleagues whereas with his employers and colleagues he will emphasise the differences. This could suggest a tension in his practitioner identity as he tries to be 'all things to all people' or it could suggest that he is able to practice his gender in flexible ways (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017).

If male practitioners are able to eschew the more mundane, everyday tasks and bring a sense of excitement to the setting (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2015) they can be positioned as the 'super heroes' of the ECEC world, 'prized commodities' (Jones, 2007, p.180) who bring fun, excitement and challenge to children. At times, their presence can cause children to behave in unprecedented, more positive ways (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2015). This 'superhero' behaviour also translates to the more physical aspect of their role. It is already well documented that males will be specifically called upon by their female counterparts to engage with the lifting of heavy resources, sports related activity and activities that take place outdoors (Sargent, 2005; Cushman, 2008). This image does have the potential to reinforce the perceived inadequacies of the female practitioner who is left to engage with the more humdrum, less exciting practice (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2015; Warin, 2015) and is blamed for discouraging boys in their learning (Brownhill and Oates, 2016).

This 'superhero' label shares characteristics with the 'fun big brother' (Warin, 2015) aspect of the male practitioners' identity. In the 'fun big brother' discourse he is still exciting but also brings an additional mischievous quality, a 'naughtiness' that some children can identify with and which could exclude the 'well-behaved' but 'uninspiring' female practitioner. This discourse is such a powerful and appealing image that it has been used in promotional material to try to attract more males into the workforce in, for example, in Sweden (Warin, 2014a). Perhaps it is this sense of mischief that allows the male practitioner to take more risks and to allow children to engage more often in risky play

(Sandseter, 2014). Once again, however, this can be referencing a stereotype (Cushman, 2008; Ashley, 2003) and it is simply that male risk-taking behaviour is noticed more because it is expected and because the male is hypervisible. Certainly, the male ECEC practitioner is identified as a risk-taker by the very fact that he has chosen a workplace that does not align with the expectations most societies hold about being a man (Sumsion, 2000).

By modelling risk, he can be described as an effective role model for young children. It has been identified how important risk and challenge is for children's development (Madge and Barker, 2007; Palmer, 2007) and how children today are being deprived of these kind of opportunities – in particular those children from families who cannot afford to buy them 'risk' in the guise of adventure holidays, horse riding or action sports. The idea of males being a role model to children in educational settings is a contested proposition but one that reoccurs frequently and is well documented in the research literature (Mills et al., 2004; Cushman, 2008; Brownhill, 2014; Wernersson, 2015). The argument that is most often discussed is that of the growing number of children living in one-parent families in the United Kingdom. The Office for National Statistics (2016) cites figures of 2.9 million lone parents with dependent children in the UK, the majority of which (86%) are headed by women (p. 5). This suggests that many children have no access to a 'father figure' in their daily lives and that encouraging more men into the sector would address this deficit. The confusion around this debate arises from the fact that there is no clear definition of what a role model is, what dispositions and attitudes the role model is supposed to be demonstrating and how these are gender specific (Cushman, 2008; Brownhill, 2014). Men are also uncomfortable with being cast in this role and

can see it as a 'burden' (Brownhill and Oates, 2016). Furthermore, this discourse risks presenting the 'lone mother' as inadequate; yet Golombok et al. (2016) assert that 'solo motherhood, in itself, does not result in psychological problems for children' (p. 409).

Such confusion must affect the male practitioner's identity. If the female practitioner struggles with her identity (Robins and Silcock, 2001; Brownhill and Oates, 2016) how much more might the male practitioner, who is an alien 'other' (Sumsion, 2000) in a foreign land. Sumsion discusses how the male practitioner is 'othered' by those he works with and the parents of the children he teaches. At the same time, he can 'other' himself by acting in stereotypical masculine ways in an attempt to convince those around him that he is 'just a basic normal guy' and that there is nothing suspect about him wanting to work with children in a gender atypical role (Skelton, 2001).

Regardless of this 'othering', there is substantial research based on the primary school teacher that indicates little difference in stereotypical behaviours between genders and more differences within gender so that it is unrealistic to expect all males to engage with pedagogy in the same way (Francis and Skelton, 2001; Ashley, 2003). What is of interest to this research, however, is 'the influence [of] early childhood educators… through the discourses that they make available to children and those that they silence' (Ferfolja and Robinson, 2004, p. 19). Furthermore, practitioners may feel compelled to adopt certain practices through their performance of gender (Butler, 1990). Or, on the other hand, they may not be prepared to acknowledge gendered behaviours and

adopt instead a 'gender blind' (Hogan, 2012) script which refuses to 'explore gender critically' (2012, p. 1).

All practitioners may have a tendency towards 'gender-blindness' (Hogan, 2012) and therefore to reinforce gender stereotypes. Aina and Cameron (2011) suggest they do this by commenting on the appearance characteristics of girls and stereotypical masculine characteristics of boys. As most of the research, out of necessity, has been on female practitioners, there is little on the specific behaviours of male practitioners (Bosacki et al., 2015) up to this point. Their very presence may be challenging gender stereotypes, though conversely their play behaviours may reinforce these stereotypes even more if they 'act in "gender-stereotyped ways" (including in their responses to children)' (Sumsion, 2005, p. 112). They could subconsciously be giving 'cues' to the children about play by, for example, inclining towards particular 'play artefacts' or 'play areas' which will therefore impact on the leaning taking place. For example, Anderson discusses how sport can reproduce 'orthodox masculinities' (Anderson, 2012, p. 76) and Emilsen and Koch found in their research in Norwegian and Austrian ECEC settings (2010) that male practitioners appeared to be much more at ease in the outdoor classroom, possibly 'retreating' here to emphasise 'the male component' of their job. This kind of behaviour has been seen in other female dominated professions such as nursing where Evans (1997) asserted that male nurses chose to specialise in those areas of nursing which aligned more with their male identity. She cites Egeland and Brown's use of the term 'islands of masculinity' (1988) to describe how male nurses both position themselves and

'shape their work role to be more masculine by emphasizing their task-oriented,

as opposed to people-oriented behaviours' (pp. 228–229).

Section 3: Playful pedagogies

The previous two sections have given an overview of some of the issues and areas of interest concerning men working in ECEC. This section will both build on the previous two and also shift the focus slightly to consider the idea of working within a 'playful pedagogy'. It will discuss what this might mean for the practitioner and their gendered identity as they position themselves as 'companions of play' (Goouch, 2008). Synodi (2010) gives an overview of the labels provided by the literature to describe the many roles a practitioner may choose to adopt in playful pedagogy. These are:

- Organiser

- Stage manager

- Observer

- Listener

- Assessor

- Planner

- Mediator

- Co-player

- Scribe**.**

 Practitioners may relate to these suggested labels in gendered ways. For example, stereotypical male (or even hegemonic) attributes could be seen as **organiser**, **stage manager**, **assessor** or **planner**, whereas female could be seen as **observer**, **listener**, **mediator**, **co-player** or **scribe**. If practitioners feel limited in their choice of roles because of their gender, then this situation can

contribute to a continual reinforcement of gender inequality in the workforce. Practitioners need to have the expertise, perhaps through 'gender sensitivity training' (Warin, 2015) to be able to 'practice gender' (Connell, 2002) in flexible ways (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017) to counteract this. In this way assumed gendered behaviours would not be fixed and therefore dominate their practice; instead they could consider the construct of gender to be fluid and 'free floating' (Butler, 1990, p. 9) so that they could make unconstrained choices about their practice (Warin, 2017).

Why play?

Before proceeding further, it is important to establish why play is an important concept to consider and to offer some background context and a consideration of its role in ECEC. Play is at the same time a simple, low value term but also a slippery, ambiguous term difficult to define (Rogers and Lapping, 2012). There is little ambiguity however concerning its importance in terms of young children's learning and development (Vygotsky, 1967; Nicolopoulou, 1993; Nicolopoulou, 2010; OECD, 2011; Dickey et al., 2016). Play boasts of a long-established research base containing some of the key thinkers in terms of children's learning and development across different cultures (Dewey, 1913; Piaget, 1962; Bruner et al., 1976; Vygotsky, 1978). Although there are many theories of play – some of which will be incorporated in the discussion below – the research tends to highlight the specific learning needs of young children (as opposed to adults and older children) and how play can be supportive of these learning needs (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Theories of play have had a clear influence on educational policy and therefore the early years curriculum in England (Kwon, 2002). For example, since 2000, children in England between the ages of 0–5 have been entitled to a variety of play-based curricula such as the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000) and the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfES, 2007). The most recent of these, the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) references the importance of play in para 1.8 where it states:

> Each area of learning and development must be implemented through **planned, purposeful play** and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity**. Play is essential for children's development,** building their confidence as they learn to explore, to think about problems, and relate to others. **Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults.** There is an ongoing judgement to be made by practitioners about the balance between activities led by children, and activities led or guided by adults. **Practitioners must respond to each child's emerging needs and interests**, guiding their development through warm, positive interaction' (DfE, 2017).

The curricula situation in England is seen to be replicated globally with many countries adopting this kind of play pedagogy for their youngest children (OECD, 2011). The main difference between England and other contexts appears to be twofold. Firstly, in England the play ends much sooner, when the children are five (or even sometimes four), whereas elsewhere it can be six to seven years before a child leaves this play-based approach to enter more

formal schooling and learning. Secondly, the English curriculum is much more prescriptive than elsewhere in terms of what children should be learning through play – for example, to read and write simple sentences – which can create a real tension for the practitioner (OECD, 2011; Robert-Holmes, 2014).

A further complication and tension arises from the fact that there is no clear definition of play in the EYFS so that it is left to the interpretation of each individual practitioner. At one end of this interpretative continuum is the adult providing the resources and telling the child where and what they should play. Others would balk at this and suggest that a true play pedagogy is when the child selects the resources and the focus of play themselves (Goouch, 2008). However, even in the latter scenario, children can only select from a specific array of resources that at some point have been selected by adults, who once again have the opportunity to 'silence' discourses through their choices (Ferfolja and Robinson, 2004). Combined with this difficulty in defining play is the documented problem practitioners have in articulating what play means to them and why they consider it important (Moyles and Adams, 2001).

Play is also a term that can encourage tensions to emerge in ECEC when it is interpreted in ways which do not align with the growing performativity agenda (Goouch, 2008; Shimpi and Nicholson, 2014; Robert-Holmes, 2014). The rhetoric around play in ECEC will often focus on the idea of 'child- centredness' (Adriany, 2015) but this, too, is a slippery term which has come to mean many different things depending on the context. For example, Georgeson et al. (2015) cite how child-centredness can be defined as either adopting a democratic view of children or a romantic view of children that positions them at the centre of their own world. Others interpret the expression in terms of the developmental

appropriateness of play activities offered (Goouch, 2008; Adriany, 2015). Adriany (2015) suggests that the 'child-centred ideology' has become a 'regime of truth' that is accepted without critique. The consequence of this regime is 'passive' practitioners' who allow children's gendered ideas to develop unchecked out of fear of being disrespectful towards the child (pp. 70–82). Definitions of 'child-centred' and 'play' are important because how the terms are interpreted will influence the kind of play that is seen to have more value by each practitioner.

Theories and definitions of play

Some of the most prominent researchers and theorists, who have arguably had the greatest impact on the present day early years curriculum and therefore how the practitioner should accompany play, have been Vygotsky, Bruner and Piaget (Nicolopoulou, 1993). Vygotsky's influence is evidenced in how the adult supports the child in play and encourages them to extend their thinking and develop socially (Nicolopoulou, 1993). Viewed through Vygotsky's lens a young child requires the practitioner to be a 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978) and to interact with them using language to encourage cognitive steps (John-Steiner, 2011, p. 137). Bennett et al. (1997) describe how Vygotsky emphasises the role of interaction in play. He believes children need 'a play companion', to borrow Goouch's terminology (2008), as a MKO who can support the children in acquiring 'knowledge, information and tools for thinking and learning' (p. 12). This was an idea further developed by the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (EPPE) (Sylva et al., 2004) who coined the term 'Sustained Shared Thinking' (SST) to describe a strategy that

the most effective practitioners adopted when engaging the children in play. They defined SST as 'when two or more individuals "work together" in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, [or] extend a narrative' (Sylva et al., 2004, p. vi). Of interest in this context is whether, in this model of pedagogy, gender norms are transmitted along with cultural ones (Rogoff, 1990; Nicolopoulou, 1993).

The importance of the role of the practitioner is an idea developed through Bruner's work on play where he uses the term 'scaffolding' to describe how the adult should support the child to work at the edge of their cognitive abilities (Bruner, 1978, p. 19). Piaget's influence is apparent in how practitioners consider the importance of the environment in play so that the child has opportunities to play as a 'lone scientist' (Wray, 1999) to explore, investigate and develop their own schema of concepts (Ultanir, 2012).

Writers and researchers, such as Moyles (1989; 1994) have continued to develop the ideas of these three key theorists. Through her work, Moyles has critiqued and reviewed their discussions to support practitioners in creating a play pedagogy to meet the requirements of children in the 21st century (1989; 1994). She thus developed the idea of the 'play spiral' (1989). This model 'stresses the importance of children being allowed free play in-between structured play sessions to enable them to consolidate their learning' (p. 37). In some respects, Moyle's model marries the concept of Piaget's lone scientist with that of Vygotsky and Bruner's supportive adult, to demonstrate to practitioners how they could support children effectively in play. One of the key

pieces of research Moyles led, and which was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), was the Study of Pedagogical Effectiveness in Early Learning (SPEEL) project that looked to define what the best pedagogy was in the early years (Moyles et al., 2002b). It was through this research that she discovered how difficult practitioners found it to articulate their understandings about play and the contradictions between their espoused and their enacted practices.

Another present-day writer and researcher, Goouch, influenced the initial thoughts about this thesis. She used the verb 'accompany' (2008) to describe the role of the adult in play; this led me to wonder whether there were any practitioner gender differences to consider. Goouch sets out the importance of the adult in a playful pedagogy and her own thesis looked at what this meant for two effective practitioners (2010). She noted with regret, as Moyles et al. had done before her (2002a), that few practitioners had a good understanding of the pedagogy of play and that this was having a negative impact on outcomes for young children. Furthermore, Goouch considered the EYFS (DfES, 2007) to be guilty of constraining effective pedagogy (2010). This argument was echoed later by Broadhead (2011) who argued that practitioners were becoming more and more obliged to view play as a 'tool for delivering the curriculum… [and] as a means to achieving outcomes pre-determined by policy and 'distant' adults – that is distant from the current preoccupations of the playing child' (p. 55).

Outdoor play, risky play and rough and tumble play

The EYFS (DfE, 2017) stipulates that children must have daily opportunities for outdoor play (p. 30) echoing an international recognition of the importance of outdoor play in young children's learning and development (Bento and Dias, 2017). Some research suggests that male practitioners are much happier and more confident in the outdoor environment. For example, Emilsen and Koch (2010) found that, in the Norwegian and Austrian context, male practitioners who were allowed to stay outdoors felt 'more freedom to work with the children in their own way, without the tradition of "caring" being imposed on them' (p. 543).

The outdoor area is an ideal environment for a specific kind of play called 'risky play' (Sandseter, 2009). Positive risk-taking is an important part of children's lives; it develops their confidence, their thinking skills, their creative skills, their problem-solving skills and is vital for their wellbeing (Stephenson, 2003; Madge and Barker, 2007; Sandseter, 2009; Little et al., 2011). Some even go so far as to state that positive risk-taking is an essential part of being human and if we are not given the opportunity to do so we will look for it in other ways (Madge and Barker, 2007). Risk-taking in the context of ECEC pedagogy has been defined as 'play that provides opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries and learning about injury-risk' (Little et al., 2011, p. 115). Stephenson (2003) identified elements of four-year-old children's play that were associated with risk-taking as 'attempting something never done before, feeling on the borderline of "out of control" often because of height or speed, and overcoming fear' (p. 36). Greenfield (2004) asked four-year-old children to convey their feelings and views about the outdoor playground. Favoured

areas… had common features – 'risk, speed, excitement, thrills, uncertainty and challenge' (p. 4). There may be gender differences in practitioner attitudes towards this kind of play (Sandseter, 2014). Sandseter (2014) suggests male practitioners 'have a more liberal attitude towards children's risky play, and allow children to engage in greater risky play than women' (p. 434). If this is the case, then there is a considerable impact for children having interaction with male practitioners.

Linked closely with the idea of risky play is the playful wrestling that children often engage in and is frequently described as rough and tumble play. Research tells us how important 'rough and tumble' play is for young children (Tannock, 2008; Bosacki et al., 2015). It enables them to develop many skills such as self-control, self- regulation and spatial awareness (ibid.). It is predominantly males (fathers or practitioners) that see this kind of play in a positive way (ibid.) and engage in it with young children (Lamb and Lewis, 2014); in fact, it 'is reported as an important feature of father–child relationships' (Fletcher et al., 2013, p. 746).

Role of the adult

I have outlined above some of the general theories and perspectives on play that all practitioners will have covered in part regardless of the level of their training. These theories and perspectives contribute a useful lens when considering how practitioners may view their role as one who accompanies play. On the one hand there is the importance of adult–child interactions in play as outlined by Vygotsky (Gupta, 2009), and on the other hand is the Piagetian

provision of an environment which can act as a third 'educator' (Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2009) and a much more 'passive' practitioner in terms of interacting with the children (Adriany, 2015). In Vygotsky's model, the practitioner is in the role of 'More Knowledgeable Other' (MKO) (1978) to ensure that the play leads to learning and development. The MKO could be defined as one who supports a child to work within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Gupta, 2009), either by their questions, assertions or actions. Bennett et al. (1997, p. 12) describe the ZPD as 'the difference between the actual and potential development' of a child. In this context it is how the adult accompanies play that can support the child in achieving this potential. It is important to acknowledge that in Vygotsky's perspective this does not need to be necessarily an adult; it could also be a child who has more expertise or knowledge in a certain area and so can extend their peer as they play together. Sometimes it can be as simple as certain behaviours being imitated which can influence the learning (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991). Imitation is also a key idea in Rogoff's work (1990). She demonstrates, through ethnographic research within a diverse range of cultures, how the adult passes on the baton of culture through modelling certain actions. In this perspective, it is not necessarily what the adult says but rather what they do which is powerful; she highlights the immense learning that can take place without constant adult–child interaction, a pedagogy she would define as being a more ethnocentric view of the role of the adult (Angelillo et al., 2003).

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (2004), through its use of the phrase 'Sustained Shared Thinking' (SST), asserted that

it was what the adult said that was vital when accompanying play with a young child. There was an understanding that it was common, but ineffective, practice to bombard children with questions when accompanying them in play to ensure that their learning was extended (Wood and Wood, 1983). Often these might be quite low-level questions such as 'What colour…?' or 'How many…?' However, these questions were more about assessing learning and could often have the effect of shutting down children's play or willingness to interact. SST, on the other hand, was about opening up thinking by the adult attempting to align their own thinking with that of the child. For example, in the simple everyday scenario of a child playing with cars in the sand, the adult would closely observe what the child was doing with the cars and, as the MKO, would use language to describe or extend the play. The child may be demonstrating schema (Ultanir, 2012) such as lining up or pushing the cars to make circular tracks. The adult would then describe the actions and perhaps make some 'I wonder why…' type comments which the child could choose to respond to verbally or not.

Thus, the idea of play is closely linked with what the adult thinks their role should be; this in turn could be impacted by practitioner gender. The very notion of play may be contested in its definition and interpretation (Goouch, 2010), however, its inclusion in an array of early years curricula globally (OECD, 2011) highlights how it is perceived as a potentially powerful tool for learning. Thus, it has a unique capacity to pass on cultural norms (Rogoff, 1990; Brody, 2014) including gender stereotypes. This claim provides a strong argument for increasing the number of males in ECEC to ensure that children are exposed to greater diversity in the cultural norms that are transmitted (Rogoff et al., 2010).

In **Table 2.1** I have united the idea of the role of the adult in play with Connell's concept of masculinities (2005) in order to consider how and why Connell's framework may be useful in three different ways (descriptive, interpretative and conceptual) when considering how male ECEC practitioners accompany play with young children. Initially the table was constructed to support my consideration of how and if Connell's framework might be useful and indeed was helpful in terms of thinking of sub questions to support my main research question. The three different aspects of **factual, interpretive** and **conceptual** describe how I considered that such a framework could support my thinking at varying levels of analysis both as I considered the literature for the review and then eventually how it might help me interpret the data. For example **factual** relates to the purely descriptive way that both the literature and eventually the data might reflect how practitioners talk about gendered approaches to play, **interpretive** introduces another level of analysis by considering the 'So what?' of these discussions and **conceptual** is a consideration of how this second analysis could contribute to building theory.

Connell's masculinities (2005)	Play behaviours which may be articulated	How male practitioners may position themselves	How they may be positioned by others
Hegemonic: *Bring something better; superhero behaviours.*	*Males are more exciting and bring something different.*	***Factual:*** *They think they bring something different or better to females.*	***Factual:*** *Do female practitioners see males as better?*
		Interpretive: *Are they contributing to a deficit discourse about women?*	***Interpretive:*** *Are females contributing to the deficit discourse about themselves?*
		Conceptual: *Do they position themselves as hegemonic males?*	***Conceptual:*** *Are women content to accept a traditional gender order?*
Subordinate: *Mirror stereotypical female traits such as nurturing.*	*They take a 'female' approach to play.*	***Factual:*** *Do they believe they demonstrate 'female traits'?*	***Factual****: Do females see the males as having 'female' approaches?*
		Interpretive*: Is ECEC only for a certain type of man?*	***Interpretive:*** *Do they see 'female' traits in a male as negative?*
		Conceptual: *How does this impact on their relationship with children?*	***Conceptual:*** *Are women supporting hierarchical gender regimes?*
Complicit**: *Passing on the 'patriarchal dividend'.*	*Adopts 'gender blind' perception of others' pedagogy.*	***Factual:*** *Do they use a 'gender-blind discourse'?*	***Factual****: Do female practitioners recognise no difference in behaviours?*
		Interpretive: *Why do they adopt a 'discourse of denial' (Solomon et al., 2005)?*	***Interpretive:*** *Are the females also complicit?*
		Conceptual: *Are they on the sidelines supporting the hegemony in wider society?*	***Conceptual:*** *Are women supporting hierarchical gender regimes?*
Marginalised: *Because of class, sexuality race etc.*	*Males practitioners seen in a deficit way.*	***Factual:*** *Do they feel marginalised and inadequate compared to the females?*	***Factual:*** *Do female practitioners believe the males bring something less?*
		Interpretive: *Is this a class issue i.e. the certain kind of woman who goes into ECEC in England?*	***Interpretive:*** *Are women blocking men from the ECEC workforce (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006)?*
		Conceptual: *Is it a question of intersectionality**?*	***Conceptual:*** *Is this in Connell's framework at all?*

Table 2.1 Connell's framework of masculinities and the positioning of male practitioners when accompanying play.

What attracts men to working in ECEC and what kind of men would choose it as a profession?

The literature gives contradictory answers as to what kind of men are drawn to working in ECEC as viewed through Connell's lens (2005). On the one hand Sargent (2005) argues that they could be viewed as subordinate because they are rejecting traditional forms of masculinity by choosing this non-typical gender role and as such 'are vulnerable to being abused and ridiculed' (p. 252). On the other hand, they are risk takers who are leading the way into a new kind of masculinity and gender-flexibility in the work-place (Warin, 2017). At the same time, they are drawn to the profession for the same reason as their female counterparts; Koch and Farquhar (2015) cite Williams' assertion (2011) that they have 'a desire to be involved in something socially significant' (p. 381).

Conclusion and research question

This chapter has set out some of the key issues and ideas surrounding practitioner gender in ECEC and why it is important to consider these alongside playful pedagogies. The 'feminised' context of ECEC (Cameron et al.,1999; Skelton, 2012; Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015) has led to a moral panic in terms of boys' achievement and disaffection even from the very beginning of their education (Brownhill and Oates, 2016). There is an argument on the one hand that female practitioners bring certain behaviours and ways of interacting with children and that it would benefit children to be able to interact with male practitioners so that they could be exposed to a more diverse range of behaviours (Rentzou, 2011). In terms of gender equality on a more macro level, it would benefit all children to see men engaging in what has traditionally been

seen as the 'women's work' (Lupton, 2000) of caring, nurturing and helping young children to develop. Other research based in the primary school, would contest the view that the gender of the practitioner has an impact on outcomes for children (Kwon, 2002).

The research informing this thesis is specifically concerned with whether ECEC practitioners perceive that there are gender differences in the way they accompany play. At the same time, it acknowledges that play is enacted in a wide variety of ways regardless of practitioner gender. Respecting the power of play is a core value for all working with young children in the context of ECEC in England and its Statutory Framework (DfE, 2017). This document is informed by a wealth of theory and research developed over the course of the last 100 years and beyond. How each practitioner defines play is important because their definition will influence how they accompany play. Literature and research has provided theoretical models (Piaget, 1962; Bruner, 1978; Vygotsky, 1978; Moyles, 1989) that they can base their practice on.

Practitioners may recognise the categories suggested by Connell (2005) to describe how gender, or more specifically masculinity, is enacted in the ECEC workplace. As men in ECEC are often seen as marginalised or 'other' (Williams, 1992; Sumsion, 2000; Rentzou, 2011) this may lead them to believe that those with the appropriate dispositions to engage in playful pedagogy are thus positioned in the marginalised category. Play can be seen, on the one hand, as an esteemed pedagogy where the child is performing cognitively at 'a head

taller than himself' (sic) (Vygotsky, 1967) or a low status activity when utilised as a learning approach by women or certain kinds of men.

The gap identified by the literature, and which this thesis addresses, is whether it is perceived that male practitioners bring something different to playful pedagogies. The main research question is therefore:

What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?

The following chapter will now set out how the research was designed to find answers to this question.

Chapter 3 Methodology

Educational research is considered to have a fragile reputation (Evans, 2013). Pring (2006) sets out some of the accusations that are levelled at it; these accusations include that it can be disjointed, ideological, sloppy and elitist as the researcher becomes 'seduced by the postmodern embrace' (Pring, 2006, p. 161). His thinking concurs with Crotty's view (1998) that the educational researcher needs to demonstrate clear rigour and transparency. This chapter will inform the reader of the research decisions that have been made throughout this study as I have borne Pring and Crotty's advice in mind. I will demonstrate how my identity as a researcher has influenced these decisions and the theoretical position I have adopted in terms of methodology. The methods will be transparently set out and there will be a comprehensive consideration of ethical issues.

Researcher identity

Before setting out clearly the research design, it is necessary to make explicit how I have been formed and shaped as a researcher and how this 'shaping' has influenced my researcher identity. No one can claim to come to research unbiased and impartial; as Ali and Kelly suggest 'research can never be fully "objective", neutral or value-free because it is produced by "knowers" who are situated in the social world and whose knowledge reflects its values' (2012, p. 60). It is particularly important to recognise this when engaging in qualitative research, where the data may become a co-construction as the participant

'constructs aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997, p. 127). As this description seemed to match my research behaviours, I was aware that I needed to follow the advice of Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2005, p. 965) and ensure that as the researcher I located my writing within 'disciplinary constraints, academic debates, departmental politics, social movements, community structures, research interests, familial ties, and personal history'. Wenger attests that 'our ability to deal productively with boundaries [between our various identities] depends on our ability to engage and suspend our identities' (Wenger, 2000, p. 239), although I am not convinced this is unproblematic and wonder if this is possible for researchers with dual, or multiple identities. Britzman (1986) uses the term 'institutional biographies' to describe the cultural baggage that trainee teachers take with them as they progress on their journey towards becoming a teacher. My own baggage has travelled with me on a long journey from my days of teacher training, through time working in the classroom, first with young children and then with young adults training to be teachers, all the while developing a researcher identity. My own personal biography is particularly informed by this professional background and also by my gender. I will set out below how these labels have influenced my approach to the research process (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p. 198).

Impact of professional background on teacher identity

As a teacher of young children for approximately twenty years, I was able to observe first-hand how play could impact on children's learning. When I entered the teaching workforce, fired up by tutors who went on to be considered 'experts' on play (e.g. Moyles, 1989; 1994), I had the professional freedom to

teach whatever I felt the children needed to learn. Our curriculum became a real co-construction (Hedges and Cullen, 2005) between the children and myself. I look back upon those days with rose-coloured spectacles and recall the growing tensions as the impact of the Education Reform Act 1988 (DES, 1989) appeared on the educational landscape in the form of prescribed curricula, standardised testing, Ofsted inspection of schools and baseline assessments. With each new initiative, opportunities to hold fast to my adopted philosophy of learning through play became more and more difficult.

When the compromise between how I wanted to teach and how I had to teach became too problematic, I entered Initial Teacher Education, idealistically hoping I could have more impact by working with adults who were going to enter the workforce. Subsequently I have chosen to work as a tutor on the multidisciplinary Early Childhood Studies degree (ECS). Within this degree, students may choose a pathway that leads to the recently introduced Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) as described in the Literature Review (Chapter 2). This qualification does fit within the performativity agenda of Teacher Education in that it is a programme accountable to Ofsted. My tutor interactions in this role are mainly with work-based mature students and the conversations in our seminars often revolve around the ever-present tensions between philosophies of working with young children in playful pedagogies and the current performativity agenda (Robert-Holmes, 2014). My professional background has influenced my researcher identity in many ways. In particular it has left me with a perspective that young children in England are constrained by an education system that expects too much of them at an early age. For

example, the non-statutory guidance (Early Education, 2012) divides children into ages and stages with clear targets of what they should be able to achieve at each stage; this seems at odds with the 'Unique Child' discourse that pervades the EYFS (DfE, 2017). The curriculum culminates with the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) where children, in theory aged 5, but in reality, often still 4, are graded to see if they have achieved a good level of development.

The professional knowledge part of my researcher identity came to the fore when I was undergoing the data collection part of the research process. Those participants who were aware of my professional background in the ECEC workforce would sometimes take for granted that we held the same views about certain issues. Generally, though this was a positive thing because I had immediate understanding of the terminology and jargon that they used and did not have to ask for unnecessary explanations.

A gendered identity

As a former member of the ECEC workforce, it is no surprise to learn that I am female, and it is important to mention this here, as gender is a focus of this piece of research. I have both seen men ride Williams' 'glass escalator' (1992) in that they have been quickly promoted and transparently given opportunities because they are male, and conversely, the few male teachers of young children I have worked with have indeed inspired me. Probably the practitioner who inspired me the most was a male Year 1 teacher (children aged 5–6 years). I shared an open plan classroom with him in a First School (children aged 3–7) so became very familiar with his daily pedagogical practices. If I unpick the

reasons as to why his practice inspired me, I am left with the sense that he was able to be a 'rule breaker', an educational anarchist who could walk the line between performativity and the joy of learning. His most important drive seemed to be that the children would love learning and because of this, parents and children adored him.

Thus, I have transparently set before the reader some of the forces, at least those of which I am aware, that have shaped me as researcher. It would be disingenuous to speak of how I might minimise these forces; they are part of my tool kit when working within the interpretivist/constructionist paradigm (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006), as I am here. Following Thomas' recommendations (2013), I have used these forces along with the research literature, participant comments and critical dialogue with peers as a spotlight to shine on the data in order to answer the research question. Richardson and Adams St Pierre seek to advise the researcher about 'honoring the location of the self' (2005, p. 965); therefore, I have made explicit the biographical lens through which I have considered the research question. I am hopeful, therefore, that in this context my subjectivity can be seen as a 'strength rather than a weakness' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 6).

Research Design

Issues of paradigm, ontology and epistemology

This study recognises that there is some valid knowledge that can be constructed concerning the impact of gender on ECEC practitioners' behaviours

and practices. At the same time, it rejects the view that there is a consistent 'observable, independent reality' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 8) as any glimpse of reality can only be viewed through the 'prism' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 28) of my own, and my participants', subjectivities. Any claims to constructions of knowledge or truth must recognise the impact of this 'prism' (Silverman, 2014). Therefore, this research sits firmly within the interpretivist camp because it recognises that we cannot 'consider knowledge outside the context in which it was generated' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 6); another researcher may have both constructed different data with the same or different participants and analysed the data in different ways. It is for this reason the research will not make any great claims to generalisable knowledge. In spite of this, it has a contribution to make, in line with Bassey's (1995) definition of educational research cited in the Hillage report (1998) which is to 'critically inform educational judgements and actions' (p. 7). In this context, my research can contribute to both to the curriculum content of Early Childhood Studies degrees and CPD through Gender Sensitivity Training.

The study's qualitative approach and use of thematic analysis

The epistemological underpinning of this research is constructionist in nature (Crotty, 1998) and so informs the qualitative methodology adopted. As a researcher I am interested in what people say to describe their practices and this approach allowed me to access 'people's subjective worlds and meanings' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 8). I have been influenced by Braun and Clarke's use of thematic analysis (2013) which, although developed in their own field of psychology, they assert has a useful contribution to make to other disciplines

such as educational research. Moreover, they suggest (p. 8) that qualitative methods are particularly relevant when working with more marginalised groups. My participants could be described thus because they were i) those in the ECEC workforce, ii) women and iii) men doing 'women's work' – all three potentially marginalised groups. In this way, qualitative methods seemed a good fit. I am choosing to use them in the sense of 'Big Q qualitative research' as defined by Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 4) meaning that I not only adopted qualitative methods but also my methods aligned with the interpretivist paradigm described above. At the same time, I had to select from the smorgasbord of qualitative approaches and justify the decision made. My choice of approach was influenced by constructivist grounded theory (Braun and Clarke, 2013) in that it was interested to see what themes emerged from the data in an inductive way. Nevertheless, I could not adopt a pure grounded theory route because it was impossible for me not to be influenced by my reading around gender and play and therefore the 'conceptual baggage' (Coy, 2006) I carried. It would be naive of me to ever suggest that my analysis would be uninformed by this prior knowledge; therefore, my intention was to 'reach down' to the data and 'reach up' to the abstract (Charmaz, 2011, p. 135) by incorporating both Connell's framework of masculinities (2005) and Synodi's play labels (2010) as theoretical perspectives. Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) likewise recommend this 'hybrid approach' suggesting it can effectively identify 'overarching themes that capture(d) the phenomenon' (p. 90).

Research process

Methods rationale

The data collection methods aligned with the qualitative nature of the research described above. Silverman (2014) asserts that it is important to consider the purpose of the chosen methods (p. 226) and mine had three possible purposes: i) information gathering (particularly in the early stages), ii) 'theory building', iii) 'empowering participants' (Silverman, 2014, p. 226). I cannot assert that the third of these has been fully achieved, however, this could be linked to possible dissemination of the findings which will be outlined more fully in Chapter 6 (Conclusions) and Chapter 7 (Gender Sensitivity Training) Two methods of data gathering, in the form of qualitative surveys and one-to-one interviews using photographs as a stimulus, were utilised.

Use of qualitative surveys

The initial sample was 32 ECEC practitioners (males = 8; females = 24) working in 13 ECEC settings in the southeast of England; of these, 21 surveys were returned (males= 4; females = 17) with 13 of these practitioners (males = 3; females = 10) agreeing to be interviewed. Qualitative surveys were chosen as a method that allows a targeted group of society – in this case, ECEC practitioners – to share their views in a non-threatening way. It is a method deemed to be particularly useful in capturing 'experience, understandings and perceptions' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 137). Full details were provided to all potential participants through participant information sheets approved by Lancaster University ethics committee (please see Appendices for all ethical

paper work). Participants could complete a hard copy to protect their anonymity but some requested electronic versions of the qualitative survey to return by email. I made three follow up requests for unreturned surveys that were sometimes successful, though, as indicated, 11 chose not to respond although they had initially been quite enthusiastic about participating. Although each participant had the right to remain anonymous in the survey – they were asked to share contact details if they were happy to participate in a follow up interview. An incentive was offered for taking part in the interview (a £10 supermarket gift card) to show respect for the time they were prepared to give up. One of the participants interviewed declined the offer of the gift card when it was presented at the end of the interview and to avoid any embarrassment I did not insist. The surveys had two sections, one inviting participant responses about play and one about practitioner gender. An excerpt from the survey sheet is given in **Figure 3.1** on the following page.

Section 1 – views on play

1.1 What does the word **play** mean to you?

1.2 How does play impact on children's learning and development?

1.3 What do you think the role of the practitioner is in play?

Section 2 – male and female practitioners

2.1 Do you think that the gender of the practitioner impacts on how they play with young children? How?

2.2 Why would young children need both male and female practitioners to play with them?

2.3 What skills, characteristics and dispositions do you need to be able to engage in play effectively with children?

Section 3: additional thoughts

3.1 If you have anything else you would like to say, anything else about play and differences between male and female practitioners, please write it here:

Figure 3.1 Questions on the qualitative survey

Construction of the survey

The surveys were constructed keeping in mind the key elements of length, types of questions, responses to be avoided and type of data hoped for. They were

compiled following Braun and Clarke's advice (2013, p. 138) that they should be relatively short to avoid 'question fatigue'… and 'diminishing detail in the answers'. One rationale for using this method was that I would be provided with a practitioner vocabulary I could then use as a starting point for the one-to-one interviews and indeed, they were very useful for this. It meant that overall the language used in the interviews did not alienate the participant by any academic or researcher tendency to use jargon or literature-informed terminology. Because of my own professional background, there could also have been the danger that I would have made assumptions about a key shared terminology, so the surveys were also supportive in avoiding this. However, as will be discussed later, there were clearly assumptions made about shared understandings of concepts both on my part and on the part of the participants.

The qualitative survey questions needed to ensure they maintained the twofold focus of the participants on gender and play which was the overall focus of the thesis. It was for this reason that the survey was divided in three sections; one section invited participant responses about play, one about practitioner gender and one for any general comments they wanted to make having pondered on the first two sections.

Type of questions included in the survey

The discipline of ECS is one that consistently promotes the voice of practitioners, parents and children in research. Because of my professional and discipline background I already had an understanding of the kind of questions

that practitioners of all academic levels and experience could respond to. For example, the first question 'What does the word play mean to you?', although tackling what has already been described as a slippery and complex concept (Moyles and Adams, 2000), asked practitioners to describe something that was part of their everyday practice and conversations. At the same time there was an awareness that certain questions, particularly ones about gender, might encourage essentialist type responses.

The intention in section 2 of the survey was to encourage responses which avoided a binary approach. Questions had to be constructed which did not suggest stereotypical ways of thinking about men and women nor imply that as the researcher I was expecting certain kinds of responses. For example, the questions needed to suggest that gender could be performed in different ways (Butler, 1990) and also encourage responses which would highlight gender scripts in use (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015). There was also an awareness that I wanted survey responses to open up the conversation for the interview rather than shut it down by encouraging the ontological cul-de-sac mentioned in Chapter One (Introduction)

Type of data hoped for from the surveys

In this way the questions were constructed to both provide enough rich data for analysis and to provide a way forward for the interviews. It was hoped that the survey responses would be rich enough for standalone analysis but also would provide a shared terminology which would be a good starting point for the

interviews. Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 141) suggest that a limitation of using qualitative surveys is their lack of 'flexibility'. However, mine were not standalone and were used to inform the one-to-one interviews which were semi structured and therefore offered plenty of opportunity for flexibility.

Therefore, the qualitative surveys were constructed to both provide enough rich data to maintain the focus of participants on both gender and play in an accessible, non-gatekeeping manner. At the same time there was an intention to discourage participants from responding in an essentialist way to discussions of gender yet encourage discourses which could inform the interviews.

Quality of data generated by the surveys

Although my initial thoughts had been that the surveys would provide a more supportive role in terms of providing me with an initial vocabulary and to gather initial responses, in fact they did provide much richer data than I had anticipated. One explanation for this could be that the participants had time to give unhurried and thoughtful responses as they were not 'put on the spot' as might be the case in the interview. Another strength of the data provided by the surveys was that not only did they support my understanding, they also challenged my understanding. One thing I had not expected was to be challenged about my research focus through the responses to the survey questions. However, some of the participants did indeed contest whether I was making assumptions that there were gender differences or trying to pigeon hole gendered practices. They

could not have done this as easily at interview and so the surveys managed to include additional gender scripts (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015) to the interviews.

However, the most important issue when considering the status of the data arising from the surveys is how they relate to the contribution claims this thesis is making; this data revealed some of the gender-denial scripts or gender-blind scripts used to discuss practice offering evidence to the proposal that there can be an unwillingness to explore gender (Hogan, 2012) by ECEC practitioners and therefore highlighting the need for Gender Sensitivity Training. However regardless of this highlighted strength of the survey data it is also necessary to acknowledge any limitations in what they could reveal.

One limitation was the inconsistency in response length. Some respondents had been motivated to provide quite detailed and surprisingly long responses whereas some had only given very brief ones. This could have been down to motivation, but it could also have been a lack of confidence on the part of the participant to expose any limited literacy skills. Although there were some limitations to using the qualitative survey as a data collection method, I argue that it was still an appropriate approach predominantly because it did provide some rich data in the form of thoughtful and reflective responses which revealed some gender scripts in use (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015). The data also aligned with the theoretical framework I wanted to use in the sense that in addition to looking at the data inductively, I was also able to see a fit with both Connell's (2015) and Synodi's lens (2010).

Interviews

To support participant engagement in the interviews, photographs of children at play were used as a stimulus. Oliffe and Bottorff (2007) suggest that using photographs in this way 'can yield fascinating empirical data and provide unique insights into diverse phenomena, as well as empowering and emancipating participants by making their experiences visible'. However, in the interviews I undertook with my participants, the photographs were used to prompt data rather than analysed as data themselves. The photographs had been taken by the practitioners of children at play and so provided useful visual clues of the issues being discussed; they became a 'coat hanger for [the] conversations exploring behaviour and viewpoints' (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 118).

The specific form of photo-elicitation taken in this research was that participants were asked to bring a selection of hardcopy photographs they had taken as part of their pedagogical documentation of the children's learning and development in their setting. The photographs were not taken for this research; rather they were collected as part of normal every day practice in the setting. It was hoped this method would bring a spontaneity to the discussion because the participants would be talking about what they do rather than what they want the researcher to think that they do (Silverman, 2014). Conversely, it would be too simplistic to assume that the documentation had not been put together without an audience in mind; practitioners still may feel a need to perform for parents, other staff members, senior management and even the children who will all

have access to these annotated photographs. The photographs were never intended to be included in the analysis; they were only intended to support the interview and be a stimulus to help the participants talk about their practice. **Figure 3.2** below sets out the questions prepared to accompany the discussion of these photographs in the interview.

Question 1: Can you talk to me about play in your setting? You can use the photos to describe what happens. Please choose a photograph and talk to me about how you would see your role as the practitioner.

Question 2: Do you think your gender influences how you see your role in play?

Question 3: Can you think of any specific strengths that male and female practitioners bring to play?

Question 4: Do you think there are other factors, besides gender, that might affect how a practitioner views play?

Question 5: How much does policy and curriculum influence your approach to play?

Question 6: How do you feel about the lack of men in early years? Does it matter as far as play is concerned?

Question 7: Do you think that there are specific kinds of play where the practitioner gender does matter?

Question 8: Is there anything else you would like to say that you think might be helpful to the research?

Question 9: Are there any of the photographs we have not discussed that you would like to discuss?

Figure 3.2 Questions included in the interview schedule

During the interviews, I asked the participants to describe what was happening in the photographs as can be seen from the interview schedule. The power of this approach has already been seen in other research; for example, Oliffe and

Bottorff (2007) demonstrate how a prompt '"Tell me about this photograph," …
resulted in a 20- minute commentary about the meanings embedded…' (p.
853). In their research, men had taken photographs specifically for the research
and so another layer of complexity was added; however, I also saw the
effectiveness of this approach in my own research.

There is clear alignment here with Silverman's constructionist assertion that 'it
often makes sense to begin *without* a clearly defined problem and to gradually
work towards a topic by confronting data with the simple question: "What is
going on here?"' (2014, p. xxii). This way of proceeding took into consideration
the fact that I brought my own professional expertise and understanding about
play and being an ECEC practitioner to the interview. A consequence of this
meant I had more freedom to let the interview go 'off-piste' because of an
inherent understanding of any professional discourse. The interviews came to
mirror a way of proceeding suggested by Rapley (2004) who describes how
interviews can become 'inherently spaces in which both speakers are constantly
"doing analysis" – both speakers are engaged (and collaborating in) "making
meaning" and "producing knowledge"' (p. 27). This approach may address in
part the gap which exists between what people say and what people do, or, as
Pring suggests, 'what is said and what *is*' (2006, p. 75). For example, how would
I know as the researcher what kind of account the participants were giving of
their practices? After all, their discourse could have been very different to their
actions. If I had simply asked them about their thoughts on gender and play
using a fixed set of questions, the interview may have developed as a 'common

sense', essentialist type of discussion, the type of discussion which Silverman advises is best left to the skills of the media interviewer' (2014, p. 234).

Those working within the context of ECEC have been inundated and overwhelmed by ever changing policy and initiatives over the past few decades (Brownhill and Oates, 2016). I was concerned that their discourse would therefore be 'salt and peppered' with the jargon, terminology and ideas from the many documents with which they have had to engage. It is true that at times some participants found it difficult to distinguish their own ideas and thoughts from that of the 'official party line' and so it was sometimes difficult for me as the researcher to dig down deep and extract what their personal perceptions were. Compounded with this is the difficulty of articulating an understanding of both play (Moyles and Adams, 2001) and gender issues (Ashley, 2003; Rohrmann and Brody, 2015).

All practitioners working with young children in ECEC will follow the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) already discussed in Chapter 2. This curriculum was highly informed by key research such as the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (2004) which highlighted the importance of young children being given appropriate opportunities to learn through play. Therefore, I was aware that when these practitioners were questioned about their beliefs about play and how they see their role within it, that they would find it difficult to 'sieve and separate' their own beliefs from the professional discourse they had become encultured in. I had no concerns, however, that this might impact on the validity of the research

as long as I was explicit about the kind of knowledge the research could generate, how it added to what was already known and the contribution it could make. This contribution will be outlined more fully in Chapter 6 (Conclusion).

Participants were still selective in what they chose to share with me as the researcher, yet their choice of selection was enlightening in itself. By asking them to talk about the photographs they had taken to record children's learning and development through play, they revealed a consideration of their own behaviours as well as highlighting tensions between official policy and their actual practice. In this way, the research uncovered in part how practitioners made sense of their practice (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 285). After each interview I followed Rapley's advice and wrote up 'notes on the encounter, noting both pre- and post- tape talk alongside my reactions and observations about the interview itself' (2004, p. 27). These notes were not used as data, but they were the beginnings of my analysis.

The intention was to conduct the interviews in the setting because I wanted to inconvenience the participants as little as possible; however, five participants requested that they took place in my office as there was little space in their setting to find a quiet corner. The interviews were scheduled to last for 45 minutes, were recorded and then later transcribed by myself. Each interview proceeded in the following way:

1. Participants were given the Participant Information Sheet and an opportunity to reread it and ask any questions (they had been previously

given this sheet when they had agreed to complete the qualitative survey)

2. Participants were asked to sign the consent form.

3. The voice recorder was activated and the interview began (lasting approximately 45 minutes)

4. The voice recorder was switched off and participants were asked if they were happy with everything that had been recorded and if they wished any of their comments to be removed from the data. They were reminded of my contact details if they wished to follow anything up.

Construction of the interview schedule

All participants were asked the same six questions on the interview schedule but then each participant was also asked additional ones which built on their responses. For example, they were able to use their own context and experiences to develop ideas. It can be seen that the inclusion of individually participant chosen photographs in the interviews meant that no two interviews could be exactly the same. It also introduced an unknown 'surprise' element to each interview as I could not predict what the photographs would include. I was able to also pick up on individual points that participants had raised in the surveys as appropriate which meant that all participants were asked the questions included on the schedule though they may also have been asked additional ones specific to them. The data generated by the interviews was richer and more extensive because I was able to probe responses and

encourage participants to develop ideas. The interviews revealed some of the same gender scripts noted in the surveys in addition to further ones.

Piloting work undertaken

Some piloting work was undertaken around establishing the most effective questions to include in both the qualitative survey and the interview schedule. For example, colleagues with expertise in early year pedagogy and/or research methods offered feedback on my proposed questions when consulted. Some of the survey questions were modified in terms of supervisor comments or ethics committee feedback as they were felt to be too leading. The modifications made can be seen in the **Table 3.1** below:

Original question	Modified question
1.2: How important do you think play is in terms of children's learning and development?	1.2: How does play impact on children's learning and development?
2.1: Do you think that male practitioners play with young children in a different way to female practitioners? How?	2.1: Do you think that the gender of the practitioner impacts on how they play with young children? How?
2.2: Do you think that young children need both male and female practitioners to play with them? If yes, why?	2.2: Why would young children need both male and female practitioners to play with them?

Table 3.1 Modification of qualitative survey questions following feedback

The first interview (**P5:** f; 22; 5 years; i) was intended to be a pilot interview to test out the suitability of the questions and how participants might respond; however, it was an effective interview in terms of how the participant engaged

with the questions, how she used her photographs to talk about practice and I was reluctant to lose the data and so decided to include her responses. She is a participant I discuss further in the Findings chapter (see page 101) as she seemed to adopt a gender-blind stance (Hogan, 2012) when she began the interview by declaring that it was only on her way to the interview that she realised that she had indeed worked with a male practitioner saying:

*I actually forgot that the TA [teaching assistant] was a male practitioner… I thought I **have** [her emphasis] worked with a male practitioner cos I just thought of him as one of us*

Limitations of the design

Such a research design is not without limitations; some of these could align with Pring's criticism of educational research (2006, p. 158). This critique is outlined in **Table 3.2.** I have also addressed how each criticism could be aimed at this piece of research in particular. Furthermore, I have then considered how these objections were minimised.

Criticism	Pertinence to this research	How the criticism was addressed
'Too small-scale and fragmented, constructed on different databases, such that it is not possible to draw the "big picture"'	• Small sample • Context of small area of country	• The intention was to collect data until saturation following Guest et al.'s advice (2006) who recommend that after 12 interviews new ideas become less prevalent in the data.
'Ideologically driven, serving the "political purposes" of the researcher rather than the disinterested pursuit of the truth'	• Qualitative piece of research therefore open to accusations of researcher bias	• I have been transparent about impacts on my identity as a researcher, so the reader will have to judge the extent of my reflexivity.
'Methodologically "soft" or "flawed", without the rigour either in the conduct of the research or in the reporting of it'	• Possibly perceived as such if reader adopts a positivist stance	• I have been transparent about my methodology and how I have analysed my data – herein lies the 'trustworthiness' of the research.

Table 3.2 Pring's critique of educational research (2006) and how it has been addressed.

As already suggested at the beginning of this chapter, educational research is always going to be fraught with issues and difficulties (DfEE, 1998). These issues are intensified when the methodological approach adopted is qualitative and therefore open to a myriad of interpretations. In the Literature Review (Chapter 2), it was noted that the participants were part of a workforce with a diverse range of qualifications. Some of the sample may have worried about completing an official looking form (qualitative survey) and perhaps were anxious that they would be judged on their spelling and grammar. It would be

unfortunate for my research if only those who could write confidently had agreed to participate as then I would be unable to capture a range of views. This was why my original intention was to attend setting staff meetings to have the opportunity to reiterate the unimportance of spelling and grammar, perhaps sharing a personal anecdote, and to emphasise that I was viewing participants as professional experts and wanting to tap into their expertise. However, I was not given access to attend staff meetings as it was deemed more appropriate that I met one to one with the setting managers or other facilitators. There was no intention here to manipulate participants but a genuine desire to allow a voice to those often silenced (Brownhill and Oates, 2016) and who I was convinced had something interesting and useful to say.

At the same time, in addition to Pring's useful lens (2006) the research that informs this thesis has certain other limitations within the areas of i) sample, ii) methods and iii) the binary nature of gender research. The sample size was problematic in two ways. Firstly, the number of participants hoped for were not recruited. It was my intention to recruit 50 participants to complete the surveys (following Braun and Clarke's advice); eventually 32 were recruited and 21 were returned. However, the data obtained from most of these was richer and more substantial than expected. The second issue with the sample was that it certainly reflected the gender imbalance in the ECEC workforce in that I recruited just 4 males as participants, interviewing three of these. Brandes et al. (2015) also suggest that 'it makes little sense to enquire into the effect of the gender of the ECEC workers without, at the same time, taking into consideration

the gender of the children' (p. 325); whether this is a flaw of this research or a suggestion for further study is open to interpretation.

Both the qualitative survey and the interview format seemed to be more accessible for the more qualified practitioner. The more qualified practitioners certainly provided much more information in the survey and presented themselves confidently at interview. It is important to capture perspectives across a range of educational levels and experiences, but I am not convinced I managed to do this. Silverman (2014) suggests that naturalistic data such as observations are more appropriate than interviews, but observations of practice would still have been problematic for me in this context. I was aware of a power differential between myself and the participants and consider that there is something almost intrusive about observing and commenting on another's practice, although I recognise that this discomfort could be a personal bias from my professional background with its years of being observed and commented on to fulfil the performativity agenda. From this perspective, if I had chosen observations over interviews, it would be tantamount to me declaring '*I can't trust you to write anything worthwhile down or even to tell me anything useful so instead I will just watch you and come to my own conclusions'.*

As suggested at the beginning of this thesis (Introduction: Chapter 1), the very nature of gender research is problematic (Ashley, 2003; Rohrmann and Brody, 2015); this was clearly revealed as I carried out the interviews. People did succumb to an essentialist, binary approach though the main sticking point I found was that participants were determined to stick to a 'gender blind' script

(Hogan, 2012) or 'discourse of denial' (Solomon et al., 2005) so that unpicking their perceptions was difficult. These scripts are set out in more detail in the following chapter (Findings).

The research generally followed its initial design although there were a few modifications along the way. For example, it was intended that all participants would complete the qualitative survey and the interview, but I realised that the participant information sheet was making people fearful of committing themselves as participants; this was feedback given to me by a deputy manager of a setting. I then decided to ask people to complete the survey only and then to indicate at the bottom of the survey if they would be willing to take part in an interview. This meant that participants were able to commit themselves in phases and perhaps once they had completed the survey they realised they did have something worthwhile to say; yet it must be recognised that just 13 offered themselves for interview.

Sample

I used a predominantly 'snowballing sampling technique' (Seale, 2012, p. 145) to recruit participants. First, I began with managers and practitioners that I had already established a professional relationship with due to my work on ECEC programmes at a local university. I reinforced the fact that I was not approaching this research as the expert but as one who wished to work collaboratively. It was important to me that as an undervalued workforce (Brownhill and Oates, 2016), they were left with the impression that their time was being respected. Ideally, I wanted to recruit equal numbers of male and female participants but

this became very difficult. For example, of the eleven participants who failed to engage at all after initial contact, four were male. In this way, my study mirrors the criticism that Sarkardi et al. (2008) levelled at research on 'fathering'; that it is too often based on reports of what mothers (in my case female practitioners) have reported on fathers (in my case male practitioners). **Figure 3.3** below offers some additional information on the range of the sample.

Qualification level	L7: 6 L6: 5 L3: 10
Age	18–24: 9 25–39: 6 40–50: 6
Role	Early years teacher: 7 Nursery practitioner: 13 Play leader: 1
Number of years spent in ECEC workforce	Less than 1 year: 1 2–5 years: 6 6–10 years: 10 11–20 years: 3 20+ years: 1

Figure 3.3 Information on the range of the sample

Analysis of data

My intention was to begin to analyse the data as it was gathered. Comments from the qualitative surveys were typed up and compiled in a word document. I transcribed the interviews as soon after the event as possible. Because I work full time and am a part-time PhD student I only had a certain window of time for fieldwork, so this meant that there was some overlapping of the two data collection methods. In practice, this meant that I was arranging and conducting

interviews before I had collected all my qualitative surveys. This was not my original intention, yet I chose to perceive this to be a positive as I was able to immerse myself fully in data collection and have the time and space to be able to think about my data at a deeper level. I also began to write up my analysis as I was collecting – using the writing process as a method of developing my own thoughts or indeed as 'a method of data analysis' (Richardson and Adams St Pierre, 2005, p. 970). However, as each new piece of data was collected I had to return and redraft and then had a period of time when the analysis was set aside so that my thoughts about it could 'simmer'.

The hybrid approach to analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) that I adopted has already been noted. On the one hand, the analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's description of how to proceed (2013) by looking for codes and then themes across the data. In addition, I made use of two theoretical lenses referencing gender and play. One of these is Connell's (2005) framework of masculinities (see Chapter 2) and the other is the selection of labels suggested by the literature on the adult's role in play and cited by Synodi (2010, pp. 186–187) (see also Chapter 2). **Table 3.3** clarifies further how the survey and interview data were analysed.

Steps in analysing survey	Steps in analysing interviews
1. Raw data from hard copy surveys typed up. 2. All data from surveys included in a Word document entitled 'Surveys no comments' through cut and paste process. This kept as original document. 3. Copy of original document made and entitled 'Initial comments'. Read through this document several times to familiarise self. Began writing process noting anything of potential interest or 'looking for key, essential, striking, odd, interesting things people or texts say or do as well as repetition' (Rapley (2011, p. 277-8) (see Appendix 10). 4. Copy of original document made entitled 'Links to Connell'. Read through noting any evidence of Connell's masculinities (see Appendix 11) 5. Copy of original document made entitled 'Links to play labels'. Further read through to note any evidence of use of play labels (see Appendix 12). 6. Began to compile codes across the data set in Excel spread sheet including examples and definitions. 7. Used codes (71) to begin to look for themes. 8. Looked for links between themes and Connell's framework. 9. Looked for any links between play labels and themes. 10. Considered whether the themes would help answer the research question. 11. Considered how the themes relate to each other. 12. Defined, described and named themes through continuation of writing process.	1. Wrote up field notes. 2. Transcribed interviews. 3. Copy of original document made and entitled 'Initial comments'. Read through this document several times to familiarise self. Began writing process noting anything of potential interest or 'looking for key, essential, striking, odd, interesting things people or texts say or do as well as repetition' (Rapley (2011, p. 277-8) including links to Connell (2005) and Synodi (2010) (see Appendix 13). 4. Read again looking for evidence of themes and highlighted in corresponding colour (Appendix 14). 5. Considered whether there are any new ideas suggested which could be new codes. 6. Revisited themes to see if they needed developing or modifying.

Table 3.3 Stages of analysis (adapted from Rapley, 2011, p. 277; Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 202-203; Nielsen, 2015)

Issues in the analysis

By overlapping the two phases (surveys and interviews) of data collection and because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, not all participants were given the same questions in interviews. The same interview schedule (see Figure 3.2) was followed for all however additional follow up questions were asked depending on participant responses in the interviews and also whether I wanted to follow up any points they had touched on in their survey. This way of proceeding aligns with the constructionist approach taken and is often a feature of semi-structured interviews (Mukherji and Albon, 2015, p. 154). Diefenbach (2009) also suggests that:

> qualitative researchers should feel encouraged to ask themselves throughout the whole research process whether they ask the right questions, to change these whenever it seems appropriate, to challenge their even most basic assumptions and to see 'things' from as many different perspectives as possible (p. 877).

In this way, it was inevitable that the focus I gave to individual questions on the schedule might change.

As already noted, I did not wait for all the data to be collected before I began its analysis; this followed a recommendation from Braun and Clarke that 'In qualitative research, it isn't essential to have *all* your data collected to start your analysis. …there's not always a clean separation between data collection and analysis…' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 204). This meant that initial surveys and interviews did inform analysis of later ones. At times I had a real sense that both

myself and the participant were constructing meaning together and that the interview had become a 'scene for a social interaction rather than a simple tool for collection of "data"' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 169). Indeed, at times the analysis did seem to begin in the interview, then continue in the transcription before the more formal procedure began, as Thomas suggests can happen (2013, p. 271-273).

In addition to this weaving together of data collection and analysis, the entwining of both an inductive and deductive approach to the analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) added an extra layer of note; when interviewing it was difficult not to refer constantly back to both Connell's framework (2005) and also the play labels framework (Synodi, 2010). I had to be disciplined, and did not always succeed, not to use the terminology from the frameworks when they often seemed the best fit. For example, when participants were discussing how they enjoyed engaging in play with the children I often felt compelled to use the term 'co-player' with them as it seemed to sum up exactly what they were trying to say.

A criticism that could have arisen from taking a hybrid approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was that the research could potentially become a 'mishmash' of procedures and strategies that only led to superficial findings. I hope to have shown the rigour of my methods through the transparency of my writing and through setting out clearly how both approaches have been supportive in answering the research question. Braun and Clarke suggest that a criticism of thematic analysis is that it can have 'limited interpretative power'

and can become quite descriptive if not used 'within an existing theoretical framework' (2013, p. 180); my use of these two theoretical lenses (Connell, 2005; Synodi, 2010) therefore could have strengthened the analysis. A critique of Connell's framework has already been offered in Chapter 2 along with how this critique may be addressed and why I suggest it is still an appropriate lens to use. As far as the play labels (Synodi, 2010) are concerned, one issue I envisaged was that the language and terminology used by my participants would be different to the more academic terms used in the research literature. I attempted to find an alignment between the two despite being aware that interpretations are subjective and that as Silverman suggests it will be dependent on my use of 'common-sense knowledge of what participants' words "mean"' (Silverman, 2014, p. 221). This is an accusation he directs at thematic analysis as a whole and it is an additional rationale for using a theoretical framework alongside. I have not relied on common-sense assumptions, as might be the danger if adopting, for example, a complete grounded theory approach; my own professional knowledge was also supportive in avoiding common-sense thinking and became a third lens through which I could view the data.

Ethical Issues

Ethics were given detailed consideration when designing the research. I needed to ensure that I followed Punch's advice and engaged in 'principled deliberation about morally salient issues and acceptable courses of action' (2014, p. 37). Ethics were attended to at two different levels; one, which I shall name *Ethical*

Compliance, and one, which I shall name *Ethical Values.* There is naturally some overlap between the two areas, yet I want to make a clear distinction between ethical decisions I made to ensure that the research followed established, laid down procedures and ethical decisions that reflected my own personal researcher identity.

Ethical compliance describes how recognised 'procedural requirements' (Punch, 2014, p. 36) were respected to ensure that the ethical content of the research met the requirements of the wider research community, such that this piece of research would allow me as a researcher to join that community. Lancaster University ethics procedures were followed closely and all necessary documentation was submitted to the ethics committee. Upon their recommendations, adjustments were made and the updated documentation was resubmitted for approval (please see Appendices 1-9). Documentation approved included participant information sheets, consent forms, qualitative survey proformas and proposed interview questions. In addition to this, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2011) were considered to ensure that this research would fit the approval of the educational research community.

Ethical values describes how I wanted to ensure that my own researcher identity and values, or, as Punch terms them, my own 'philosophical principles' (2014, p. 36) as a researcher, were apparent in the research design. It is a dynamic phrase that suggests that ethics should not just be considered at a certain stage, for example when designing the research or applying for ethical approval.

Instead, it should be at the forefront of the researcher's mind through every stage of the research and should be revisited constantly. **Table 3.4** sets out some of the ethical considerations at each stage of the research and how they were addressed.

Stage of research	Ethical issue	Solution adopted
Choosing area of research	*By addressing the moral panic surrounding the lack of men in the ECEC workforce I may be contributing to a discourse that reinforces gender inequalities.*	*There were more gains from researching this area than risks as any essentialist thinking about gender was avoided. Research in this area does have the potential to challenge gender inequality and contribute to the discourse about a more gender-balanced workforce and therefore wider society.*
Formulating the question	*By formulating a question about practitioner gender differences, I could be reproached for inviting a critique of women's practices in a workplace that has given them many employment opportunities and where they should be valued for what they specifically bring as females (Osgood, 2005).*	*The question ensured it encapsulates both female and male voices. As it is a predominantly female workplace then it is important to hear what the females who work there are saying about the situation rather than rely on policy discourse.*
Searching the literature	*I needed to ensure that my research of the literature did not lead me to ignoring certain areas of it such as any sources that were overly critical of either gender.*	*Literature searches have been informed by the European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) Special Interest Group (SIG) on Gender Balance.*
Methodology adopted	*Research design needed to incorporate women's voices and avoid an approach that was about drilling and mining women for knowledge.*	*Data methods ensured that the practitioners' voice was articulated in their own language and terminology and that they had some control over the interview process.*
Analysis	*There was the potential to feel compromised by the findings; what if they contributed to a deficit discourse about female practices?*	*This is where it was important to have critical friends to talk though the analysis.*
Trustworthiness of findings and any claims made	*How trustworthy are the claims I can make?*	*I have attempted to pay 'continuous, recursive…and excruciating attention to being trustworthy' (Ely, 1998, p. 156), [and have] transparently set out the research design.*

Table 3.4 Ethical considerations at each stage of the research and how they

were addressed

Considering the ethics so thoroughly presented me with several problems. One of these was to do with the part of my researcher identity informed by my professional background. I discovered I had to be the translator of two very different languages as I moved between documentation for the ethics committee and documentation for participants, trying to satisfy both but finding it difficult to be happy with a compromise in language. For example, I used the term 'Learning Journey' on any practitioner or parental consent and information forms to describe the collection of annotated photographs used in interview. In so doing, I was making use of a shorthand that both these groups of people would understand. Yet this shorthand is outside the professional area of those on the ethics committee, so they wanted much more detail included on the consent and information forms to make the idea of the 'Learning Journey' more explicit. This created two problems for me. Firstly, it meant that I had to begin to discuss in much more detail how photographs would be used which I felt might alarm parents and lead to them infer that we were doing something outside normal every day setting practice. Secondly, it simply added to the wordage of the documentation and therefore the reading and engagement that these two busy groups of people were required to do. I did not consider this to be either respectful, helpful or particularly honest. It made me reflect on the whole process of gaining ethical approval and wonder if it would be more effective as a researcher to sit before the committee and be able to articulate and justify ethical decisions before gaining approval.

Unforeseen ethical issue

One ethical issue that I had not considered at the ethics application stage was the fact that some of my participants might inadvertently be people who I had engaged with in a tutor – student capacity previously. This was because I may have come across them when they were enrolled as university students in my workplace. Immediately this positioned both myself as researcher and them as researched in contradictory roles which could have implications of power and self-presentation on the data collection.

It could be considered that power issues impacted greatly both on whether some participants felt they were obliged to participate and then on the nature of their participation. For example, participants may have felt obliged to say yes to me if they felt I was asking them as their former university tutor. Thus, I may have been positioning us both in 'dual roles' (Shi, 2006); I was both teacher and researcher whilst the participants may have seen themselves not just as a professional but also as a former student. As their former tutor I had previously had the 'power' to award marks and grades so they may have positioned me as a 'marker' rather than a researcher. In turn this perceived power imbalance could have impacted on the unrehearsed nature of the responses I was hoping for as some participants may have felt compelled to present themselves in a certain way.

A common theme in all social science research is how participants may choose to present themselves and how this can impact negatively on the data produced

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and therefore the claims the research can make (Silverman, 2014). In this context I must question whether these particular participants were sharing with me unrehearsed ideas about practitioner gender and play or whether they wanted to present themselves as professionals who could engage in both official anti-discriminatory policy speak (Rohrmann and Brody, 2015) and academically informed discussions about play. It is important then to consider here how both power and presentation issues were minimised.

With hindsight I recognise that the use of the qualitative surveys did afford these particular participants an opportunity in part to address the possible power imbalance created by our 'dual role' (Shi, 2006); the surveys handed some control to them in that they could choose to participate or not and if they did participate they could participate anonymously. By completing the survey in their own time, they had the opportunity to challenge me as they saw fit; they then had the opportunity to build on this challenge in the interview if they wished to participate.

Therefore, the juxtaposition of former student and participant added another layer of ethical complexity which I had not foreseen. Issues of power could have impacted on the data collected but these issues were diluted by participants both asserting their voice in their responses and having the opportunity to not participate or withdraw at any stage. Nor should we dismiss the notion that as a researcher I was choosing to see my participants as professionals with a voice rather than as part of a student/teacher hierarchy.

The role of critical friends in this research

In the interests of transparency, I will give more detail here about the critical friends alluded to in Table 3.4 outlining both who they were and what their input was. As one who has worked in education for many years, a normal part of my profession would be to have critical friends I could discuss my reflective practice with (Costa and Kallick, 1993). A definition of a critical friend offered by Costa and Kallick (1993) aligns well with my consideration of this role as:

> a trusted person who asks provocative questions, ...offers critique of a   person's work as a friend ...takes the time to understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward. The friend is an advocate for the success of that work (p. 50).

Two key critical friends supported me on the latter half of my research journey. One worked in the discipline of Teacher Education and was at the same stage on her doctoral journey as I was. Although her work had a different focus to mine (class and Higher Education) it was the intersection of her interest (class) with mine (gender) that led to our most thought provoking conversations. The second critical friend worked within the same discipline (Early Childhood Studies) and at the same time as my writing of the thesis we were also co-authoring a book which focused on research in the discipline of Early Childhood

Studies (Bolshaw and Josephidou, forthcoming). This meant our conversations centred more around research methodologies.

Although I did not originally consider the role of critical friends at the design stage of my research, as my research journey developed I realised the importance of having peers in such a role and on completion of the research I recognised much more how important their presence had been. They were not 'recruited' as critical friends nor was any job specification discussed however looking back on the process I can see that their key roles included holding me accountable in terms of setting goals for completion, reading and giving critical feedback on my work and asking me questions which challenged my thinking. All the while this was done in the spirit of friendship so that I felt encouraged and cheered on.

Therefore, it can be seen that the critical friends to this piece of research offered support, challenge and an additional means of accountability. They did this predominantly by asking questions, listening to my articulation of ideas and then asking further questions. Sometimes these were 'provocative' questions (Costa and Kallick, 1993, p. 50) but more often they were asked by one who was taking 'the time to understand the context of...[my]...work' (ibid). At the same time their questions supported me in developing my own reflexivity and therefore in turn understanding the context I was researching within.

Conclusion

This chapter has clearly set out the research decisions that were made and consequently adapted in an attempt to develop a greater understanding of practitioner gender and approaches to play. I have demonstrated how my identity as a researcher has influenced the design of the research and how it proceeded. I have endeavoured to be transparent about any claims the research can make and attempted to signpost its 'trustworthiness' by clearly setting out my methods. Underpinning all of this has been a determination to show how ethical issues have informed these decisions and how the research design has promoted 'the voices of women and men who work in the 0–8 sector in the UK [and who] are rarely heard' (Brownhill and Oates, 2016). At the same time, I recognise that though my research will give them a voice, it may also be judging and categorising them so could be accused of taking their voice away. Nevertheless, its intention has always been to contribute to Bruner's recommendation that there should be:

> a constantly reviewing dialogue between those who spend time asking questions about children and those who work more practically with them on a day-to-day basis in playgroups, nurseries, and the like' (Bruner, 1983, p. 60).

The next chapter will show what happened when this research design was implemented. It will set out the findings provided by data that were collected to answer the research question:

What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts

on their approaches to play?

Chapter 4 Findings

This chapter will set out the meanings I have created (Piantanida et al., 2004) through my analysis of the collected data in order to answer the research question: *What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?* As discussed in the previous chapter (Chapter 3 Methodology) the data was gathered through qualitative surveys and one-to-one interviews. The findings are structured around five themes which have been chosen to show how the coding of the data has been organised to answer the research question. There is also a demonstration of how these themes link, following Thomas' advice (2013, p. 235) that often a lack of connection between the themes can be a weakness of both qualitative research and working in the interpretivist paradigm.

The problematic nature of gender research, which was set out in Chapter 1 (Introduction), did surface during the analysis of the data. However, just because this type of research has its difficulties does not mean that it should be avoided (Thomas, 2013). Such qualitative gender research can lend itself to a more holistic understanding (Anderson, 2012) of performances of gender (Butler, 1990) and can support practitioner thinking about gender and the ECEC workforce in more critical ways. There was, at times, a self-conscious presentation of self by participants yet they were not overly cautious about challenging me or questioning my approach. This was apparent in both the survey and the interviews when some questioned the very nature of the research. **P2 (**f; 47; 24 years; s) seemed to want to challenge the popular

discourse that more males were needed in the workforce; she wrote in the survey:

> *The suggestion that children need both male and female practitioners may not be correct*

P4 (f; 45; 18 years; s) adopted an almost accusatory tone which led me to wonder if I had been a little naïve in proposing the research question and was indeed guilty of adding to a discourse which thus reinforced gender stereotypes. She stated in the survey:

> *A diverse workforce in early years is of course welcomed in meeting the needs of children. However, I also feel we would be limiting the worth of our male colleagues if we were to concentrate too heavily on their suitability to fulfil a specific 'gender role' in play. Whilst elements of practice may be influenced by their gender, to define the importance of their role in such simple terms (or assume they will offer and/or adopt traditionally documented male characteristics during play scenarios) would be restricting and discriminatory. Our male practitioners demonstrate enthusiasm, commitment, sensitivity and a flexible approach to effectively meet the needs of children across all aspects of their learning and development, in as many varied ways as their female colleagues within the setting*

On one level she may have been adopting a 'gender blind' (Hogan, 2012) or 'discourse of denial' (Solomon et al., 2005) tone as will be discussed in **Theme**

1 in this chapter. Yet on another level, by choosing the word 'flexible' she may have been recognising the need for a gender flexible approach (Warin and Adriany, 2017).

As an interpretivist researcher I am not attempting to discover one certain, fixed truth but I realise that 'research is a social activity that can be powerfully affected by the researcher's own motivations and values' (Blaxter et al., 2010, p. 14). In this study I am reflecting on the way that certain members of society, here a small sample of ECEC practitioners, choose to discuss and reveal their practices. In so doing, I am unearthing and highlighting their 'usage of gender scripts' (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015, p. 6) in relation to play pedagogy. My choice of the verb 'unearth' here demonstrates my agency as a researcher and a recognition that I am actively looking for these scripts rather than passively waiting for them to 'reveal' themselves.

The code and themes decided on therefore did not 'emerge' independently from the data (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 161). To use the metaphor of the sculptor suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013), I did not stand in front of my block of marble waiting for the completed statue of my findings to burst out. Instead I began to fashion it led by my reading of the literature, my professional identity and my chosen theoretical lens (Thomas, 2013, p. 272) as my tools. Codes were chosen because they were evident across the data set rather than the focus of one particular set of data (Guest et al., 2006). This did not mean that I dismissed ideas if they were limited in reference. Two examples to illustrate this are, firstly, that almost all pieces of data included the code '*gender-blind*

discourse', but only two '*making self vulnerable*'. They were both treated as equally valid in terms of answering the research question. It was unavoidable that at times my previous reading of the literature influenced the codes. I am aware that on the one hand I may have 'narrow[ed]… [my] analytic field of vision at the expense of other potentially crucial aspects' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86). Subsequently I recognise I have actively looked for ways to draw these codes into themes which would help in my making sense of the research question (Piantanida et al, 2004) and answering it (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Table 4.1 sets out the codes decided on and how these were organised into themes. All codes decided on are presented in italics. The table then illustrates how I finally decided upon grouping them with the emboldened text giving the theme for each collection of codes. Altogether there are 71 codes although at first glance it may appear that there are 74 because '*Men are more exciting'* was counted 3 times and '*Listener'* twice. Titles in bold are the initial themes. The numbers which follow the themes have no quantifiable value in terms of analysing the data; they are merely there to support the reader's understanding of how I have arrived at the overall number of 71 codes.

Types of play = 15							
Indoor and outdoor play	**Gender distinct approaches = 14**						
Role play	Men are more exciting						
Time and space to play	Hypervisibility of male	**Practitioner as professional = 12**					
Play for wellbeing	Challenge	Tensions					
Physical play	Female attributes	Addressing gender equality					
Male offering a lower level of play	Spontaneous	Importance of environment	**Role of the adult = 9**				
Play as a tool for learning	Patient	Values of setting	Importance of questioning	**Play labels = 8**			
Risk taking	Gender distinct approaches	Children's agency	Gender flexible practitioner	Mediator	**Emotion of play = 7**		
Man play	General gender differences	Intellectual aspect of the job	Listener	Listener	Men are more exciting		
Resources	Native or immigrant discourse	Unique child	Role model discourse	Organiser	Emotion	**Connell's framework = 5**	
Hierarchy of play	Glass escalator	Gender-blind discourse	Policing play	Assessor	Passion	Men are more exciting	**Intersectionality = 4**
Construction	Knowledge of male practitioners	So what?	Socialisation discourse	Observer	Making self vulnerable	Males as risk takers	Personality
Rough and tumble	Feminisation	Professional discourse	Attachment discourse	Stage manager	Enjoyment	Females anxiety about risk	Cultural influences
Importance of play	Boys	Theoretical discourse	Parents	Planner	Excitement	Marginalised masculinities discourse	Intersectionality
Adults can play	Reinforce stereotypical behaviour through play	Aware of power relationship discourse	Practitioner as parent	Co-player	Nurturing	Subordinate male	Age of practitioner

Table 4.1 Codes and themes

The initial theme names were chosen as a best fit to summarise the codes; there was no concern at this stage that some codes would link to more than one theme. One example of this is the code '*Men are more exciting'.* At first, I was unsure which was the best fit for this code; I therefore temporarily linked it to three different themes (***Gender distinct approaches; Emotion of play; Connell's framework***). Once I was satisfied with this early naming and sorting of codes, I then looked to see how the themes could be used to answer the research question. This process was not without issues. On the one hand I wished to adopt a constructionist/interpretivist approach to analysis (Flick, 2014, p. 421) where I was 'looking… beyond what a participant has said or what has been written… [in] an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications'. At the same time, I wanted to make sure I stayed true to one of the purposes of the research (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 169) which was 'to help to improve practice in an area' (ibid.). **Table 4.2** demonstrates how the initial themes evolved into the final themes that were decided on to answer the research question. One example of this evolution can be seen by looking back at **Table 4.1** and the fourteen codes collected under the initial theme ***Gender distinct approaches.*** As I pondered on how this theme helped me answer the research question I decided it was better to divide into two different themes *i) **Males bring something different*** and *ii) **Males are constrained in their practice.*** In the left-hand column of **Table 4.2** are the initial draft themes decided on at the end of the first complete analysis. When I subsequently looked at these themes alongside the research question, I decided to modify them so that there was a better alignment. The

middle column shows these final themes and then the right-hand column shows

how these could answer the research question.

Draft themes decided on at end of initial analysis	Final themes decided on in response to research question	What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?
Types of play	Types of play	It depends on the type of play.
Gender distinct approaches	Males bring something different	Practitioners talk about males behaving differently to females and hint that males bring something specific.
	Males are constrained in their practice	The male cannot be as effective, as he is constrained in his practice as 'other' or 'outsider' or just because he hasn't got the necessary skills.
Practitioner as professional	There is really no difference	Practitioners claim there is no difference.
Role of the adult	Role of the adult	Some practitioners are able to be flexible in their practice regardless of their gender and some practitioners may feel constrained by the child-centred approach.
Emotion of play	Types of play	It depends on the type of play.
Play labels	Role of the adult	Some practitioners are able to be flexible in their practice regardless of their gender and some practitioners may feel constrained by the child-centred approach.
	Types of play	It depends on the type of play.
Connell's framework	Males bring something different	Practitioners talk about males behaving differently to females and hint that males bring something specific.
	Males are constrained in their practice	The male cannot be as effective, as he is constrained in his practice as 'other' or 'outsider' or just because he hasn't got the necessary skills.
Intersectionality	There's really no difference	Practitioners claim there is no difference.

Table 4.2 Development of themes

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By making explicit the process by which I have analysed the data I have demonstrated my commitment to trustworthiness in the whole analysis process. I have endeavoured to address Briggs' criticism (1986, p. 102) cited in Arksey and Knight (1999, p. 149) about the 'commonsensical, unreflexive manner in which most analyses of interview data are conducted' by being transparent about factors which may have influenced how I carried it out. I have also allowed myself to be challenged by critical friends (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 166) being prepared to change the direction of the analysis if necessary.

The five themes decided on were:

i) *There is really no difference*

ii) *Males bring something different*

iii) *Males are constrained in their practice*

iv) *Types of play*

v) *The role of the adult*

As I now discuss each theme, I will offer a clearer definition of each one, show how the themes link together and demonstrate how they could answer the research question:

What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?

I have used an organiser 'Question and Answer' for each thematic discussion. This is both to support the reader and to maintain my own clear focus as a researcher and writer. Thus, each section below, which is structured around the

five themes, begins by repeating the research question and then follows this with a short response. Following this, both a definition of the theme and a detailed explanation of the response is given illustrated by example quotations drawn from the data. Participants are referred to as **P** followed by a number to distinguish their responses. To support the reader's understanding further I have then included additional information in brackets relating to their gender, age, amount of years working in ECEC and also whether the data is from the survey or interview. For example, **P1** (f; 41; 8 years; s) denotes that Participant 1 is female, 41 years old and has worked in ECEC for eight years. It also indicates to the reader that the particular excerpt from the data is taken from the survey.

Theme 1: There's really no difference

Q: What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?
A: They claim there is no difference.

This theme was used to describe all the codes which suggested the practitioners were adopting a gender-blind approach (Hogan, 2012); there were many claims that they did not recognise any differences between male and female approaches to playing with the children. An illustration of this is when **P1 (**f; 41; 8 years; s) states:

To be honest in my own past experiences of working with male practitioners, I didn't see a significant difference in their play approach, other than due to personality rather than gender. For example, one male practitioner I worked with was very loud and boisterous with the children and would play very physical games. But at the same time, I have worked with several female practitioners who have been equally loud, boisterous and physical with the children

Some hinted at ideas of intersectionality (Christensen and Jensen, 2014) when they articulated that perhaps other factors combined with gender to affect practitioner practice. **P4** (f; 45; 18 years; i) thought it pertinent to highlight the ages of the male practitioners she had worked with, alluding to the fact that their age may have had some impact on their practice:

Working with two male practitioners of similar age… both in their early 20s… I have noticed differences in their approaches

whilst **P15** (f; 21; 4 years; i) commented positively in the interview on how older practitioners (female) brought lots of skill and expertise to play:

We've had one woman who… she's only just left… she's in her 60s… you know she got on with all the children… loved her and everything but obviously with age comes experience the more

experienced you kind of have the more confident you get… the

younger practitioners [are] maybe a bit shyer especially when

they are starting

Although several participants recognised that other factors might combine with gender to impact on approaches to play, only **P13** (f; 21; 4 years; s) highlighted that cultural differences could inform how practitioners worked within a play pedagogy. She emphasised a Piagetian focus on providing an appropriate learning environment (Wray, 1999; Strong-Wilson and Ellis, 2009) combined with a Vygotskian (Nicolopoulou, 1993) or Brunerian (Bruner, 1978) consideration of learning through interaction by saying:

The aim is to create an environment safe for children to do

so and help, get involved where necessary, but following the

child's instruction. Prompts or key questions may be asked,

to support this process, allowing the child to think, which is a

western view, but is necessary within this context

I thought the fact that she emphasised the western view was an intriguing point that recalled Rogoff et al.'s view (2010) that effective learning is not dependent on constant adult–child interaction. I wanted to develop this idea further with **P13.** She was the only one to raise this and also the only participant to identify with a non-English cultural background, so I made the assumption she was

relating this to her own ethnic background. **P13** agreed to be interviewed but when I tried to question her on this point she linked it to some reading she had been doing which looked at how practitioners worked across the globe with young children, so the discussion never really developed.

Others agreed that gender could have some impact but only when combined with other attributes or dispositions:

I would imagine that personal preference, levels of understanding around the value of play as well as personality and enjoyment of play would impact on how practitioners play so gender may just be an additional factor within this (**P21**: f; 42; 8 years; s)

I think all practitioners have preferences for certain types of play, and will naturally be influenced by their own childhood play preferences and experiences, which may well be quite gender specific **(P1:** f; 41; 8 years; s**)**

In the above statement, **P1** hints at an understanding of how socialisation (Adriany, 2015, p. 76) can influence gendered behaviours though this does contradict somewhat her other quotation above which refused to see gender differences. This self-contradiction was not only apparent in **P1's** discourse but was a frequent occurrence in the data. I met one participant in the street a few

days after our interview had taken place. It seemed on returning home she had pondered on the interview and her responses; she apologised for contradicting herself. I reassured her that this was no problem and reiterated that I could delete anything she wished from the interview script or if she had additional thoughts she could email them to me; however, she chose to do neither.

I considered the fact that she had gone home to reflect on her responses was an indication of the importance of opening up this kind of debate with practitioners to support them in exploring gender issues more critically (Hogan, 2012). This phenomenon was seen with other participants who often used the phrase '*I've never really thought about it before*' in response to some of the survey and interview questions focusing on gender. Others indicated that knowing they were coming for interview had really made them consider their perspective. **P5 (**f; 22; 5 years; i) admitted to such gender blindness (Hogan, 2012) that it was only at the interview she realised that she had actually worked with a male practitioner when on placement. She said:

> *When I actually thought about it… male practitioners coming to the interview…. I actually forgot that the TA[teaching assistant] was a male practitioner… I thought I **have** [her emphasis] worked with a male practitioner cos I just thought of him as one of us*

Many participants used the word 'personality' to describe the key influence on practitioner pedagogical choices. There appeared to be a strong thread that this was the defining impact on practice and they appeared to understand the term 'personality' in an essentialist way as something that neither they or their colleagues had any agency over:

> *I think that the gender does not impact on how they play with young children. I think it is more about the personality of the person rather than gender* **(P11:** f; 28; 10 years; i)

At the same time, I noticed an initial unwillingness to make any links between gender and personality or recognise how gender may have helped form personality. **P4** (f; 45; 18 years; i) illustrated this when she spoke in the interview about her work colleagues and their use of the outdoor classroom:

> *I think there are certain members of staff who generally like to be out[side] myself included. So I would be in our mud kitchen that we set up… but that would be the same for me as it would be for him [the male practitioner]… let's get messy… let's just go and make a load of mud and pots and paints and crates and things and that would be the same for either of us… there are certain people who don't like to be outdoors because they don't like to be messy… and there are some people who like to be outdoors more when we've got things like cosy*

areas etc so they like the quiet calmness of outside if it's one of those quiet literacy or math activities outside but if it's a full on dig in there and equipment things …it's just a personal choice

At times, as the researcher, I found it quite frustrating that there seemed to be an apparent refusal on the part of some to make links between any social conditioning and practice. This is an emotion that Hogan (2012) succumbed to when trying to explore gender with her ECEC student teachers. I questioned whether participants were following 'cultural scripts about how one should normally express oneself on particular topics' (Alvesson, 2003, p. 169) or if they were sharing unrehearsed thoughts. Yet Diefenbach (2009) suggests that these 'cultural scripts' (p. 880) which arise from the participants 'first level of reflection' (ibid.) could be most useful in answering the research question as 'it is evidence for the dominant ideology/mainstream thinking and a crucial part of the social and political dimensions of social systems' (p. 892). In addition, it was a reminder to myself to remain true to the interpretivist paradigm that I was working within; thinking about participant responses in any deficit way could lead to accusations of positivism.

When I reflected on my expectations of the participants, I was assuming they would have the same academic interest in these matters as myself, just as Hogan before me had done (2012). They were more steeped in what they had observed in practice and their own personal understanding and bias. There

were other challenges to my previous assumptions in responses around this theme; **P15** especially surprised me in her interview responses. Because of her level of education (Level 6 degree level) and her relatively young age (21) I assumed she would bring a much more gender sensitive (Warin and Adriany, 2017) perspective; however, she was clear there were differences between females practitioners who she always referred to as 'we' and male practitioners who she always referred to as 'the boys'. She did not take an exclusively essentialist approach but rather was very reflective when she considered her experiences and what she had observed in the practice of at least six male practitioners. She had a clear interest in gender issues, having recently completed an undergraduate research project on gender play choices of young children. This meant that her responses were quite analytical and came across as an honest reflection of what she had witnessed rather than a use of professional discourse.

Regardless of the fact that most participants adopted a gender-blind approach initially, as the interview proceeded many developed a gender-binary standpoint which contradicted their previously espoused gender-neutral view with its emphasis on freedom of choice 'not as men and women, but as individuals' (Connell, 2011, p. 39). **P4** (f; 45; 18 years; i) made assumptions that we would have a shared understanding of gender related issues when she said:

We've got some [practitioners] who like to sit in the pirate ship quite a lot… we've got quite a few photographs of two of the ladies who always sit in the pirate ship behind the children and singing all sorts of sea shanties… and so they'll be doing 'aha there me maties' and all the talk and all the things that you expect the male practitioners to get in there… cutlass and all the rest of it… but no we've got two particular ladies who love all of that

She assumed that we would both identify this behaviour as 'male' but, from my perspective, this was not 'male' type behaviour at all; I had probably done something similar myself as a practitioner as indeed had many female practitioners I had observed. On reflection after this interview, it made me wonder how many assumptions I too had made about a shared understanding of gender practices.

Hogan (2012) uses the term 'gender blind' to describe the prevalent attitude amongst the student teachers she was working with; she was struck by the superficial manner they engaged with the gender debate, seeing it as 'unproblematic '. I also got a sense of resistance from my participants 'to exploring gender critically' (Hogan, 2012, p. 1); this was exemplified by **P3** (f; 28; 5 years; s) who summarised in the survey:

I think that male and female practitioners both bring fantastic aspects to play for young children and that they are able to provide similar opportunities and impact on children's play equally

It may be that there is a much more explicit denial of the importance of gender so that the participants are using 'discourses of denial' which utilise similar 'liberalist notions of individualism and meritocracy' which Solomon et al. (2005, p. 147) noticed when they asked student teachers to engage with notions of racism. In this context, it was white teachers being required to address issues of white privilege and so is perhaps understandable that they would find this kind of conversation both challenging and uncomfortable. However, Connell also noticed that even within gender diverse workforces there was a 'distinct element of gender denial' (Connell, 2011, p. 36).

This gender denial amongst my participants could be linked to the lack of agency that practitioners feel they have as a workforce. If they feel they are without agency then they will have little motivation to challenge the current status quo in ECEC, including the gender makeup of the workforce. They may feel they have no power to change their practices or challenge the practice of others. If reform, in terms of gender balance, does come to ECEC it will be something else 'done to them' rather than something that the workforce has had control over themselves (Brownhill and Oates, 2016). From a different perspective, Tennhoff et al. (2015) highlight in their research the gender

neutrality of a professional discourse. They maintain that 'professionals' (here ECEC practitioners) use it as, on the one hand, a kind of armour to protect themselves from accusations of discriminatory talk or on the other, of being 'the unwanted other' (Tennhoff et al., 2015, p. 342); this might be a less judgemental way of viewing this 'discourse of denial' (Solomon et al., 2005).

Participants did allude to the necessity of addressing gender equality on a much wider scale. **P1** (f; 41; 8 years; s) asserted:

If children see healthy respectful relationships taking place between male and female practitioners they will learn by example

By suggesting this idea, she may be proposing that having male practitioners is good for wider gender issues in society. There was also a general unease with the male often being portrayed as the 'bad cop' or disciplinarian (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015, p. 2) in the education system. **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) suggested:

I know I remember from my own schooling as such… I worked the whole way through from reception even from pre-school from early years nursery all the way up to year 6… there was one male member of staff... he left the year that I was there right… so all the way through my youth education up until I went to [secondary] school I'd never been taught by a male… this year 6 teacher used to be a scary guy he was the scary man … 'what's

going on?' and then suddenly you're in secondary school and there's like

men everywhere you know

There are also echoes of the 'scary man' in **P1**'s (f; 41; 8 years) survey when she talks about children going to secondary school and meeting a male teacher for the first time.

To conclude this theme, it is important to recognise that there was an eagerness, on the part of most of the participants, to present a denial of the impact of gender on approaches to play. This was coupled with an apparent refusal to engage critically with any discussion of gender differences; most were not comfortable to look for differences between themselves and their colleagues and some even questioned me about the appropriateness of the research. However, they inferred a very different binary discourse between the lines. At other times participants contradicted themselves, demonstrating 'attitudinal layers' (Rohrmann and Brody, 2015, p. 411) of understanding and perceptions, and did state more explicitly that there were gender differences in practitioner practices and behaviours including in approaches to play. Sometimes they realised they were speaking in a contradictory manner and pointed this out themselves. The participants also recognised that gender can interact with other factors such as age, culture or level of education to inform approaches to play. They were especially keen to emphasise the part they felt personality had to play. **Theme 1** was the theme that revealed most the limitations of the research

design. The participants contradicted themselves, meandering from gender-blind discourses, through gender denial discourses and onto gender essentialist discourses. Furthermore, this ambiguity was compounded by the '…contradictions and nuances in their understandings and expressions of masculinity' which Anderson also highlighted as a feature of his research (ibid.).

The following two themes will pick up on the practitioner gender differences inferred by participants and consider first how male practitioners might bring something 'refreshingly different' (Wohlgemuth, 2015, p. 401) to play in **Theme 2**, and then in **Theme 3**, how they might have different approaches because they are constrained in their practice.

Theme 2: Men bring something different

Q: What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?
A: Practitioners talk about males behaving differently to females and hint that males bring something specific.

All participants did signpost gender distinct approaches even if they did it very subtly. Some of the responses were 'salt and peppered' with inferences that could be interpreted as positioning males as bringing something superior to the

world of ECEC in their approaches to play. The well-documented, role model discourse (Brownhill, 2015a; 2015b) was utilised constantly:

For some young children, a male practitioner may be their only male role model, and their only experience of play with an adult male **(P1:** f; 41; 8 years; s)

I do feel that a child with no input from a male at home would benefit greatly in having a male practitioner in order that they do learn that there are differences in the way males and females see things **(P2:** f; 47; 24 years; s)

Many of our single mothers have commented that they appreciate the presence and influence of male practitioners in providing a positive male figure where this is absent within the home **(P4**: f; 45; 18 years; s)

According to Connell's framework (2005) this could then position the male hegemonically as in 'only a man can show a boy how to be a man', although this perspective is qualified in part by some recognition that the needs of young girls should to be taken into consideration as well:

Male and female practitioners would be particularly beneficial for children who may come from a one parent family, who may lack a role model of one gender **(P3**: f; 28; 5 years; s**)**

Children would benefit dramatically from both male and female practitioners as both genders bring a different style of play and approach to play which would in turn benefit the children and be a positive experience for both boys and girls to experience the different styles of play and understand that they do not necessarily need to engage in gender specific play **(P16:** f; 23; 9 years (sic); s)

Elsewhere, although it seemed as if the participants wanted to adopt a gender-blind perspective (Hogan, 2012), they also illustrated how male practitioners could, 'complicitly' (Connell, 2005) have the potential to reinforce gender stereotypes by interacting with children in gender specific ways during play:

The children often look to the male for rough and tumble play or construction play **(P2:** f; 47; 24 years; s)

I also worked with a very gentle quiet male practitioner who would often play home corner role play games with the children, brushing dolls hair, having tea parties etc. He had a young daughter of his

own, so this possibly impacted on his play with the children **(P1:** f;

41; 8 years; s**)**

The quotation above could be interpreted in at least two different ways; the male practitioner could be modelling gender flexible behaviours (Warin and Adriany, 2017) by showing how a man can 'do caring' or he may be reinforcing gender by modelling to the child 'how little girls should play'.

 P5 (f; 22; 5 years; s) described other role play scenarios which positioned male practitioners differently to female:

> *Male practitioners can sometimes be seen as more comfortable*
> *in playing certain games with children and taking different roles*
> *in role play scenarios. This may mean children role play*
> *different scenarios with a male to a female practitioner, in my*
> *experiences children have set up hospitals and assigned the*
> *nurse roles to me and the doctor role to the male practitioner*

P12 (m; 24; 5 years; i) constantly reiterated his sports background, how this influenced his practice very much by encouraging the children to challenge themselves and adopt a 'have a go' kind of attitude, which could be linked to the idea of developing resilience in the children (Hoffman, 2009). He recounted watching the children playing on the balancing equipment:

And then I started saying I know he's got good balance …try and

challenge him cos that's something that I've been brought up to

do… the competitive side of things… so 'can you walk

backwards, can you cross your legs' and he was able to walk

with one foot behind the other and do that

Some also began to use the feminisation discourse (Skelton, 2012; Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015; Mistry and Sood, 2015; Brownhill and Oates, 2016) in part which seems to suggest that females have certain approaches and practices with children and that it is not beneficial for children to be exclusively exposed to these practices. **P4** (f; 45; 18 years; i) adopted a deficit model of maternal approaches when she discussed her own practices:

Mumsy, caring, comforting… 'oh you've hurt yourself… I'll pick you

up'…nurturing probably a little bit too much sometimes and I need

to allow these children space to build their own resilience and do

their own things as well so I know that I am guilty of that… being

a little bit too maternal… and I'm getting better at it

She had been working with children for nine years and had qualifications at postgraduate level and a real passion (Colley, 2006) about the work she did; yet here she was comparing herself negatively to a younger, less qualified male who had much less experience than she did but whose practice she admired.

Elsewhere though, she had constantly denied that gender was an issue and indeed was the one that had challenged me most about the focus of the research when she completed the survey.

Others wrote:

> *Sometimes I think young children are often surrounded by female practitioners in early years, often all female teachers in many small primary schools, then launched into secondary education where male teachers are part of a very formal, often intimidating environment – More male early years teachers are needed!* **(P1: f; 41; 8 years; s)**

Once again this is positioning males hegemonically (Connell, 2005) which of necessity in this framework means the female practitioners are then viewed in some kind of deficit way. Within this discourse was also an indication by some that female anxiety about risk taking, in particular in the outside classroom, meant that often this became the domain of the male practitioner. I had the following conversation about this with **P5 (**f; 22; 5 years; i) where she recounted how both herself and another female member of staff worked with a male practitioner:

P5: *When we asked them what they wanted to do the children did usually want to go outside then **K**… the male, would usually take them outside*

Int: *wow… why?*

P5: *I don't know I suppose he was seen as the fun one so if we went outside I was a bit more conscious on like… oh we can't do that… Oh the climbing frame I don't want them to fall… Oh we can't have the bikes and balls out together*

A common thread through their discourse linked the idea of risky play to the gender of the practitioner so they seemed to be suggesting that men were much more willing to engage in and encourage this kind of play as Sandseter (2014) had also found.

The outdoor area, a key area for risky play, was signposted by many as the preserve of male practitioners, mirroring Emilsen and Koch's findings (2010). Participants indicated that this has happened for a variety of reasons. Sometimes the male practitioners used the outdoor area because they were 'sent there' by the females (Sargent, 2005; Cushman, 2008); sometimes it was because they claimed it as their own territory because they felt more

comfortable there, as Emilsen and Koch (2010) had previously found. **P2 (**f; 47; 24 years; i) told me that her female staff:

> *don't want to get dirty and cold …it took years to get the staff happy to be outside in the winter …even now we still have members of staff who try and find ways not to go out*

There is a difficulty for practitioners if they believe they have to engage in certain behaviours or follow certain scripts (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015) because of their gender; some male practitioners told me they felt obliged to go outside and 'play football' when they were actually much more skilled at developing children's language. On the other hand, a female practitioner could be very keen to engage with children in the type of play that males are stereotypically expected to do. **P17** (m; 22; 5 years; i) mentioned that as soon as the children saw him they would kick a football towards him; almost as if it was a conditioned response. **P11** (f; 28; 10 years; i) told me how she loved football and being outside, but she was aware that this made her come across as '*not very feminine'* leading me to the assumption that she felt her gender was being policed.

If men 'claim' the outside area as their own 'island of masculinity' (Egeland and Brown, 1988) then this could be a demonstration of 'privileged irresponsibility' (Tronto, 2002). Warin and Gannerud (2014) highlight how Tronto (2002) uses

this term to describe how men who are engaging in 'care and teaching practices within educational contexts' (p. 193) may be able to pick and choose which aspects of care they engage in 'because it is not seen to be their "natural" work' (ibid.). By choosing to place themselves in the outdoor area are male practitioners taking advantage of this 'privileged irresponsibility' or, on the contrary, are they are addressing a gap that needs filling? The latter perspective is seen in a variety of responses, one of which was **P18** (m; 19; 1 year; i) who described how, in the outdoor area, he takes over the sports activities because he cannot join in with the conversations of the female practitioners:

it is difficult cos I did sort of choose that role because… it was mainly because I didn't feel comfortable standing there with the teaching assistants so I went off and now I am… now I am assigned that by default because that's what I chose to do at the start

He hastens to add that he believes this is not just to do with gender but also with his age:

Obviously I can participate… not necessarily… the gender… it might be age because I am the youngest person… so it might be some other demographic but it is definitely something where it is noticeable that I can't always contribute [to the conversation] as much as I want

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This mirrors the description of the outdoor area that **P11** (f; 28; 10 years; i) gives when she says:

I think especially when you go outside a lot of people won't play with the children either they'll just stand and be the adult

P17 (m; 22; 5 years; i) is sent on forest school training, with its focus on outdoor activities, because none of the females are willing to do it; they are '*wussies*' as his line manager (**P2:** f; 47; 24 years; s) tells me. **P5** (f; 22; 5 years; i) relates how it is the male practitioner who always goes outside because the females are not comfortable there:

He'd always be the one to take them out and even sometimes he'd take… if they were making stuff he'd take that outside on the table... and then he'd make stuff with them and he'd play with them

In Emilsen and Koch's research (2010), which noted that male practitioners in Austria and Norway were more comfortable in the outdoor area, they suggested that focusing on the outdoor area would be a good strategy to encourage more men into the workforce. This did not come out in my data explicitly; however, there was the discussion of enjoyment of physical activities or more sports-like activities that would be best placed in the outdoor classroom. Both **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) and **P17** (m; 22; 5 years; i) stated how much they enjoyed playing

sport or football with the children. Others assigned this role to the male practitioners with a particular emphasis on football, which I found quite surprising as we were talking about young children who I assumed were too young to be already engaging with 'football culture'. This is a culture which Anderson claims can have a profound effect on how gender is passed on from generation to generation (2012). This point was illustrated by **P14** (f; 47; 7 years; s) who wrote in response to the survey question 'Why would young children need both male and female practitioners to play with them?':

> *To bring a difference of ideas, for example women practitioners...*
> *tender and gentle with dolls etc, men practitioners – football! I*
> *know that sounds very stereotypical!*

Some of these responses could suggest that the issue is not that men claim the outdoor/football/sport role as their own but rather that they are positioned thus both by the female practitioners and the children. Their presence seems to trigger a response in the children; **P17** (m; 22; 5 years; i) mentioned that the children would just begin kicking a football at him as soon as they saw him and **P15** (f; 21; 4 years; i) had the following dialogue with me about an almost behavioural response from the children towards male practitioners:

> **P15***: The children reacted differently to the males than… to us I*
> *noticed how… children would run up to them and climb on them in a*

different kind of way and act differently to a male than they did to us... a softer kind of approach with us but they kind of climb automatically on the male

Int: *Have you got any idea where that comes from?*

P15: *I'm not sure... they [male practitioners] were very enthusiastic all the time and they... were happy to pick up the children and you know straight away as soon as they walked in ...more kind of a physical play with them whereas we were maybe more tender... kind of focused on the ones who were upset whereas they mainly focus on the ones that were wanting to play*

P11 (f; 28; 10 years; i) also attested to how the children seemed to immediately make a connection between a male practitioner and football:

But football is a big thing with males that I know and I think children do sort of look at men and think 'he'll play football with me right' whereas they might not look at a female and say she'll pay football with me

P11 (f; 28; 10 years; i) mentioned she also liked football and was happy to use the outdoor area. Yet she seemed resigned to the fact that the children did not perceive her as a 'football player'. **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) described how, even

if there were females in the outdoor area engaged in physical activity, the children would be more likely to surround the male practitioner. He understood this was because the female practitioner was more authoritarian. He described an incident when there were two male practitioners and one female in the outdoor area, all engaging in sports type activities with the children:

We had a lot more [children] over with us than the female member of staff… she did the whole same thing… [she was] more authoritarian probably with it… [we were] loud… that was our way of doing things… but they [the children] were definitely trying to get away with more with us

In this way **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) could be positioning himself, or is being positioned by the children, as the 'fun big brother' as described by Warin (2015).

Only one female indicated that she enjoyed sports type activities including football and being in the outdoor classroom. I asked her if she minded that it was always the male who took on this role in her setting. She shrugged her shoulders in response and appeared not to see it as a problem. This particular exchange highlighted my inexperience as an interviewer; I wanted to ask a question to support her engagement with the idea that this could be a negative situation in terms of how children may be conditioned into performing gender (Adriany, 2015). I realised I was beginning to position myself as a university

seminar lead and her as a reluctant student (Hogan, 2012) although she had never been a student of mine.

Males were often seen as more exciting by the children according to the practitioners. **P15** (f; 21; 4 years; i) had used the phrase 'more exciting' in the survey to describe male practitioners. In the interview, she developed this idea saying:

> *I think they react… the children reacted differently to the males than they did to us… I noticed how they especially …when they kind of came in the room children would run up to them and climb on them in a different kind of way and act differently to a male than they did to us*

Elsewhere **(Theme 4)** there is evidence that practitioners thought play should contain a fun and enjoyment element; by defining the male as a fun figure in this way they are perhaps signalling that the male approach is a superior one. **P20** (m; 41; 23 years; s) summed up what most of the participants had expressed when he wrote 'fun' three times in response to one question on the survey:

> *Play is sometimes a fun way of learning for children, it can help their learning and development in a fun way. It can enable children to take risks and try new things whilst having fun and enjoyment.*

These inferences of gender differences were occasionally tempered with a recognition that any differences may be due to socialisation and the construction of gender. **P1** (f; 41; 8 years; s) demonstrated a consideration of this when she said:

> *I'm sure at times we are all influenced by our childhood experiences when we interact with children in play, particularly when we need to read a situation or interpret the behaviour of a child. So, in that sense, male practitioners may well bring a different perspective and set of experiences, their interpretation of a situation, particularly regarding boy's play, may be more 'in tune' with the motivation of the boys involved.*

Yet there is another contradiction to this positioning of men both hegemonically and complicity; there is also an acknowledgement in participant responses that males may be marginalised in the workplace and therefore constrained in their practice. This is the focus of **Theme 3.**

Theme 3: Males are constrained in their practice

Q: What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?

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A: Some practitioners believe the male cannot be as effective, as he is constrained in his practice as 'other' or 'outsider' or because he does not have the necessary skills.

Although the male practitioner can be positioned hegemonically (Connell, 2005) in the data there is also an understanding demonstrated that he is an 'outsider'. This could leave him feeling marginalised (Connell, 2005) and without a voice. **P1** (f; 41; 8 years; s) wonders whether male practitioners' behaviour is different to females because they are in a minority and so they are 'othered' in the ECEC workforce (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015). She ponders:

> *I wonder, as male practitioners are usually in a minority in early years environments, whether their play approaches may be influenced by how they fit into a very female dominated team. Do they always have a voice when activities are planned or initiated in a setting?*

P17 (m; 22; 5 years; i) admitted that, although he really enjoyed working with children and got on well with his female colleagues, he doubted he would stay much longer in ECEC because he felt lonely and really missed having other male adults to connect with in the workplace. This admission mirrors Thornton and Bricheno's description of retention difficulties in primary teaching (2006). It also has echoes of **P18** (m; 19; 1 year; i) selecting sports-type behaviours in the outdoor classroom because he felt 'left out' as described above in **Theme 2.**

P13 (f; 21; 4 years; i) reflected this very same idea when she observed that any males who had come to work in play schemes she was involved in would often be apart, on their own, and how she had felt sorry for them.

P2 (f; 47; 24 years; s) who has been working with children for over 20 years, was much more explicit about the fact that male practitioners did not always seem to have the necessary skills:

> *I have worked with many male practitioners; the sense of play is often excitable and the children often look to the male for rough and tumble play or construction play. However, I have seen that more skilled practitioners are able to lead play away from this and offer the same skills and play as female practitioners.*

In stating this she is 'subordinating' male practices (Connell, 2005) and stressing that they need to become more like females but that not all of them could do this only the *'more skilled'*.

P12 (m; 24; 5 years; i) has noticed that as a male practitioner not all children feel comfortable with him:

> *There are some children here who don't feel comfortable working with me… I can see it… particularly this couple of girls you know when they are*

crying they won't come to me… I'll help them… they'll want to go to a
female member of staff

P13 (f; 21; 4 years; i), **P15** (f; 21; 4 years; i) and **P11** (f; 28; 10 years; i) made the same observation about how sometimes children, usually girls, could be reluctant to interact in play with the male practitioners. On the surface this may not seem particularly surprising; however, if we consider the opposite scenario of a child who would not approach a member of staff because they are female then we can see how difficult it must be for the male practitioner in his hypervisible mode. **P2 (**f; 47; 24 years; i)**,** who I noted does not remain convinced of the priority of the 'missing men' (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006) argument, still uses the term *'suffering'* to describe how male practitioners carry out their role and asserts that it is '*heart breaking'* to see this:

You know they do suffer because of that still which is heart breaking

In the interview, when I tried to unpick what she meant by using this emotive terminology, the discussion turned more to issues of safeguarding and accusations that can be levelled at male practitioners (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006; Brody, 2014; Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015; Wernersson, 2015). It is not the remit of this research to discuss these particular barriers that male practitioners must face; however, there can be no doubt that such barriers must impact on how the male approaches play if he always feels he is 'on show':

You know I think… it's fair to say that all females will have that extra vigilant eye with a male... for safeguarding and for making sure that they are stopping the bad play [meaning over boisterous in this context] **(P2:** f; 47; 24 years; i)

It may be that when **P2** references the concerns of the female practitioners and their 'extra vigilance', the underlying concern is not that a child will get hurt but that the male practitioners are being viewed through the same 'cloud of suspicion' (Brody, 2014, p. 352) that Brody claims is generated when men engage in caring behaviours with young children. There may be a concern that the male practitioner is becoming too intimate with the child if he engages in, for example, rough and tumble play. The male practitioner, on the contrary, may see this as an appropriate form of physical contact because it is an authentic way of performing their gender (Butler, 1990). Perhaps this is why males seem to enjoy being outside and females seem to encourage them to be there; both metaphorically and physically they are 'out in the open' with 'nothing and nowhere to hide.' However, this performance is problematic if they are thus modelling to children how to perform gender in defined ways; this is particularly true if predominantly boys engage with them in this kind of play. Furthermore, there are other interpretations of this kind of physical practice in relation to the males' sense of hypervisibility within the ECEC context.

Brody (2014) indicates that men have to look for different ways to demonstrate caring. They may either feel uncomfortable about, or be discouraged from, the 'hugging, kissing, lap sitting' behaviours which are the mark of the ECEC practitioner (2014, p. 352). If this is indeed the case then perhaps they are showing their care in different ways by engaging in the boisterous, physical activity that my participants said the children seemed to initiate with them. They are following the agency of the child, an idea developed in **Theme 5,** rather than imposing their own agenda as practitioner.

Children's agency is a thread that continually runs throughout participant contributions**. P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) recounts the tale of a little boy who would have nothing to do with female practitioners:

> *He's actually one of the children who is… quite shy and struggles to work with some of the female members of staff… actually… he's not got the confidence to go and approach them*

This illustration is ironic when we consider the chances (approximately 2%) of him being in a setting with a male practitioner. The child's behaviour prompts the question 'What would he do if there was no male practitioner?' This situation could align more with the child having both a sense of agency and an entitlement to state a preference rather than making a gender choice. This idea of children's agency is explored more fully in **Theme 5.**

Some female practitioners, continuing with the gender-blind discourse (Hogan, 2012) or 'discourse of denial' (Solomon et al, 2005), did not recognise the constraints that the male practitioner in their setting may be feeling and that he had actually shared in the interview with me. **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) contradicting the view that the male figure provides discipline (Winsler et al., 2005), discussed the difficulties he found in achieving a good balance between playing with the children and setting boundaries. He described an incident that had happened on the very morning of the interview:

> *For example today I was jumping over hurdles like not just one I was jumping over multiple hurdles having a laugh and things like that… but then for me to try to pull it back… we had a young lad who literally walked straight through them and it was a case of 'no you're ruining it for the other children!' but he wasn't really listening to me too much because I'd been that fun guy and 'oh I can get away with it' rather than when the females come over to him and say 'right you really need to stop… you're going in' he listens*

Following our interview, I interviewed his line manager; she was not convinced that there was any difference between his approaches to behaviour management, or any difficulties he might face, claiming:

I think we're very lucky here… we're all very good… we've got a very strong team group so everybody is equal… learned how to interact well with the children and do… that they've seen good practice… the best bits

P12 (m; 24; 5 years; i) had spoken at length about his enjoyment of the outdoors and organising sports activities so I was surprised that all the photographs he showed me of children playing were of the indoor environment apart from one photograph of a child painting outside. When I raised his choice of photographs with him, he explained it was because of the one particular child who would not engage with female practitioners; as his 'key person', **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) felt compelled to follow the child's lead which the photographs reflected seemed to be less physically active activities in the indoor environment. At the time, I did not question him further on this but on reflection I pondered on whether this situation would make him feel constrained in his practice.

P15(f; 21; 4 years)**,** who in both the survey and the interview had described how children found male practitioners much more exciting, did however share how a male student practitioner had discussed with her his concerns about the overwhelming attention he received from the children. At the time, she had found it difficult to understand the extent and nature of this problem and to offer him any advice. She told me:

The children automatically see the male you know they go straight over… all of them in my experience… you can't really shy away from that… one of the males said they feel uncomfortable and I kind of didn't really know what to say to that 'oh why do you feel uncomfortable' kind of thing and he said 'oh I'm not really sure' …he was the only male there and he said they were all kind of surrounding him and he wasn't really too sure about that because he didn't know the children yet and he did say he found it a little bit uncomfortable… whether that was the attention he was getting… he is a kind of more shyer student

P2 (f; 47; 24 years; i) did recognise the difficulties for male practitioners in these circumstances and shared the following dialogue with me:

P2: *They'll [the children] come in and if they see a man they think let's go play rough and tumble and the practitioner is happy to do that to a level but then they [the practitioners] have to find out where the safe boundaries… where they need to stop…*

Int: *So do you think it could be quite difficult for male practitioners in that sense?*

P2: *Definitely yes I know [one] practitioner he found it very hard to make the children calm and to make them realise actually no this isn't just what I am about… the boys were more for the rough and tumble and the girls, thinking about it, were more for the …wanted his attention to cuddle him*

Int: *Cos he was like a novelty kind of thing… okay so that's a lot of pressure on them isn't it?*

P2: *There is really and it was when that male practitioner worked with us …we realised actually we look at it one way but the pressure for them is a lot*

P18 (m; 19; 1 year; i) articulated this pressure well when he described girls wanting to be affectionate with him:

> *There is some difficulty... there have been a couple of girls… who are very affectionate… it was difficult for me to determine… basically the advice I was given about safeguarding in terms of contact with children is it's situational so if a kid is… someone hits them with a ball or something it's fine to put your arm around their shoulder and comfort them fine but for example this girl would be asking to hold my hand or to sit on my lap when she was upset …it is really lovely to have them share things with me but again having to … distance*

myself… It's not flat out ignoring them but showing enthusiasm…. as before… I did ask for advice about it openly because you know it is not something you want to be secretive about that can come across really badly… but it does seem to be something that doesn't happen with younger boys and female teachers… **J** *[a female practitioner he works with] has had no similar problems*

I unwittingly stepped out of researcher mode to reassure him that this seemed to be a common problem for male practitioners:

Int: *I'm just saying that to reassure you that I think that is the norm really but because you don't work with lots of men that won't be something that's talked about so that's a difficulty isn't it*

When I listened to the interview to transcribe it, I realised my mistake and that I should have stayed in role as interviewer and offered any advice at the end. However, out of sixteen pages of transcription this exchange happened on page 15 so I am reassured that it did not lead the participant too much. It was also a good example of encouraging the kind of critical dialogue which both Hogan (2012) and Warin and Adriany (2017) say is vital for practitioners in order to eradicate gender blindness. This was also the case with **P15** (f; 21; 4 years; i) who I noticed came to her own kind of 'light bulb' moment in terms of her understanding of the constraints for male practitioners. When I responded to

her description of the male practitioner being overwhelmed by the attention from the children I could see she had to think in a different way about the constraints that her male colleagues had to deal with:

> **Int***: I think it is a problem for them because they have these children being very physical with them without them even saying anything*

> **P15***: It might not be what they want*

> **Int** *: No but also there's this whole… people keeping an extra eye on them because they are male*

At this point, **P15** returned to a more gender blind/gender denial discourse and looked for other reasons besides gender for the difficulties the male practitioner was facing:

> **P15***: I think… that is maybe what he meant but he …just kind of a… bit unsure about the placements at the moment… and they feel like because they're the only male and they're a student and they're new*

Theme 3 has demonstrated that there is a recognition by practitioners, regardless of the gender-blind discourse they may have initially used, that male practitioners are not always able to accompany play (Goouch, 2008) in the

same way that female practitioners do, for a variety of reasons. There was also general consensus that different kinds of play did demand of the adult different types of practitioner skills. The next theme will consider these different kinds of play.

Theme 4: Types of play

Q: What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?
A: It depends on the type of play.

It was clear from practitioner responses that, just as I had asserted in the Review of the Literature (Chapter 2) that play was a complex term, they also recognised this complexity and that the concept of play is evidenced in many different ways. Role play was a type of play often commented on; this could have been because the practitioners were making a link to the role model discourse. Discussing role play allowed gender differences to emerge such as **P5's** already cited description of role play in the hospital with the male cast as the doctor and the female as the nurse by the children. There was also her description of herself knowing how to '*play dollies'* in the home corner or of how the male practitioner had freedom to act in a '*goofy*' way when role playing Cinderella with the children:

They were like let's measure Mr D and he was Cinderella and he measured their feet and he was Cinderella and he put on the funny voice and then they found his shoes but then he's really tall so then he was the giant and he was making the giant's voices and they laid him down and they measured how tall he was (f; 22; 5 years; i)

P4's female colleagues in the pirate ship or the male colleague combing dolls' hair in the home corner also demonstrated an enactment of gender in the role-play context as did **P2's** practitioner's confidence in dressing up for role play:

I think there probably is that element actually that men are more comfortable at role play …the male is more seen to be doing role play where it is full get up and he gets really involved… **P2 (**f; 47; 24 years; i)

Other kinds of play particularly highlighted by many of the participants were '*boisterous play*', '*risk taking play'* and '*outdoor play'*. Almost all the participants used the word 'boisterous' to describe how children liked to play with male practitioners as in:

The male person may do more rough and tumble play, whereas the female may be more relaxed and not as boisterous **(P7**: f; 37; 13 years; s)

The research literature labels this kind of play as 'rough and tumble play' (Tannock, 2008) and highlights its benefits to children in terms of both social and physical development. The practitioners did not seem to report these benefits though and at times almost seemed to consider it as a 'lesser kind of play' or 'man play' as **P2** (f; 47; 24 years; i) named it.

I am a believer that many children automatically look for 'man' play when they have a male practitioner. The male practitioner then offers a level of this play automatically. The skilled male practitioner will then calm this play down and encourage other play. Often when we have soft play out the children look for the male practitioner to play with and often use them to learn about how hard they can be physically with jumping on them pushing them etc… however if a female practitioner has previously allowed this style of play then the children equally seek her out for this play… the children in my opinion hit, jump on and push the male much harder though.

'Boisterous play' and 'risk taking play' often seemed to take place in the outdoor classroom and this was often an area of the setting associated with the male practitioners as discussed in **Theme 2**. Participants gave different explanations for this; **P5** (f; 22; 5 years; i) linked it more to female anxiety, whereas **P2 (**f; 47; 24 years; i) believed it was the disposition or personality (gendered or otherwise) of her female colleagues. She discusses with me why it was the male practitioner she decided to send on the forest school training:

P2: *I can tell you this… our male practitioner actually set up our mud kitchen… we sent him off to forest school training… so he set this up…*

Int: *Right… why did you send **him** [my emphasis] on the training?*

P2: *He volunteered… he asked …we always say 'who would like to go on it' and he said 'I'm up for that'*

Int: *so it was like nobody else wanted to?*

P5*: At that time no… Actually, not many women would like… would want to do forest school training which is a shame*

It was at this point that she called her female staff '*wussies'.* With this assertion **P2** interestingly contradicts claims she had made earlier about children not needing any particular skills or dispositions that men might bring to the workforce. She is suggesting by her comments that women are almost essentially predisposed not to like doing the 'outdoor stuff' yet at the same time, she acknowledges how important using the outdoor environment is for children's development.

Theme 5: Role of the adult

Q: *What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?*

A: *Some practitioners are able to be flexible in their practice regardless of their gender (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017) and others may feel constrained by the child-centred approach.*

I was struck by the repetition of the phrase '*if the child wants me to*' or '*if the child invites me to*' that many of the practitioners used. **P7** (f; 37; 13 years; s) states that the role of the adult is to '*take part if the child wants the adult to or the child initiates for the adult to play*' and **P22** (f: 33; 13 years; s) talks about '*only intervening when they [children] wish it*'. These quotations sum up the consensus of practitioner perceptions of how they should be fulfilling their role. **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) considered this was predominantly a feminised perspective when he suggested:

> *I think males are more willing to go a bit further… I know that I am willing to get involved in doing a lot of things… so walking a balance beam going through tunnels playing with them in the same sort of way that they would play... I would say generally I am more willing to go and do those things*

However, later on in the interview he did give instances of how he was, at times, constrained in his practice because of his understanding of child-centred ideology (Adriany, 2015).

I coded any reluctance to engage without invitation as '*agency of the child*' and reflected on how this impacts on what the practitioner feels they are allowed to do. When **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) describes his practice, he is both physically and emotionally manipulated by his 'key child':

> *But he really just wanted me to play with him exclusively … he was like*
> *pulling on my shirt trying to get me to come and play with him*

The subordination of one's own agency to that of the child's has the potential to make the practitioner feel subservient to the child. Those preferring a less 'passive role' (Adriany, 2015) with more freedom to lead learning would not be attracted to working with young children in this inflexible interpretation of the child-centred curriculum that is the EYFS (DfE, 2017).

Furthermore, as **P22** suggested, it would not be a workplace some would remain in for long:

From my experience, it has seemed as if male practitioners begin work in the early years in order to pursue a career in primary teaching, or have used the job in early years as an interim job but don't actually see it as a career choice (f: 33; 13 years; s)

This led me to wonder if there was something more attractive to men, something more aligned with how they felt society had told them they must perform their gender (Butler, 1990), in being the 'teacher' in a more Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1978) sense. A further tension emerged when I used the play labels as a lens (Synodi, 2010) to look at both surveys and interviews. I remind the reader here that the nine labels were:

- *Organiser*
- *Stage manager*
- *Observer*
- *Listener*
- *Assessor*
- *Planner*
- *Mediator*
- *Co-player*
- *Scribe*

The labels **'co-player'** and **'stage manager'** were used much more frequently than any or the others. So, for example, when **P15** (f; 21; 4 years; s) said: '*I believe the adult can also extend a child's play through suggesting other ideas that could be included into the children's play*', I chose to categorise this as '**stage manager'**. Elsewhere the quotation '*Male practitioners can sometimes be seen as more comfortable in playing certain games with children and taking different roles in role play scenarios' by* **P5 (**f; 22; 5 years; s) was annotated as **'co-player'.**

If it is true that practitioners see their role predominantly as either one of these highly interactive roles (**'co-player'** and **'stage manager'**) but that they can only adopt these roles if invited to by the children then there is a clear contradiction for them in their practice.

Male practitioners may enjoy adopting the 'fun big brother' role (Warin, 2015) as indeed the few in my sample indicated but those female practitioners who are able to be more flexible in their practice (Warin and Adriany, 2017; Warin, 2017) may enjoy adopting it too. **P11** (f; 28; 10 years; i) clearly demonstrated her understanding of gender flexibility, her belief that not all practitioners could be gender-flexible, her discomfort with being constrained in a gender role and her willingness to attempt to 'disrupt the slow but steady progress of gender entrenchment' (Warin and Adriany, 2017, p. 384) when we had the following discussion below. How interesting that by the end of the excerpt, however, she

had returned to the neoliberal discourse (Connell, 2011) of *'I just think everyone is so different'*.

> **P11**: *Even if you're got a man it doesn't mean to say that he is going to be 'a man'… like he could be quite camp… more feminine… so I don't think you can really say that just because he's a man he's going to do things any differently*

> **Int:** *Can I just come back to that cos I think that's interesting when you say 'just because he's a man doesn't mean he's going to be a man' what do you think that means?*

> **P11:** *Like men get down and dirty whereas I could do that*

> **Int:** *Could everybody do that?*

> **P11**: *No not everybody no*

> **Int**: *Okay so what's the difference? Between you and other people who wouldn't then*

> **P11**: *they're more feminine than me [laughs] I just think everyone is so different*

If practitioners would prefer to engage in gender flexible practice (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017) or adopt the role of Vygotsky's 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978) then there will be a tension for them if they feel constrained in this by the child-centred curriculum (Adriany, 2015). If they have to rely on taking 'instruction' from the child, they become subordinate to the child – a label reinforced by **P2's (**f; 47; 24 years; i) assertion that:

The children in my opinion hit, jump on and push the male much harder

Conclusion

This chapter has set out the five key themes that I used to organise 71 codes. These codes were settled on after analysing the data from the qualitative surveys and the interviews to answer the research question: *What perceptions do ECEC practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?* These five themes are: ***Theme 1*** (***There's really no difference); Theme 2 (Males bring something different); Theme 3 (Males are constrained in their practice); Theme 4 (Types of play***); ***Theme 5 (Role of the adult***). The themes suggest that there are contradictory discourses, or 'gender scripts' (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015, p.6), being constructed in the ECEC workforce around the subject of practitioner gender and gender specific skills. This was seen in the way that practitioners often completed the qualitative surveys or began their interview discussions by adopting a gender-blind

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(Hogan, 2012) tone; however, in the interviews this was very often replaced with a clear inference that there were gendered practitioner differences. Some of these scripts will exclude potential practitioners by 'the subject positions that may be made available' (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015, p. 6). This is unfortunate if these are people with specific skills who would bring the quality practices Nutbrown stressed were needed (2012) both to impact on the status of the workforce and outcomes for young children. For example, practitioners, or potential practitioners, may perceive that they have to perform their gender (Butler, 1990) in specific ways, such as men being sporty or women having a 'motherly' disposition.

Throughout this chapter, I have used quotations from the data to both offer illustrative evidence for the chosen themes and also to build an argument (Mason, 2013) for the importance of sensitivity training for ECEC practitioners to enable them to work in gender flexible ways (Warin and Adriany, 2017). At the same time I recognise that 'organising and sorting [of data] are not conceptually neutral activities' (Mason, 2013, p.173) and that just as I have opened up some interpretivist possibilities I will also have unwittingly closed others down (ibid). 'All research is a compromise' (Arksey and Knight, 1999, p. 171) and this is my own subjective interpretation of the data with which I have made 'a case' by 'select[ing] and arrang[ing] the data accordingly' (Diefenbach, 2009, p. 885). The next chapter will ask the important 'So what?' question

(Trowler, 2016) and set out what I consider to be the implications of these findings and what contribution they make.

Chapter 5 Discussion

This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings set out in Chapter 4. In proposing this interpretation, I remind the reader of my professional background as a one-time member of the ECEC workforce and how this has informed my understanding of the data. One example of this is how specific knowledge from my professional background has helped me understand the shorthand jargon the interviewees used. For example, if they used the expression 'mud kitchen' to describe a currently popular resource, I could immediately create an image in my mind of what this would look like and how the children involved could be playing. I had previously used this professional shorthand in the interview process to avoid ambiguity of meaning as much as possible. An illustration of this is my use of the term 'continuous provision'; the participants knew this meant I wanted them to talk about a specific way that the environment is organised to encourage independent learning. If I did not have this professional background then I may have been more inclined to use terminology and ideas picked up in reading; this vocabulary might not have aligned with every practitioners' discourse. However, misunderstandings still occurred. One example of this was when I realised that one participant (**P11:** f; 28; 10 years; i) had concluded that it was my own personal argument that there should be more men in Early Years. She also assumed that I saw a specific role for them rather than a desire to unearth 'effective play-based practices' (Nicolopoulou, 2010, p. 3). She said:

*… **if you say** we need more men I get the impression **that***

you mean like men get down and dirty whereas I could do

that…

I have emboldened the text to show how she assumed this was my opinion and perspective. In the same manner, I too will have made assumptions as I interpreted participant responses through the bias of my own lens. Bude (2004, p. 324) describes how the researcher 'buried in the text' turns 'into an engaged *ego* concerned with [themself]' and I consider this an apt description of how I proceeded, immersing myself in the data and looking for *meaning* that was *meaningful to me.* This is where the importance of critical friends was highlighted as sharing my ideas with them forced me to turn my gaze away from the data and my own analysis and outwards to other possibilities. I found plausible ideas that I had rehearsed on paper in the privacy of my own study could disintegrate when articulated aloud with colleagues well versed in social constructionism. Some ideas I raised in discussion with colleagues did not appear to have the same resonance with them. As a qualitative researcher, my interpretation takes precedence, nevertheless, if the idea did not resonate with others I did not consider it was worth proceeding with. The following discussion of the findings will offer 'contextualized explanations' (Bude, 2004, p. 324) rather than 'general theories' (ibid.) as I signpost the clear contribution my research makes. This chapter will offer evidence to signal the conclusions I have reached

before setting out the contribution fully in the following chapter (Chapter 6 Conclusion).

The previous chapter (Chapter 4 Findings) suggested five different themes to help answer the research question: *What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?* Practitioners shared *c*ontradictory perspectives even within individual discourses; at times they considered there was no difference (***Theme 1: There's really no difference***), yet at other times both genders considered males brought something specific, whether that was in a negative or positive way (***Theme 2: Males bring something different; Theme 3: Males are constrained in their practice***). Another theme (***Theme 4: Types of play***) suggested that gendered practice depended on the type of play in question and yet another (***Theme 5: Role of the adult***) that some practitioners are able to be 'gender flexible' (Warin and Adriany, 2017) in their practice whilst others may feel constrained by the child-centred approach of a play-based curriculum. This chapter will make links with the literature as set out in Chapter 2, including Connell's framework (2005) of masculinities, together with a consideration of how some of the ideas presented in the literature could be further developed. I have continued to organise the chapter to mirror the organisation in Chapter 4 (Findings). This means that it is structured around a discussion of the five themes. As in Chapter 4, each theme begins by restating the research question, suggesting a possible response drawn from the analysis of the data and then

posing the '"So What?" question' which Trowler advises is necessary to demonstrate 'the wider significance of this research to the academic community generally and/or to the economy, society or culture?' (2016, p. 50).

Theme 1: There's really no difference

Q: What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?
A: They claim there is no difference.
So what?

At times, participants were adamant that there were no discernible gender differences in the practices of male and female practitioners. They used scripts which did not subscribe to the view that the lack of men was impacting negatively on the development and learning of young children; and therefore the moral panic recognised by Brownhill (2014) is misplaced (Rentzou, 2011; Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015; Brownhill and Oates, 2016). By espousing this viewpoint, they potentially highlight a 'gender flexible approach' (Warin and Adriany, 2017) or what Cushman terms a 'holistic approach' (Cushman, 2005, p. 233) which recognises that traditional masculine or feminine traits are not 'gender bound'. She states that this approach is becoming more and more evident in the practices and behaviours of male practitioners and teachers so that they demonstrate dispositions and behaviours that stereotypically would be

associated with females, such as 'compassion and sensitivity' (p. 233). If this kind of practice is becoming the norm for men working with young children then this would suggest that it is rather the practitioner's gender flexible dispositions and skills that should be at the forefront of research discussions (Brownhill and Oates, 2016). However, if these gender-neutral scripts are a result of gender blindness or gender denial, then there are more complex and problematic implications for the workforce.

Gender blindness describes how the participants appeared to notice no difference in gendered behaviours from practitioners. They made the same assumptions that Hogan found with her students that 'gender in early childhood education is largely unproblematic' (2012, p.1). This meant that they were 'resistant to exploring gender critically' (ibid) and even challenged me about the appropriateness of the research focus. The term gender blindness suggests a kind of passivity on the part of the holder and an inability to see gender issues in a critical way; a more active refusal to see differences may be better described as gender denial.

Gender denial scripts were used by participants to position and present themselves in certain ways. For example, if they wanted to demonstrate their professionality, the gender denial script would become their 'armour' just as

Tennhoff et al. (2015) had found in their research with ECEC participants. Aigner and Rohrmann also found denial of practitioner gender differences, alongside an emphasis on 'personality' (2012) and Connell used the term 'gender denial' when she noticed that even within gender diverse workforces:

> There is something here that goes beyond underplaying gender issues. There is a rejection of even the possibility of gender discord, of divergent interests or practices. There is a distinct element of gender denial in some current discourse (Connell, 2011, p. 36)

When participants emphasised the importance of personality over gender in how they chose to interact with children, they gave contradictory messages about their workforce. It was almost as if they were suggesting that practitioners should be employed according to their personality rather than their skills. This is rather an odd and problematic way of looking at the workforce. It is also a 'cop-out' if a practitioner can avoid playing football with the children or using the outdoor area simply because that does not 'align with their personality'. It also presupposes that personality is fixed. It was almost as if the adults had taken the 'official speak' of the 'Unique Child' (DfE, 2017) and applied it to practitioners as 'Unique Adults'. The difficulty here is that it is as if they are absolving themselves of the responsibility of carrying out the best practice by only engaging in the kind of play that suits their personality. This totally contradicts

the values and ethos of a child-centred curriculum and places the agency of the child and the agency of the adult in opposition to each other. Whatever the subtle differences are between this gender-blind or gender denial way of seeing other practitioners, both scripts are harmful in terms of impact on the workforce.

A lack of awareness of gender implications in ECEC implies an overall lack of criticality which is unhelpful in terms of developing the best pedagogies for children. It suggests both a 'common sense' approach, influenced by traditional gender scripts and a 'prominence of neo-liberal thinking' which Connell (2011) also came across as her participants articulated that 'differences in people's situations or actions are essentially the outcomes of the choices they have made as individuals. Thus it wasn't a gender thing, it was just a preference' (Connell, 2011, p. 37). Such a stance implies that those within the workforce sense no imperative to act in gender flexible ways or to take action for change. In turn this could indicate a willingness to uphold hierarchical gender orders (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Warin and Adriany (2017) suggest 'gender sensitivity' is a key element in being able to 'confront and disrupt gendered performances in children' (p. 384); one might add it could also be used to disrupt gendered performances in other practitioners. Without either this willingness or the required sensitivity, it could be argued that little can change in terms of practitioner gender balance at the micro level of the ECEC workforce in England. If practitioners make assumptions that are not sensitive to gender,

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they may fail to be inclusive and supportive of their colleagues. This was illustrated by the anecdote of **P18** (m; 19; 1 year; i) joining in the playground sport activities because he was excluded from the conversation of his female colleagues. From their perspective, he is interested in football because he is male. From his perspective he is lonely, alienated and 'othered' (Sumsion, 2000), considering that his career does not lie in the ECEC workplace. Such a scenario does not appear supportive of encouraging more men into ECEC and therefore highlights how the 'no difference' script could be contributing to a much deeper embedded way of thinking about gender. To further complicate this phenomenon, although participants began interviews and qualitative surveys using these gender blind/gender denial scripts, as the interviews progressed, they turned from these and began to speak in much more gender-binary, essentialist ways.

Despite initial denials about the impact of practitioner gender on approaches to play, practitioners began to contradict themselves as others have found in their research (Rohrmann and Brody, 2015). In this way they could conceivably have been 'policing' gender (Butler, 1990, p. 45) to ensure the upholding of traditional gender orders. This could have arisen from a sense of 'lack of agency', that things could never change, or potentially because they felt their gendered identity was at stake and so must take responsibility for 'reinforcing gender barriers…[rather than]… be involved in dismantling them' (Burn and Pratt-

Adams, 2015, p. 152). They did this in their descriptions of specific gendered characteristics. This is not a phenomenon peculiar to my own research; Rohrmann and Brody (2015) highlight a 'surface 'gender neutrality' (p. 411), which they suggest can be traced back to official anti-discriminatory policy speak, which does not sit well with deeply embedded understandings of gender. Rohrmann and Brody (2015) develop Anderson (2012) and Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) idea that we need new methodologies to explore gender. They assert that, although 'the search for differences between male and female workers has been a major thrust of gender research in ECEC' (2015, p. 407), it is often problematic in nature from a methodological point of view. If my research question invited the participants to think and speak in stereotypical ways, perhaps on reflection its focus should have been 'How can we attract a more diverse workforce in ECEC?' However, I assert that we still need gender research such as mine to continue this kind of wider conversation. The contradictions in the participants' scripts will be discussed more fully in **Theme 2** and **Theme 3** below.

Theme 1 has described how participants were either unaware of or reluctant to see differences in gendered behaviours of practitioners; they preferred to use neoliberal discourses of 'we're all the same'. This is problematic on at least three counts. If practitioners refuse to critically engage with gender issues then they will be unwilling or unable to disrupt either their own, their colleagues or

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the children's gender performances. It also demonstrates an uncritical approach towards pedagogy and what could be the best practice for the children in their care. Thirdly, without any 'disruption' how will the entrenched situation of the 2% of males in the ECEC workforce ever change? Furthermore there is an added layer of complexity because the practitioners do not stay true to their gender neutral script but begin to move away from this towards a more binary, essentialist one. It is this binary script that will be considered in the following two themes. Connell's framework of masculinities (2005), laid out in **Table 2.1** in Chapter 2 (Literature Review), shows how male practitioners may position themselves with the world of ECEC. Within my interpretation of the framework, **Theme 1** would align with the 'complicit' label because of the gender-blind/gender denial script used by all participants which could be claimed to support hierarchical gender regimes (Connell and Pearse, 2015).

Theme 2: Men bring something different

Q: What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?

A: Practitioners talk about males behaving differently to females and hint that males bring something specific.

So what?

If men are a 'prized commodity' (Jones, 2007) and can bring something different to interactions with young children in the workplace then it seems evident that we need to recruit many more than the present 2%. Yet this statement is contentious in that it could be taken to suggest that females are incapable of bringing these same behaviours or that their own practices are deficient in some way. At the same time, my study recognises that men in the ECEC workplace can be both 'idealised and demonised' (Bhana, 2016, p. 49). **Theme 2** focuses on the practice of idealising them. If this is a low status workforce, with low self-esteem, perhaps the present workforce are looking for leadership and practitioners with hegemonic behaviours regardless of gender.

In my study, male practitioners were idealised in different ways. One of these ways was when participants observed that males were less anxious to support the children in taking risks (Madge and Barker, 2007). They also were perceived as encouraging children to engage in 'out of control' play (Stephenson, 2003) and were much more confident and willing to use the outside area, allowing the children to engage in 'play that provides opportunities for challenge, testing limits, exploring boundaries and learning about injury-risk' (Little et al., 2011, p. 115). If this is the case, children may be forgoing the kind of outdoor learning (DfE, 2017, p. 30) which is so important for their holistic development (Bento and Dias, 2017). Possibly they are being encultured into a climate of fear, anxiety and mistrust of the outdoors, or to use Louv's terminology 'nature deficit disorder' (2005), if they are in a setting without practitioners who either understand this or are drawn to being outdoors. The importance of incorporating

the outdoor environment into the ECEC curriculum suggests that anyone who is training to work with young children needs to have this pedagogical understanding at the core of their training so that it becomes a gender-free pedagogy. Another conclusion could be that initiatives aimed at attracting men into the ECEC workforce would benefit from emphasising this outdoor, physical play. However, it is misplaced to target these initiatives specifically at men (Emilsen and Koch, 2010) because such promotional and recruitment materials may encourage a diversity of women to apply to work with young children also.

If practitioners of both genders recognise the different, beneficial skills that males can bring to the workforce then the calls for more men in ECEC are valid. If men can bring complementary skills to women, children are not benefitting from a more holistic pedagogy because of the lack of males. Once again, however, we return to issues of difficulty in recruitment. Targeting males in recruitment initiatives is a strategy that has been undertaken with little success previously in both England and internationally (Oberhuemer, 2011). Just as recruiting men is not a simple exercise, neither is supporting men in completing any specific study programme and then encouraging them to stay in the profession (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006). This recruitment and retention issue leads on to the idea that perhaps the problem is that these skills cannot only be provided by men; just as there are many different ways of being male so too are there very many ways of being female, as suggested by **P11**'s responses. There is no reason to presume, unless we are adopting a pure essentialist gender

discourse, that women cannot bring the same skills and dispositions as men and vice versa.

Therefore, instead of merely looking to recruit more men into ECEC the emphasis should be on the need for practitioners who can bring these apparently missing behaviours. Rather, there is a need to take the focus away from practitioner gender and turn it onto practitioner skills and dispositions. This shift in emphasis means a reduced focus on 'missing men' (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006) who can provide the 'missing pedagogy'. On the contrary, the aim would be to recruit a diverse workforce with diverse skills who can be flexible and not have to rely on their personality or their gender to inform their practice. As Brownhill and Oates argued in their research into expectations of male and female practitioners (2016), it is not about the gender of the practitioner but about the professionalism and quality of pedagogy that is important. They assert that there are many 'missed opportunities… to allow professionals to be who they are' (Brownhill and Oates, 2016, p. 668). A practitioner, free of the straitjacket of expected gender behaviours (Brownhill and Oates, 2016) would also fit Warin and Adriany's description of the gender flexible practitioner (2017). By concentrating on practitioner skills and dispositions, the gender-binary discourse that Ashley (2003) warns against is avoided. Instead 'a third alternative to the masculinity discourse' (p. 141) is chosen, which is 'the undermining of gender dichotomy' (ibid.). In this way, in answer to the question posed by Nordberg (2004) and cited by Brody (2015):

'Are they mainly employed as… pre-school teachers or mainly as men?' the ECEC workforce could respond '*They are employed as professional, highly qualified and highly effective pre-school teachers'*.

There is a danger that if I interpret the data to reveal male practitioner behaviours that are held in high esteem, elevated over female behaviours, then I am subscribing to the 'gender dichotomy' and downgrading what females have been bringing to the ECEC workforce for many years (Nordberg, 2004). This in turn would contribute to the continuation of a hegemonic discourse which has been so powerful in reinforcing gender inequalities (Connell, 2005) so that rather than male practitioners 'breaking a mould of orthodox masculinity by adopting professional roles within "women's work"' (Warin, 2014b, p. 97) they are reproducing them (ibid.) by the behaviours they engage in in this context. These behaviours could be a reflection of a male sense of 'privileged irresponsibility' which allows them to become the fun figure (Sandberg and Pramling-Samuelsson, 2005), or the 'fun big brother', (Warin, 2015) in the setting. As they do so, they disregard the caring elements that do not fit with their perception of how to be a man (Warin and Gannerud, 2014) so that they have less accountability for the more humdrum or tedious aspects of the job (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2015). By choosing the outdoor area, or boisterous play, they may be choosing to 'specialise in those areas… which align more with their male identity' (Evans, 1997, pp. 228–229) just as the male nurses in Evans' study did. If they choose the outdoor area as their 'territory'

are they choosing this place as an 'island of masculinity', to cite Evans as she draws on Egeland and Brown's terminology (1988) to describe how males in a female dominated profession 'shape their work role to be more masculine' (pp. 228-229)?

The suggestion that males bring something specific, or 'refreshingly different' (Wohlgemuth, 2015), to complement the female contribution can indicate that every effort needs to be made to recruit more men. Thus, they can bring their specific skills into the world of ECEC. At the same time, we should be encouraging female practitioners to develop these very same skills. The trouble with each of these arguments is that they both downgrade the contribution that female practitioners have made up to this point and, thus, contribute to a discourse of gender inequality. Furthermore, although there is, on the one hand, the setting on a pedestal of the male early years practitioner, there is also an opposing discourse so that he becomes both 'the "wanted"' and the 'unwanted other' (Tennhoff et al., 2015). **Theme 3** will explore this latter idea.

There is also the issue that the male practitioner may not choose these gender-reproducing positions for himself but rather he is manipulated into doing so 'to avoid being identified with other subordinate masculinities' (Brody, 2014, p.12). This links with **Table 2.1** in the Literature Review (Chapter 2) which considers his positioning by others when engaging with young children in the context of a play-based curriculum. I speculated under the hegemonic label whether, for

example, female practitioners were contributing to a reproduction of gender norms themselves because they were content to accept the old gender order (Connell, 2005).

Theme 3: Men are constrained in their practice

Q: What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?

A: Some practitioners believe the male cannot be as effective as he is constrained in his practice as 'other' or 'outsider' or just because he does not have the necessary skills.

So what?

Both Burn and Pratt-Adams (2015) and Sumsion (2000) discuss how males are 'othered' in the ECEC workforce; Brody (2014), too, highlights how 'The UK is not a particularly welcoming place for men in childcare' (p. 100). This could be because they are viewed with suspicion (Skelton, 2001), because they are not thought to have the necessary skills for 'women's work' (Lupton, 2000) of caring and nurturing; it may even be because female practitioners are protective over what for a long time has been their domain (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015). Sahin and Sak (2016) found that 'It was also widely believed by male teachers that school administrations adopt suggestions made by female teachers more than those made by males because of weight of numbers' (p. 479) which is

something that **P1 (**f**;** 41; 8 years; s**)** alluded to when she asked of male practitioners '*Do they always have a voice*?' Thus, a deficit picture is painted of the male practitioner. In this image, he is seen as subordinate to a more highly skilled female practitioner. Furthermore, he is at risk of marginalisation by this female practitioner. Perhaps the only way that he will become less constrained is if his numbers increase so that he is no longer 'hypervisible' and therefore has the space to develop the necessary skills without being under the spotlight. There was a suggestion, though, that even the female practitioners, in their majority, could at times share this feeling of being constrained.

Female practitioners can be constrained in their practice if they feel that they have to perform in stereotypical female ways. They may perceive that adopting behaviours considered more masculine will lead to them being viewed in a negative way. This was perhaps what **P11** (f; 28; 10 years; i) was hinting at when she attributed her enjoyment of the outdoor area or playing football with the children to '*being less feminine*' than her colleagues. She was the one who remarked '*I could do that*' when she considered male type behaviours such as '*getting down and dirty*'. If practitioners did not have to choose between adopting 'masculine' or 'feminine' behaviours but could be 'gender flexible' (Warin and Adriany, 2017) they would not only be modelling this to children but also, perhaps, have a much clearer understanding of their own identity as practitioners. In addition, neither gender would be 'idealised' or 'demonised' (Bhana, 2016, p. 49) for choosing not to follow traditional gender scripts. In this

theme (**Theme 3)** male practitioner behaviours were not particularly 'demonised', apart from an inability to '*make the children calm'* **(P2:** f; 47; 24 years; i), however they could be viewed through Connell's lens as '*marginalised'* (2005).

Although there are some nods to the subordinate male in this theme the best fit, when considering **Table 2.1** and the questions I posed there, appears to be the '*marginalised'* (Connell, 2005) category. This is because male practitioner skills can be seen at times in a deficit way by other practitioners. An example of this is when **P2(**f; 47; 24 years; i) describes '*man play*' that, although sought by children, requires a '*skilled'* practitioner to '*calm it down and encourage other play'* **(P2)**. At the same time, the male practitioners, although consisting of a small sample, did compare themselves to female practitioners and see themselves in a deficit way which they directly attributed to their gender. This was evidenced when **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) talked about his difficulty with the hurdle game or **P18** (m; 19; 1 year; i) shared that his female colleague had not had the same issues in coping with over-affectionate children.

If the practitioners had discussed male practitioners displaying these 'female' skills, for example of being able to calm children down, then this would align better with my interpretation of Connell's '*subordinate*' label in **Table 2.1** because they would be 'acting like females' in a female world and so rejecting their rightful gendered path (Sargent, 2005). However, in this context they are

choosing not to do so but rather to display more stereotypical male traits such as the boisterous play. The interesting issue here is that these male traits are not always valued within the context of ECEC.

Connell reminds us that the label *'hegemonic'* masculinity is not an archetype and therefore is very much context bound depending on how a particular culture defines the definitive man (2005, p. 76). In the micro cultures of the ECEC environments used in this study, traditional male traits can be seen at times as inferior to female traits; a subtle recognition that they are interlopers, tolerated if they can conform to the 'feminised' environment (Cameron et al., 1999) and suppress behaviours they may feel are 'properly masculine' (Cushman, 2005, p. 233).

Therefore, **Theme 3** aligns well with my interpretation of Connell's 'marginalised' label (2005) in **Table 2.1**, although the theme also contains some idea that men in ECEC are subordinate to women because their skills are seen as being inferior. It could be concluded that, from the perspective of practitioners in this study, male traits are not always recognised as important in the ECEC setting. Society may want to view male ECEC practitioners as '*subordinate'* (Sargent, 2005) because they are rejecting traditional forms of masculinity by choosing this atypical gender role. However, within the context of the ECEC setting male practitioners are not necessarily 'othered' (Sumsion, 2000) because they are men choosing to adopt traditional, stereotypical female

behaviours but rather because their traditional, stereotypical male behaviours can be seen as 'lesser' in this context. They can be physically *'marginalised'* by being sent to the 'margins' as happened to **P18** (m; 19; 1 year; i) as he stands alone on the playground or the male practitioner who was sent 'outside' by **P2** because none of his female colleagues were willing to go. The next theme, **Theme 4,** examines what kinds of play he might engage in when he is there.

Theme 4: Types of play

Q: What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?
A: It depends on the type of play
So what?

If male practitioners position themselves physically in the outdoor classroom they are either claiming it as their own domain, so they can 'continue adhering to this paradigm [of hegemonic masculinity]' (Brody, 2014), or they have been 'banished' there by their female colleagues. Either way this is sending a strong message to children about 'gendered zones' in the ECEC setting along with the gendered artefacts, such as footballs or dolls that belong in these zones. The kind of play they engage in may be self-chosen or chosen by others (children or other practitioners) but they could be said to be reproducing a cultural script about what activities are allowed by males. Aina and Cameron (2011) noted

how practitioners reinforce gender through their verbal exchanges but here is an example of how it could be reinforced non-verbally by practitioners engaging in traditionally gender specific types of play. This modelling is the imitation that Rogoff talks about in her work (1990). The practitioner is passing on the baton of culture, through their play behaviours. Furthermore, the idea of football being specifically a means of transferring hegemony (Anderson, 2012) is seen to begin here in the early years setting. Children (often boys) and male practitioners take up their prescribed roles and in so doing mirror the 'play versus caregiving' dichotomy (Lamb, 1997; Lamb, 2000; Clarke, 2009,) observed in parental behaviours. This recalls Sumsion's argument (2005, p. 112) that, although by entering the ECEC workforce men may be 'challenging gender stereotypes' at the same time they may be reinforcing these stereotypes if they 'act in "gender-stereotyped ways" (including in their responses to children)' (Sumsion, 2005, p. 112).

Engaging in rough and tumble or boisterous play is one example of male practitioners adopting a prescribed role. It has already been stated how important this kind of play is for young children (Tannock, 2008; Flanders et al., 2009; Bosacki et al., 2015); discouragement of it, as highlighted in my findings, could be linked to Ostrov et al.'s research (2005) which highlighted how adult gender could inform their interpretation of prosocial or non-prosocial behaviour. Due to their own socialisation, the practitioners' gender could ensure they view this kind of play in different ways, with a male bias to encouraging it and a

female bias to seeing a skill in being able to '*calm it down*' **(P2:** f; 47; 24 years; i)**.** Ross and Taylor's research (1989) suggested that in being drawn to this kind of play, children preferred the male parent as their play partner; although this may be a reciprocal relationship depending on whether it was the child or the adult who encouraged this play initially. In my data, it appears to be the child who is the 'initiator' and who has agency (see **Theme 5**).

Boisterous play has the potential to include 'risky play' which was described in the Literature Review (Chapter 2) as being vital in developing children's confidence, thinking skills, creative skills, problem solving skills and, in fact, their overall wellbeing (Stephenson, 2003; Greenfield, 2004; Madge and Barker, 2007; Little et al., 2011; Sandseter, 2014). Sandseter (2014) suggests that male practitioners are more confident with this kind of play and this was a thread that ran through the data used to inform this study; for example, when **P5** (f; 22; 5 years; i) discussed the fact that the male practitioner always took the children outside because the female staff felt nervous about the children hurting themselves.

Returning once again to **Table 2.1** to see how **Theme 4** might align with any of Connell's suggested masculinities, these kind of practices and play could be seen as hegemonic in that they bring a sense of excitement to the setting (Mallozzi and Campbell Galman, 2015) and, therefore, position males as 'prized commodities' (Jones, 2007, p.180). They are positioned thus by the children

and sometimes by their colleagues although this is not clear from this small study. What is clear from this theme, though, is that males can bring something different to their female counterparts and using Connell (2005) as a theoretical lens I suggest that sometimes this is not just seen as complementary but also something superior.

There is, however, a tension here when **Theme 4** is considered alongside **Theme 3** where these very same behaviours and practices could be seen as problematic and where we applied a 'marginalised' label. Even within **Theme 4,** practitioners did not necessarily perceive that male colleagues were providing something others were unable to do; their practices were viewed more as a preference without any practitioner, regardless of gender, making any links to, or demonstrating an understanding of the importance of outdoor, risky or boisterous play for young children.

To conclude this theme, there is some suggestion that males are either required to inhabit the outdoor area or they would choose this area, potentially because they are mirroring Emilsen and Koch's findings (2010) where male practitioners felt 'more freedom to work with the children in their own way, without the tradition of caring' being imposed on them (p. 543). The outdoor area is also an ideal environment to engage in 'risky play' with Sandseter (2014) suggesting that male practitioners '…have a more liberal attitude towards children's risky play, and allow children to engage in greater risky play than women' (p. 434). If

this is the case, then there is a considerable impact for children having interaction with male practitioners or indeed any practitioner who can confidently develop this kind of pedagogy.

Theme 5: The role of the adult

Q: What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?
A: Some practitioners are able to be flexible in their practice regardless of their gender (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017) and others may feel constrained by the child-centred approach.
So what?

In a child-centred curriculum, there is an argument that all agency lies with the child so that the adult has to position themself as subordinate to the child. Practitioners could be so overly concerned about not pressuring the children into engaging with learning before they are ready (Palmer, 2007; House, 2011; Whitebread and Jarvis, 2013) that they become confused about their own identity and role as a practitioner. This could be particularly true if the adult in question is not clear about their own professional identity (Brownhill and Oates, 2016). Langford (2010) is one who argues that a child-centred curriculum subordinates practitioners because their needs become peripheral to, or less important than, those of the child. The impact of this subordination is then

coupled with the tension between providing the kind of beneficial, spontaneous play which is thought to be disappearing (Frost, 2010; Broadhead, 2011) and confusion over the role the practitioner thinks they should be carrying out as they accompany play (Goouch, 2008). Therefore, if men are working within this curriculum and feel they have to adopt a 'watching and waiting approach' (Bennett et al., 1997) to engaging with children, because any other approach would be 'hijacking' children's experiences (Fisher, 2016), the male ECEC practitioner could be labelled as 'the most subordinate man' in Connell's framework. He is subordinate to other men because he is engaged in 'women's work'; he is subordinate to women because he is not perceived to be as skilled at this work as they are and he is subordinate to children because he has to take his instruction from them.

By drawing together these three stands of:

i)   a child-centred curriculum, with its potential to subordinate those required to use it to inform their work (Langford, 2010)

ii)   a confused sense of agency (Brownhill and Oates, 2016), and

iii)   a perception that working with young children is 'low-level nurturing work which is not rewarding or intellectually demanding' (Bhana and Moosa, 2016, p.6)

ECEC continues down the confusing and contradictory path alluded to in the literature review (Kwon, 2002; Lewis, 2003; Brownhill and Oates, 2016). A

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consequence of this may be that it alienates those who would be highly effective in working with young children, including men.

This would be one, pessimistic, way to regard the data. To take a more optimistic view, a child-led practitioner could have the potential to be led into more gender flexible practice (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017). This was noticed with **P12** (m; 24; 5 years; i) who would have preferred to engage in sports type activities in the outdoor area but instead was often obliged to stay inside to meet the learning development needs of his 'key children'. The EYFS (DfE, 2017, p. 9) partly resolves the tension surrounding the adult role by stressing that there should be a 'mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity' and that children need opportunities both to lead 'their own play' and take 'part in play which is guided by adults'. However, this advice only slightly resolves the issue as both the concept of play and the EYFS (DfE, 2017) are open to many different interpretations (Rose and Rogers, 2012; Robert-Holmes, 2014). For example, an adult-led activity could be asking a child to practice writing their name or join in a simple phonics game before they are allowed to go and 'play'. This kind of practice mirrors Broadhead's argument (2011) that play is becoming a 'tool for delivering the curriculum…[and] as a means to achieving outcomes pre-determined by policy and "distant" adults – that is distant from the current preoccupations of the playing child' (p. 55). Once the children 'go and play' in the practitioner-provided learning environment (Piaget, 1962), how can the practitioner then be the 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978), 'scaffold' learning through play (Bruner, 1978) or join in 'Sustained Shared Thinking'

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(Sylva et al., 2004) to extend the child's understanding if the invitation to play never comes? A child-centred curriculum could then both support opportunities for gender-flexible practice (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017) or, indeed, reduce these opportunities (Adriany, 2015).

Anderson stresses the importance of 'individual agency in shaping a more inclusive zeitgeist' (Anderson, 2012, p. 106); the irony here is that agency may be limited in the context of the ECEC setting and its child-centred curriculum. Male workers are trying to construct an identity within a workforce where the female workers may struggle to have a well-established one (Robins and Silcock, 2001; Brownhill and Oates, 2016). If females in the workforce feel that power is always imposed on them, they may feel helpless with no sense of agency. Newcomers to the workforce, in this case men, may appear to behave in hegemonic ways simply because they bring an initial sense of agency, though it may be difficult for them to retain this within a child-centred curriculum (Adriany, 2015). This lack of perceived agency may influence how long they stay in the workforce, what behaviour they feel they are allowed to display there, gender-flexible (Warin, 2017; Warin and Adriany, 2017) or otherwise, and how they appear to other men who may or may not consider joining the workforce.

There was a further tension revealed when I looked at the data through Synodi's play labels (*Organiser, Stage Manager, Observer, Listener, Assessor, Planner, Mediator, Co-player, Scribe)* lens (2010). All of the labels, except for '*Scribe*',

were used, either explicitly by the practitioners or alluded to so that I could use them as codes in the analysis. Practitioners presented themselves as *'Organisers'* and *'Planners'* of play in that they set up the environment (Piaget, 1962) with specific resources even if they then stepped back and were not invited to engage by the children. Practitioners described themselves as *'Observers'* and *'Listeners'* as they watched and waited for a signal from the children to join in or be a *'Mediator'.* In addition, they made some judgement on children's learning as the *'Assessor'.* However, there was a discrepancy between how they described what they did and how they saw their role. When they were talking about their aspirations for their role, I used the labels *'Co-player'* and **'***Stage manager'* much more frequently to code than any of the others. This may signpost an additional tension for the practitioner if they see their role predominantly as either one of these highly interactive labels yet they are waiting on the periphery, 'a distant adult' (Broadhead, 2011), for the child to give them the 'all clear' before they can begin to enact that role.

Conclusion

This chapter has proposed responses to the 'So what?' (Trowler, 2016, p. 50) questions stimulated by interpretations of the data set out in Chapter 4 (Findings) in response to the main research question: *What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?* I argue that five clear threads run through practitioner

scripts when they consider practitioner-gendered approaches. ***Theme 1*** (***There's really no difference)*** adopts a gender-blind (Hogan, 2012) tone in that it refuses to engage with the possibility that there might be difference. **Theme 2** *(Males bring something different)* contradicts this by considering specific 'hypervisible' practices that male practitioners engage in. A third theme (***Theme 3: Males are constrained in their practice***) considers how male practitioners may meet barriers to being effective in their pedagogy. A further two themes suggest that different types of play could evoke different practitioner responses (***Theme 4: Types of play***) and that some practitioners are able to be flexible in their practice regardless of their gender whilst others may feel constrained by the child-centred approach *(**Theme 5:   Role of the adult**).* Insights gleaned from the data in response to the research question are considered useful and able to contribute both theoretically and professionally by providing: 'ideas… [and] categories… for… unconsidered social relationships which can then be subjected to further theoretical processing and conceptual testing' (Bude, 2004, p. 321). This contribution will now be laid out and evidenced in the following chapter (Chapter 6: Conclusions)

Chapter 6 Conclusions

This thesis has argued that practitioners who work with children in ECEC settings in England are currently using contradictory gender-blind (Hogan, 2012) and gender essentialist scripts to discuss their perceptions of the impact practitioner gender has on approaches to play. This means that they are either unwilling or unable to critique the gender issues specific to their particular workforce such as the paucity of men who choose ECEC as a profession. This lack of critique could be a contributory factor to minimal movement (Mistry and Sood, 2015) of men into the sector. Furthermore, this thesis claims that more could be done to develop the 'critiquing potential' of the workforce.

The key contribution I make here is the assertion that, to develop this 'critiquing potential', it is vital that 'gender sensitivity training' (Warin, 2015) is introduced for both those already working in the ECEC sector and those who are studying to become part of it. By giving the workforce, and future workforce, the opportunity and tools to question adopted 'scripts' (Burn and Pratt-Adams, 2015), they will have the skills to disrupt performative gender practices (Butler, 1990) in the workplace and support others who are trying to disrupt them. This disruption could lead to change in two distinct ways, one being the emergence of 'gender flexible' practitioners (Warin, 2017) and, therefore the other being, the status of men within ECEC.

'Gender flexible' practitioners (Warin, 2017) can describe men and women working interchangeably both to meet the learning and development needs of the child but also to lead on effective play pedagogies. This would mean that they would no longer feel 'policed' (Butler, 1990) to behave in gender specific ways but also they would be challenged in the pedagogy they provide. They would become practitioners who model 'alternative forms of masculinities and femininities, the value of a mixed gender workforce, and explicit gender teaching' (Warin and Adriany, 2017, p. 375). This in turn would affect the status of men in ECEC so that they would no longer be perceived as 'idealised' or 'demonised' (Bhana and Moosa, 2016, p. 49). For example, they would not be seen as those who can bring the 'missing pedagogy' of outdoor, risky or rough and tumble play. Neither would they be seen in a 'marginalised or subordinate way' (Connell, 2005) as deficit practitioners lacking in the appropriate skill set to work with young children.

Therefore, this thesis both builds on previous research and also contributes to new understandings of the gendered nature of the ECEC workforce, particularly in relation to play pedagogy. It develops previous work on the gender-blind discourses of ECEC practitioners (Hogan, 2012; Rohrmann and Brody, 2015) and offers new understandings about 'gender flexible' pedagogies (Warin and Adriany, 2017). This latter concept could materialise through a more gender-balanced workforce and could also affect outcomes for young children and

transform the perception of the status of ECEC as low status, intellectually unchallenging 'women's work' (Lupton, 2000, Osgood, 2009), addressing Tickell's concerns about the negative impact for the workforce (Tickell, 2011) because of the current gender imbalance.

Consideration of the limitations of the research and a reflection on the research process has been addressed in Chapter three (Methodology) (Trowler, 2016, pp. 34-35). The research was designed to capture practitioner views in the hope of working in a constructionist manner (Silverman, 2014, p. xxii) to build a researcher- participant understanding and work collaboratively with participants to make meaning and produce knowledge (Rapley, 2004, p. 27). The purpose was to look for the possible benefits of a more gender balanced ECEC workforce and contribute to a debate about effective practice when working with young children.

The findings therefore contribute to a discussion on the impact of men in the ECEC workforce. Practitioners used a contradictory discourse by claiming that there was little difference in gender approaches to play then continuing to describe observed variations in practice. For example, when explicitly questioned about differences, they used terminology such as 'personality' and 'choice' to explain any practitioner pedagogical variations using the 'neoliberal

outlook' often observed in the workplace when gender is discussed (Connell, 2011, p. 37). However, when questioned in depth about their own practices in play, often using their own photographs, they then inadvertently begin to unearth practitioner gender differences; sometimes these differences were seen as complimentary, sometimes they were seen as hierarchical.

The conclusions from my analysis of the data were arrived at using a combined inductive and deductive approach. The inductive approach has allowed me to make some contributory suggestions of a more practical and professional nature such as the introduction of 'gender sensitivity' training (Warin, 2015). On the other hand, the deductive approach, using Connell (2005) and Synodi's (2010) work as a lens, has allowed me to theory build and propose the notion that the male ECEC practitioner is in danger of being perceived as exhibiting the 'most subordinate type of masculinity' within Connell's framework. He can be viewed as subordinate to other men because he is engaged in 'women's work' (Sargent, 2005), subordinate to women because he is not perceived to be as skilled at this work as they are (Sahin and Sak, 2016) and subordinate to children because he has to take his instruction from them within a child-centred curriculum (Adriany, 2015). This perception is more than problematic if the workforce is seeking to recruit and retain more men; it is also a specific situation to those working with children from 0 to 5 for after this time a different curriculum

(DfE, 2013) is introduced in England which does not have child-centredness as its focus.

Through asking a small yet diverse selection of practitioners to share their perspectives both in interviews and in qualitative surveys, I have been able to build up a picture of some present practice in order to contribute on a more practical and professional level to the theoretical one outlined above. This contribution could be in the three different areas: recruitment, Higher Education curriculum and CPD (Continuing Professional Development). Instead of attempting to attract men into the ECEC workforce through images and metaphors which emphasise a 'masculine specific practice' (Warin, 2014a), prominence could be given to recruitment initiatives where practitioners of different genders, ages, and ethnic backgrounds are shown working *together*, as well as with children, in 'gender flexible ways' (Warin and Adriany, 2017). Images used could include both male and females risk taking together outside with children or role playing together with children in the indoor setting. In this way, the images would express a desire to recruit quality, yet diverse, practitioners flexible in the role they carry out and able to work in a collegial way with diverse colleagues.

My research can also usefully inform curriculum at Higher Education level for those considering a profession in the ECEC workforce. Indeed, I have already initiated this specific contribution at my own institution with undergraduate ECS (Early Childhood Studies) students; I have written and teach a level 5 module on gender issues in ECEC informed in part by this thesis. Here students can explore the problematic nature of 'gender blindness' (Hogan, 2012), the limitations of both adopting gender role rigidity or positioning their colleagues in this way, and critically unpack how 'gender flexible' practices (Warin and Adriany, 2017) could transform the world of ECEC particularly where different types of play are concerned.

In the same way, I have already had the opportunity to contribute to CPD work with practitioners, for example at the Men in Early Years conference (2017). Here we explored gender flexible practices in where and how practitioners choose to play. Other opportunities for CPD could centre on practitioner/child agency. It was never the intention of this research to examine the benefits or otherwise of a child -centred curriculum in ECEC; however, in this context it does have implications for the role of the adult. It may not necessarily be the nature of the EYFS (DfE, 2017) that is the barrier but rather the way it is being interpreted which impacts on practitioners and their sense of agency, or lack of.

Therefore, this thesis is able to offer some recommendations to those who work with the prospective ECEC workforce both in Further and Higher education. These recommendations are linked to the contribution outlined above and are:

i) Consider how recruitment initiatives reflect gender flexibility.

ii) Consider how study programmes for the ECEC workforce allow opportunities to critically explore the key concepts around gender, such as 'gender blindness' (Hogan, 2012), and link this to discussions of best pedagogy.

iii) Consider how CPD for practitioners could centre on gender sensitivity training; Chapter 7 (Gender Sensitivity Training) will set out more explicitly what this CPD could involve.

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This chapter has synthesised the conclusions arrived at in Chapter 5 (Discussion) to demonstrate how the research question can be answered and therefore the contribution this thesis makes. I have sought to close the 'circle' for the reader so that they too reach the end of this research journey convinced that conclusions reached are evidenced based and that, although they may not agree with all the research choices I have made, they are clear about my rationale for making them. The research asked: ***What perceptions do early years practitioners have about how their gender impacts on their approaches to play?*** It found conflicting responses to the question in that

practitioners both denied and highlighted differences in self-contradictory scripts. There was general agreement that children would miss out from not interacting with males and sometimes this was linked to specific pedagogical approaches. Further research on a much wider scale involving observation of practitioners and commentary on film footage of their practice may serve to more effectively move the debate forward. Of particular interest would be a focus on gendered approaches to agency within a play-based curriculum to build on this study's contribution to knowledge regarding the role of a gendered adult within child-centred pedagogy. This in turn could contribute further to discussions both on gender flexible pedagogies and also addressing gender imbalances on a much wider scale such as those at the far end of the 'thinking about gender' continuum.

The final chapter (Chapter 7) will focus on the key contribution that this thesis claims to make; it will consider the concept of 'Gender Sensitivity Training' by setting out what this could look like in practice.

Chapter 7 Gender Sensitivity Training

This chapter will further explore the contribution of this thesis by focusing on the concept of Gender Sensitivity Training (GST). I will offer definitions of this kind of training, reiterate its importance and also set out what it could like in practice. To illustrate these key points, I will draw on my experiences of already having engaged in this kind of work such as the level 5 undergraduate module on the Early Childhood Studies degree I have written and teach as noted in Chapter 6 (Conclusions). The module is entitled 'Gender Issues in the Early Years' (rather than Gender Sensitivity Training) but contains all the elements of GST I will outline below. Some of the same elements have also been used and adapted for a more diverse group of participants in CPD opportunities (two undertaken thus far). The abbreviation GST will be used to describe this training throughout the chapter. Furthermore, in the context of this chapter, I will use the terms 'participants' to describe those participating in GST rather than, as in previous chapters, those who participated in the research which informs this thesis.

Defining GST

Gender Sensitivity Training is a key term often used both in this thesis and by those who have a research interest in the gender discrepancies of the ECEC

workforce (Warin, 2015). Although it is often highlighted as a key way forward, it is not apparent whether there is a shared understanding of what the concept means and what it could look like in practice. Therefore, this section of the thesis will clarify how it is defined in the context of my own work and also make some suggestions for how it could be developed. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) stress the importance of practitioner reflexivity in terms of the gender implications of their work with young children yet do not describe what specific training for this could look like. Warin (2015) talks about 'the training of gender sensitivity' (p. 103) explicitly and suggests that it 'has to become a key element of initial teacher training (ITT) and continuing professional development (CPD) if we want to disrupt the slow but steady progress of gender entrenchment' (ibid). However, she does not set out what this training could look like and instead ends her chapter by challenging her reader and asking 'How can we train male and female pre-school staff to model gender flexible behaviours in front of their child and parent audience?' (ibid). Hogan (2012), who has been a key source in this thesis in terms of lending the lens of 'gender blindness', does not use the term 'Gender Sensitivity Training' but does describe her pedagogical approaches with ECEC student teachers which include 'spaces for honest, open and critical discussion on the topic of gender' (p. 1). It is Hogan's terminology of 'exploring gender critically' (p. 1) which I will keep at the centre of my own description of what GST could like.

GST is a term used in this context to describe approaches to teaching and learning which centre around opportunities to explore gender in a critical way. These opportunities could be provided either through CPD provision for those currently in the workforce or as part of the undergraduate curriculum for those who are considering a future career in ECEC. Training content would involve unpicking the taken for granted assumptions about how participants observe or perform gender in their daily lives starting from the participants' own life stories and experiences. Hogan (2012) would see this pedagogical approach as key to helping the students or practitioners to develop their understanding of the implications of gender construction and how this can be problematic. Only once participants had considered these implications could they move on to make links with their practice in the workplace.

By firstly being given the opportunity to look at gender more widely in a holistic way, participants would then be able to consider ideas and understandings about what this means for them as practitioners who work with young children on a day to day basis. For example, by considering examples of women complaining on social media about being catcalled, they could reflect on whether this has been part of their experience and if so what are the implications. They would then need to consider how these implications relate to the world of ECEC by drawing, for example, on the Zero Tolerance resources which make direct links between gender equalities in ECEC and gender

inequalities amongst adults (2013). Zero Tolerance is a charity set up in the

Scottish context to tackle violence against women and as such the charity

clearly identifies the role that ECEC practitioners have to play in challenging

gender stereotypical scripts used with young children which will impact on their

gendered, and often detrimental, behaviours as adults. Once participants have

examined links to their own practice in this way they could then begin to

consider how they might potentially lead on the practice of others both in the

workplace and in their interactions with parents.

Being able to lead on gender sensitivity in the workplace would be a non-

negotiable outcome for participants in GST; it would not suffice for practitioners

to merely be able to ponder on their own practices. If GST is to have any impact

at all those who have attended it would need to feel empowered, equipped and

energised to impact on the practice of others through their ability to challenge

and disrupt gender (Butler, 1990) and question normalised discourses

(Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006; Hogan, 2012). It is necessary to recognise

here that a willingness to lead on gender sensitivity in the ECEC setting would

not be a straightforward undertaking for these participants; the research that

informs this thesis, GST I have already facilitated and the wider literature

(Ashley, 2003; Connell, 2011; Rohrmann and Brody, 2015) all signpost the

problematic nature of discussing gender. People can feel attacked, become

confrontational and adopt both contradictory (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006)

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and essentialist scripts (Ashely, 2003) or demonstrate a commitment to upholding patriarchal gender norms (Connell and Pearse, 2015). Because of all these inherent tensions, I would advise against providing training which consists of one off sessions. Rather I would advocate for an approach which allows for progression of ideas over a period of time where participants would have the support of either online or face to face groups. In this way those who felt the weight of responsibility and the need to take action to tackle gender inequalities in their ECEC workplace would feel they were not a lone voice. This support could mirror MacNaughton's curriculum clubs (2005) which offered practitioners a designated time and space to unpick and explore the power issues potentially happening within their own pedagogy and practice. If GST was embedded in this way, a 'drip drip' approach rather than one-off input with no follow up support, it can be seen that it has potential for disrupting gender (Butler, 1990).

Therefore, it is possible that GST can impact at three different levels. Firstly, it could support individual practitioners in examining gender critically in a holistic way; this in turn could lead them on to examining their own practices in the workplace and empower them to both lead on gender equal pedagogies and challenge and disrupt gendered behaviours and practices. In this way they would be considering gender in various places on Connell's continuum (2016) for thinking and talking about gender such as their individual interactions and

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every day issues of 'relationships, [and] personal identities (p. 4) at one end then further wider implications at the other. If this potential is realised, then the importance of GST is apparent.

The importance of GST

This thesis has argued that the type of training that GST could provide is important because of the opportunities it will give practitioners to question everyday assumptions. By interrogating assumed practices and behaviours those who participate in the training have the potential to shift from a gender-blind stance to one that is hypersensitive to gendered constructions. This sensitivity would require of the participants to make decisions going forward on when it was necessary and appropriate to disrupt the gendered scripts they see being used around them in the workplace.

One of the reasons that GST could be so important is that it would give practitioners the opportunity, seldom afforded in their daily routines, to question their own and others' beliefs about gender. It has previously been noted in Chapter 2 (Literature review) how ECEC practitioners are handed down both practices and scripts which they are then never given the opportunity to question or indeed are not listened to if they try to do so (Brownhill and Oates,

2016). In this way, gender scripts in the ECEC setting may have become normalised over time. This was indeed noticed in my own research when participants began to talk about the practices and expectations of male and female practitioners in essentialist ways. Some of the assumptions that they make will be made in a state of 'gender blindness'; however even as I use this term I am reminded of Hogan's warning (2012) that it would be inappropriate to position oneself as a facilitator of this kind of training as the 'patronising' tutor who intends to emancipate her students by revealing to them the error of their ways as far as their understanding of gender is concerned.

Nevertheless, regardless of this tension which can arise for the tutor eager to engage their students in reflective discussions around gender, a movement from 'gender blindness to gender consciousness' (Warin and Adriany, 2017, p. 384) on the part of participants would be a key outcome for those engaging in GST. In practice this would mean an ability to engage at a deeper, more reflective level, in discussions around gender both in the workplace and in the wider world.   Through this reflection practitioners would bring a new dimension to their work, perhaps a dimension they had not considered before. In so doing they would be enabled to meet the benchmark standards for ECS which require those in the children's workforce to challenge gender in ECEC (QAA, 2014, p. 5). This challenge would come about by the way they were subsequently equipped to disrupt both gendered scripts and gendered practices.

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There are a variety of ways that GST would prepare them to disrupt gendered practices. One of these could be, for example, that they would have an increased confidence to question and speak out about what they see. They would acquire both a new terminology and a louder voice as ECEC practitioners to position themselves, not as a workforce that has things 'done to them' (Brownhill and Oates, 2016), but rather as a workforce with agency.

Therefore, GST is important because it can provide practitioners with the tools to be able to think and act in different ways that run counter to the 'normalising' (Hogan, 2012) narratives of gender and also empower them to be agents of change. As suggested above, one of the tools might be a new vocabulary to challenge and disrupt gender or both examples and strategies they can draw on in their daily practices. Through exploration of their daily practices in the workplace, practitioners could be enabled to have a voice on these key issues so that the gender sensitivity of the workforce is something that they have control over rather than something done to them. The following section will set out specifically how GST could look like in practice drawing on some work already undertaken in this area.

What could GST entail?

To initiate a session, participants would be introduced to a stimulus to provoke their thoughts about gender. Things already used successfully include a music video, a newspaper headline, an excerpt from a sitcom or an example from social media. This stimulus would not necessarily have to be about the world of ECEC; rather it would be a provocation which could act as a prompt for thinking about gender. Participants would then be asked to talk generally about their response to the stimulus. Their thinking would be scaffolded by some guided questions some of which would encourage them to consider whether any of the content aligned with their own experiences or observations. Using a stimulus to prompt learning is a key part of ECEC pedagogy so it is a teaching and learning device with which participants would be familiar in their daily work. This also aligns with Hogan's focus (2012) on encouraging her students to use their own life stories as a starting point to explore gender. At this point in the training participants are looking at particular gender issues through either the lens of their own experience or potentially the lens of their co-participants' experiences that have been vocalised to the group. It is at this stage in the training that an additional lens, or additional lenses, need to be introduced to extend their critical thinking further.

The lens that needs to be presented at this step is a theoretical one which can aid an understanding of how gender is played out in society. For example, in training already carried out participants have been given a brief overview of some of the key ideas and concepts espoused by such theorists as Connell (2005), Butler (1990), Anderson (2012) or Crenshaw (1991) and have been asked to reflect on them. An important consideration is how these, at times, quite complex ideas can be made accessible for a diverse audience without 'dumbing down' (Haggis, 2007) or misrepresenting the theorists' ideas in any way. Some of these writers facilitate an inclusive approach because they have made a conscious decision, such as Anderson (2012), to write in an accessible way. Others such as Connell (2005) supplement their more academic and esoteric writing with social media blogs which enable them to reach a diverse audience; this has proved to be effective material to use with both students and practitioners. Others such as Butler (1990), whose use of written language may act as a barrier to student understanding, has also recorded useful videos where she explains her key ideas in a less gatekeeping manner way and which students have already found valuable. With some, such as Crenshaw (1991), it has often been more helpful to look at, not the original sources, but other sources where they have been interviewed about their ideas. At the same time, participants will have mixed academic levels and so there will be a need for differentiation and signposting so that those who are inclined to follow up key ideas and go back to original sources are clear on how to do this.

It is also important to present participants with a variety of theorists and thinkers at one time, so that they can choose the idea that resonates with them best rather than feeling that they are being preached at or dictated to (Hogan, 2012). Once they have been introduced to these lenses then I would return to look at the stimulus through the lens of their own choosing. At this point they are already beginning to look at gendered behaviours and practices in a different way. If the training stops at this point, then they are possibly thinking about gender in a macro way so they now need to be encouraged to ask the important 'So what?' question and relate these ideas to the work they do with children.

The proceeding step would then be for participants to make links to their own practice. If, for example, they had re-examined a music video in the light of their chosen theoretical lens, they would then need to ascertain if there were any links to ECEC in three ways; firstly, they would need to consider if they recognised any of these gendered behaviours in the world of ECEC generally, secondly if these same gendered behaviours were prevalent in their own ECEC setting and thirdly whether they had ever disrupted this gendered script in anyway. It is at this point, it could be argued, that they start to become empowered because they can begin to realise their own potential and agency in initiating change. Furthermore, because the teaching and learning strategy around this part of the training would focus on group discussion and therefore co-construction of ideas, the participants would also be equipping themselves

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with tools and strategies to take back to the workplace. This approach has been successfully carried out in GST sessions already; for example, participants considered one particular recent music video which featured four famous musicians, one of these female and three male. When the students initially watched the video they focused more on the lyrics of the song and found it difficult to describe how the four musicians might be positioning themselves in gendered ways. However on a subsequent viewing, having considered some of the theories mentioned above, they began to talk in terms of 'emphasised femininity' (Connell, 1987) to describe the female musician who was the only one of the four to be in a supine position and was continually pulling up her skirt to revel her thigh, 'hegemonic' (Connell, 2005) to describe one whose body language emphasised both leadership and aggression and 'inclusive masculinity' (Anderson, 2012) to describe both the clothing and way of moving of another.

The final element of the training, designed to support the participants in making even tighter links between the session content and ECEC is to provide them with a case study (see Table 7.1 for examples of ones already used) based on real or hypothetical situations. They are encouraged to document their own personal response to the case study, linking this response to both their own personal philosophy, informed by their sense of values, and any theoretical lenses discussed in the session. Time to document their ideas would be

followed by a 'group think' about the case study; it is at this point that the tutor leading the session is able to carry out an informal assessment of any transformation and learning that may have taken place. This informal assessment also provides useful formative information which can be used to plan the following session; for example, it can reveal misconceptions, assumptions and rigid scripts that participants are more reluctant to give up.

Table 7.1 Sample case studies to use in GST

Still talking about gender: An ECS student on placement in a baby room notices the differences in how practitioners address girls and boys. She overhears comments from practitioners like "Don't cry, you are a big boy" and "Don't you look a beautiful girl today!"
Gender stereotypes don't exist anymore, do they?: Mimi is on teaching practice as part of her EYTS training. She meets with her link tutor to get feedback on her teaching. She explains to the tutor that she is pleased with how the session has gone but she is really happy that she has not been placed in the parallel reception class because it is 'boy-heavy' and therefore a very difficult class.
Is caring 'manly'?: Nicos has just started working as an early years practitioner in a baby room. In his induction, he was told that he will not be responsible for nappy changing duties, as previously parents have requested that male practitioners are not involved in this.
The panic about boys: When Jerome begins school, two days after his fourth birthday, his teacher carries out a baseline assessment. She uses the results of this to place him in a lower ability group. Jerome continues in his ability set throughout his educational career until he leaves school at 16 with minimal GCSEs. However, after successfully completing some Level 3 qualifications at college, he gains excellent A Levels and is able to enrol at the university of his choice. He reflects back on his learning journey and reflects on what went wrong and what went right for him.
Where are all the male practitioners?: Geoff is 14 and is planning his Year 10 work experience. He has lots of younger cousins and really enjoys looking after them and entertaining them at family parties. Everyone tells him how great he is with young children. He is disappointed to only be offered a small number of work experience opportunities to choose from, such as shadowing in a garden centre or the local car mechanics. When he chats to his friends over lunch, he discovers that two of them, Lucy and Sally, are going to the local day nursery. He thinks he would have liked to have been given this opportunity.
Do male practitioners have a specific contribution to make?: Nerice is an early years practitioner in a pack away setting. A researcher has asked to interview her about the need for male practitioners. She considers what they might bring to a setting and questions whether this means that what she provides isn't good enough.
Children's gendered career aspirations: Undergraduate dissertation student Jasmine carried out several group interviews with children in a primary school about their career aspirations. Some of them discussed working with young children but expressed the idea that it was more a job for females than for males. Others talked about boys being better at jobs using computers.
How boys and girls learn best: Janine is a reception teacher and has been reading about the best way to engage the boys in her class. This is because she has a large group of summer-born boys who sometimes find the more formal aspects of primary school problematic, for example, the requirement for daily phonics. When she implements some of these approaches she realises that all the children, regardless of their gender, in the class are benefitting.
The gendered nature of playing: Kezziah works in a pre-school room in a nursery and has noticed how some areas appear to be dominated by boys and some areas dominated by girls. She decides to conduct some research to find out why this is the case.
What can we learn from international perspectives?: Josephine is an early childhood studies student who is doing a year abroad in Denmark. She befriends a fellow student called Eva, who has recently had a baby. Eva has returned to her studies whilst the baby's father, Lars, takes paternity leave. Josephine learns that this leave is much more generous that the UK equivalent and wonders how this impacts both on individual children and on society as a whole.

It can be seen that by adopting pedagogies that practitioners would be familiar and comfortable with, providing an appropriate theoretical lens as an underpinning and then supporting the participants in making clear links between group discussions and their own practice, participants could effectively examine gender critically within the context of ECEC. At the same time, it is necessary to mindful of the different 'institutional biographies' (Britzman, 1986) participants bring to the GST and in this way adapt both content and delivery to best suit the learning needs of the particular audience. This is the term, already acknowledged in Chapter Two, that Britzman (1986) uses to describe the cultural baggage brought by student teachers into the classroom; tutor awareness of this 'baggage' would support a possible understanding of participants' scripts, values and behaviours.

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a further rationale for the provision of Gender Sensitivity Training for ECEC practitioners which this thesis argues is necessary to address the gender-blind scripts (Hogan, 2012) used by practitioners as they discuss gendered approaches to play. The rationale for GST, and also what this could look like in practice, is set out as the main contribution of this thesis. Therefore, this final chapter has reiterated why such training is important and suggests what it could entail. It argues that a priority outcome would be to

ensure that GST could be adapted for a variety of audiences to reflect the variety of qualifications and professional skills which make up the ECEC workforce (Nutbrown, 2012). Training with such a wide remit would allow the full range of practitioners, regardless of level of qualification or length of time in the workforce, to gain from the input. A reflection on training already carried out reveals that contradictory discourses (Sumsion, 2000; Anderson, 2012) are a key feature of audience participation. This phenomenon suggests that long-term, ongoing input could be more effective than one off training presentations. In this way participants could continually return to key ideas and therefore be supported more effectively in exploring how their own gender has been constructed or how they may have been socialised into behaving in certain gendered ways. Once able to discuss this construction critically they could then proceed to explore how their socialisation may impact in turn on the way that they socialise the children they work with.

Without the introduction of GST, it could be suggested that initiatives to recruit more men into ECEC may be misplaced or to cite P2 (f; 47; 24 years; s) 'the idea that more men are needed in early years may not be correct'. Simply looking to recruit more men, even if successful, will have little impact on wider societal gender issues if practitioners continue to draw on prescribed gender scripts because they have never had the opportunities to challenge or question them. Rather, supported by GST, this thesis argues that the emphasis should

move to one that looks for the missing behaviours such as gender flexibility (Warin, 2017) and an ability to 'critique gender' (Hogan, 2012). In this way the focus would move away from practitioner gender and turn towards practitioner skills and dispositions. This shift of focus would mean a down playing of the 'missing men' (Thornton and Bricheno, 2006) argument and an emphasis of a 'missing pedagogy' argument. The focus would be more on recruiting a diverse workforce with diverse skills who can be gender flexible and not have to rely on their personality or their gender to inform the best practice. These would be practitioners who construct themselves in the ECEC workplace 'by choices that transcend given circumstances' (Connell, 1987, p. 211) such as the cultural scripts that have been handed down to them because of their gender.

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Appendices

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Appendix 1: Stage 1 self-assessment ethics form (part A)

RESEARCH ETHICS AT LANCASTER

Stage 1 Self-Assessment Form (Part A) - for Research Students

(*To be completed by the student together with the supervisor in all cases; send signed original to Research Support*)

Student name and email: Jo Josephidou jo.josephidou@canterbury.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Jo Warin   Department: Educational
Research

Title of project: How the gender of early years practitioners influences their talk about
play?

Proposed funding source (if N/A applicable):

1. Please confirm that you have read the code of practice, 'Research Ethics at Lancaster: a code of
practice' and are willing to abide by it in relation to the current proposal? **Yes**
If no, please provide explanation on separate page

2. Does your research project involve non-human vertebrates, cephalopods or decapod crustaceans? **No**
If yes, have you contacted the Ethical Review Process Committee (ERP) via the
University Secretary (Fiona Aiken)? **?**

3a. Does your research project involve human participants i.e. including all types of interviews,
questionnaires, focus groups, records relating to humans etc? **Yes**
If yes, you must complete Part B unless your project is being reviewed by an ethics committee

3b. If the research involves human participants please confirm that portable devices (laptop, USB drive
etc) will be encrypted where they are used for identifiable data **Yes**

3c. If the research involves human participants, are any of the following relevant:

Yes The involvement of vulnerable participants or groups, such as children, people with a learning
disability or cognitive impairment, or persons in a dependent relationship

No The sensitivity of the research topic e.g. the participants' sexual, political or legal behaviour, or
their experience of violence, abuse or exploitation

Yes The gender, ethnicity, language or cultural status of the participants

No Deception, trickery or other procedures that may contravene participants' full and informed consent,
without timely and appropriate debriefing, or activities that cause stress, humiliation, anxiety or the
infliction of more than minimal pain

No Access to records of personal or other confidential information, including genetic or other
biological information, concerning identifiable individuals, without their knowledge or consent

No The use of intrusive interventions, including the administration of drugs, or other treatments,
excessive physical exertion, or techniques such as hypnotherapy, without the participants' knowledge
or consent

No Any other potential areas of ethical concern? (Please give brief description)

4. Are any of the following potential areas of ethical concern relevant to your research?

No Could the funding source be considered controversial?

No Does the research involve lone working or travel to areas where researchers may be at risk (eg countries that the FCO advises against travelling to)? If yes give details.

No Does the research involve the use of human cells or tissues other than those established in laboratory cultures?

No Does the research involve non-human vertebrates?
If yes, has the University Secretary signified her approval? **?**

? Any other potential areas of ethical concern? (Please give brief description)

5. Please select **ONE** appropriate option for this project, take any action indicated below and in all cases **submit the fully signed original self-assessment to RSO**.

(a) Low risk, no potential concerns identified
The research does **NOT** involve human participants, response to all parts of Q.4 is 'NO'. No further action required once this signed form has been submitted to RSO

(b) Project will be reviewed by NHS ethics committee
Part B/Stage 2 not usually required, liaise with RSO for further information. If Lancaster will be named as sponsor, contact RSO for details of the procedure

(c) Project will be reviewed by other external ethics committee
Please contact RSO for details of the information to submit with this form

(d) Project routed to UREC via internal ethics committee
SHM and Psychology only. Please follow specific guidance for your School or Department and submit this signed original self-assessment to RSO

(e) Potential ethical concerns, review by UREC required
Potential ethical concerns requiring review by UREC, please contact RSO to register your intention to submit a Stage 2 form and to discuss timescales

*(f) Potential ethical concerns but considered low risk, (a)-(e) above not ticked
Research involves human participants and/or response to one or more parts of Q.4 is 'YES' but ethical risk is considered low. Provide further information by completing PART B and submitting with this signed original PART A to RSO

 Student signature: Jo Josephidou 3rd June 2016

Supervisor signature:

Head of Department (or delegated representative) Signature:

Research Support Office (RSO) ethics contact details: ethics@lancs.ac.uk or Debbie Knight ext 92605

Appendix 2: Stage 1 self-assessment ethics form (part B)

This form should be completed if you have selected option 5(f) in Part A of the stage 1 self-assessment form, or following discussion with RSO. The information provided will be reviewed by the Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC). If you cannot easily fit the information within the space below, consider whether a stage 2 form would be more appropriate.

Principal Investigator/ Student name: Jo Josephidou

pFACT ID number (if applicable – staff only):

6. Please state the aims and objectives of the project (no more than 150 words, in lay-person's language):

The intended research aims to investigate whether men who work with young children (0-5) have a distinct approach to the way they accompany play. This will be achieved by talking to practitioners to gather their perceptions; NO observations will be undertaken. The purpose of the research is to understand whether the underrepresentation of men in the early years workforce may be negatively impacting on the development and learning of young children. At a more theoretical level it may also contribute to an examination of how the enactment of play in early years settings can reinforce gender inequalities. The rationale for focussing on play is influenced by the predominance of play- based curricula for younger children as a key approach for learning both in England and internationally.

7. Please explain why you consider the ethical risk to be low, with particular reference to any areas of potential concern highlighted in Q.3 and Q.4 (PART A):

 Advice has been sought from setting owners/managers/ Early Years consultants on the best way to proceed. Data will only be gathered by talking to practitioners and NO observations will take place. Practioner generated photographs of children playing will be used in interviews as a means of photo-elicitation. The photographs will not be presented as part of the analysis. No photographs will be used as part of outputs. Parental consent has already been given for any photographs taken as part of normal nursery practice. A blanket consent letter will be sent to all parents asking for consent to use these photographs in the interview. Only children whose parents/carers return the consent form will have their

8. If your research involves human participants, please summarise (as applicable) how participants will be recruited and consent obtained (copies of supporting documentation - information sheets, consent forms, questionnaires, interview schedules etc should be attached, if available*).

Full supporting documentation attached ☒
Supporting documentation will be submitted if grant awarded ☐
Supporting documentation to be submitted later (please include details below) ☐

Setting managers will be contacted by phone to ask if they would like to participate in the research. I already have a professional relationship with these managers in my work as university lecturer of Early Childhood Studies. If there is a positive response from the setting manger then I will visit the setting to ask managers to sign a consent form, talk to interested practitioners and obtain written consent from them.

9. If you have any other relevant information please provide details below:

*Where supporting documentation is not available at the time this form is submitted it will usually need to be provided and approved before the project begins (or recruitment of participants begins, depending on the nature of the project). Please remember to allow sufficient time for approvals. Contact the Research Support Office for further details ethics@lancaster.ac.uk

Appendix 3: PFACT project information and ethics questionnaire

THE UNIVERSITY OF LANCASTER

PFACT project information and ethics questionnaire

(*To be completed by the student together with their supervisor in all cases*)

Name of student: Jo Josephidou

Name of supervisor: Jo Warin

Project Title: How the gender of early years practitioners influences how they talk about play.

1. *General information*

   1.1 Have you, if relevant, discussed the project with

   ☐　the Data Protection Officer?

   ☐　the Freedom of Information Officer?

   ✓　N/A

(Please tick as appropriate.)

1.1 Does any of the intellectual property to be used in the research belong to a third party? N

1.2 Are you involved in any other activities that may result in a conflict of interest with this research? N

1.3 Will you be working with an NHS Trust?

N

1.4 If yes to 1.3, what steps are you taking to obtain NHS approval?
_____
_____

1.5 If yes to 1.3, who will be named as sponsor of the project?
_____

1.6 What consideration has been given to the health and safety requirements of the research? N/A

2. *Information for insurance or commercial purposes*

(*Please put N/A where relevant, and provide details where the answer is yes.*)

2.1 Will the research involve making a prototype? N/A

2.2 Will the research involve an aircraft or the aircraft industry? N/A

2.3 Will the research involve the nuclear industry? N/A

2.4 Will the research involve the specialist disposal of waste material? N/A

2.5 Do you intend to file a patent application on an invention that may relate in some way to the area of research in this proposal? If YES, contact Gavin Smith, Research and Enterprise Services Division. (ext. 93298)

N/A

2. *Ethical information*

(*Please confirm this research grant will be managed by you, the student and supervisor, in an ethically appropriate manner according to:*

  (a) *the subject matter involved; N/A*

  (b) *the code of practice of the relevant funding body; and N/A*

  (c) *the code of ethics and procedures of the university.*) N/A

(*Please put N/A where relevant*)

> 3.1 Please tick to confirm that you are prepared to accept responsibility on behalf of the institution for your project in   relation to the avoidance of plagiarism and fabrication of results. ✓

3.2 Please tick to confirm that you are prepared to accept responsibility on behalf of the institution for your project in relation to the observance of the rules for the exploitation of intellectual property. ✓

3.3 Please tick to confirm that you are prepared to accept responsibility on behalf of the institution for your project in relation to adherence to the university code of ethics. ✓

3.4 Will you give all staff and students involved in the project guidance on the ethical standards expected in the project in accordance with the university code of ethics? N/A

3.5 Will you take steps to ensure that all students and staff involved in the project will not be exposed to inappropriate situations when carrying out fieldwork? N/A

3.6 Is the establishment of a research ethics committee required as part of your collaboration? (This is a requirement for some large-scale European Commission funded projects, for example.) N/A

3.7 Does your research project involve human participants i.e. including all types of interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, records relating to humans, human tissue etc.? Y

3.7.1 Will you take all necessary steps to obtain the voluntary and informed consent of the prospective participant(s) or, in the case of individual(s) not capable of giving informed consent, the permission of a legally authorised representative in accordance with applicable law? Y

3.7.2 Will you take the necessary steps to find out the applicable law?

N/A

3.7.3 Will you take the necessary steps to assure the anonymity of subjects, including in subsequent publications?

Y

3.7.4 Will you take appropriate action to ensure that the position under 3.71. - 3.7.3 are fully understood and acted on by staff or students connected with the project in accordance with the university ethics code of practice?

N/A

3.8 Does your work involve animals? If yes you should specifically detail this in a submission to the Research Ethics Committee. The term animals shall be taken to include any vertebrate other than man.

3.8.1 Have you carefully considered alternatives to the use of animals in this project? If yes, give details. N/A

_____
_____

3.8.2 Will you use techniques that involve any of the following: any experimental or scientific procedure applied to an animal which may have the effect of causing that animal pain, suffering, distress, or lasting harm? If yes, these must be separately identified.

N/A

Signature (student) Jo Josephidou   Date: 3rd June 2016

Signature (supervisor): _____ Date: _____

N.B. Do not submit this form without completing and attaching the Stage 1 self-

assessment form.

Appendix 4: Participant Consent form

Title of Project: An investigation into the approaches of male early

years practitioners when engaged in playful pedagogy with young

children.

Name of Researcher: Joanne Josephidou

		Please Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 30th September 2016 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary. If for any reason I wish to withdraw during the period of this study, I am free to do so without providing any reason.	
3.	I understand I will be asked to bring to the interview a selection of photographs I have taken of children playing as part of my normal every day practice (eg children's 'Learning Journeys). The interviewer will ensure parental consent is obtained but will only use the photographs to ask me questions about my practice. She will **not** ask to copy or remove any from the setting. Nor will she ask to use any in any work she has published.	
4.	I consent to the interview being audio recorded.	
5.	I understand that the information I provide will be used for a PhD research project and the combined results of the project may be published. I understand that I have the right to review and comment on the information I have provided.	

6.	I agree to take part in the above study.	
Name of Participant: Signature Date		

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: An investigation into the approaches of male early years practitioners engaged in playful pedagogy with young children.

Research Student: **Joanne Josephidou**

Full Address *Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1QU*

Tel: 01227 767700

Email: *jo.josephidou@canterbury.ac.uk*

Supervisor: Dr **Jo Warin**

Educational Research Department, County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK Tel: +44 (0)1524 594266

Email: j.warin@lancaster.ac.uk

Date: 30th September 2016

Dear _____,

I would like to invite you to take part in my PhD thesis research with the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

Before you decide if you wish to take part you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

This document includes:

• Information about the purpose of the study (what I hope to find out).

- Information about what participation means and how to withdraw when and if you wish (what you will be doing).

- Details of what notes, recordings and other sources of information may be used as 'data' in the study - for the group and with you as an individual.

- Information about how this data will be secured and stored.

- Information about how any quotes will be used and how you will be involved in checking, agreeing and consenting to their use.

- How the information will be used in the thesis and for other purposes such as conference presentations or publication.

The purpose of the study

This research is for my thesis on the PhD programme in Educational Research with the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

My research aims to explore whether male early years practitioners have a distinct approach to the way they accompany play. If it is discovered that there are some gender differences in practitioner approaches to play then these findings can contribute to a discussion about opportunities that may be lacking for young children if they have limited interactions with male practitioners. It may also help us to understand how to develop the most effective professional practice when working with young children.

What participation involves and how to withdraw if you no longer wish to participate

Why have I been invited?

You have been invited because you work with young children in an early years setting.

Do I have to take part?

No, your participation is entirely voluntary. If you wish to take part, then please let me know.

You can withdraw at *any* time during the study and there is absolutely no obligation on you to continue nor penalty for withdrawing. Your related data, including recordings and notes made at interview, can be destroyed and all reference removed at any time. As it will not be possible to identify an individual's response from the anonymised survey then it will not be possible to withdraw and destroy this section of the data.

What would taking part involve for me?

I would like you to fill in a short survey and also participate in an interview on the subject of play and young children.

What will I have to do?

1. You will be asked to complete a short survey in your own time about play.
2. You will be asked to take part in a 45 minute interview around the subject of play which will take place in your own setting. You may bring your key children's Learning Journeys (if consent is approved by both setting manager and parents) so that you can discuss aspects of photographs of children playing that you have taken in your setting. The photographs will only be used to give us a focus for our discussion and so they can help you talk about your practice. I will not ask to copy any photographs, take any photographs away from the setting or ask to include any when I write up my research. This interview will be recorded.

Protecting your data and identity

What will happen to the data?

'Data' here means the researcher's notes, questionnaires, audio recordings and any email exchanges we may have had. The data *will* be securely stored for *a minimum of* 10 years after the successful

completion of the PhD *Viva* as per Lancaster University requirements, and after that any personal data will be destroyed. Audio recordings will be transferred and stored on my personal laptop and deleted from portable media

Identifiable data (including recordings of your and other participants' voices) on my personal laptop will be encrypted. With devices such as portable recorders where this is not possible identifiable data will be deleted as quickly as possible. In the mean time I will ensure the portable device will be kept safely until the data is deleted.

You can request to view the field notes or listen to the audio at the end of the interview and any parts you are unhappy with will be deleted, or disregarded from the data. As it will not be possible to identify an individual's response from the anonymised survey then it will not be possible to withdraw and destroy this section of the data. Data may be used in the reporting of the research (in the thesis and then potentially in any papers or conference presentations). Please note that if your data is used, it will not identify you in any way or means, unless you otherwise indicate your express permission to do so.

You have the right to request this data is destroyed at any time during the study as well as having full protection via the UK Data Protection Act. The completion of this study is estimated to be by April 2017 although data collection will be complete by Dec 2016.

Data will only be accessed by myself and my supervisor.

The research may be published in journal articles and used conference presentations.

How will my identity be protected?

Any identifying information about you will be removed from the report. The name of your setting will also be anonymised so that there is not possible to trace you as a participant.

Who to contact for further information or with *any* concerns

If you would like further information on this project, the programme within which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the project, participation or my conduct as a researcher please contact:

Professor Paul Ashwin – Head of Department ; Tel: +44 (0)1524 594443 Email: P.Ashwin@Lancaster.ac.uk

Room: County South, D32, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

Appendix 6: The qualitative survey

Views on play and the role of the adult – a qualitative survey

Many thanks for participating in this qualitative survey about views on play and the role of the adult. It is being conducted by Jo Josephidou a Senior Lecturer in the School of Childhood Education and Sciences at Canterbury Christ Church University and supervised by Dr Jo Warin, Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

I would like to know your views and perspectives on play. I want to find out what female and male practitioners think about children learning through play and why they have these views. Once received, your answers to the survey will be anonymous, with nothing linking you to your response.

Instructions

· Before completing the survey please ensure you have read the participants' information sheet.

· Please write down your own feelings and perspectives – there are no right answers.

· Please write your answers in your own words, in the space directly below the question.

· Please feel free to write as much as you like.

· The survey should take no more than 30 minutes to complete.

Returning your completed survey

Please place it in the envelope provided, seal it and return to your manager to enable us to complete the project.

If you have any queries, please contact Jo Josephidou (jo.josephidou@canterbury.ac.uk)

THANK YOU!

Section 1 – views on play

> 1.1 What does the word play mean to you?

> 1.2 How does play impact on children's learning and development?

> 2.3 What do you think the role of the practitioner is in play?

Section 2 – Male and female practitioners

> 2.1 Do you think that the gender of the practitioner impacts on how they
>
> play with young children? How?

2.2 Why would young children need both male and female practitioners to play with them?

2.3 What skills, characteristics and dispositions do you need to be able to engage in play effectively with children?

Section 3: additional thoughts

3.1 If you have anything else you would like to say anything else about play and differences between male and female practitioners please write it here:

Section 4: some questions about you

1	How old are you?			
2	I am	Male	Female	Other

3	I am:	Full-time employed	Part-time employed	Full-time student
		Part-time student	Other:	
4	How long have you been working with children?			

 If you would be willing to participate in a 45-minute (approx.) interview please include your name and contact details here.

Name:

Contact details (email or phone as you prefer):

Thank you!

Appendix 7: Parent Information Sheet

Title of Project: An investigation into the approaches of early years practitioners engaged in playful pedagogy with young children.

Research Student: **Joanne Josephidou**

Full Address *Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1QU*

Tel: 01227 767700

Email: *jo.josephidou@canterbury.ac.uk*

Supervisor: Dr **Jo Warin**

Educational Research Department, County South, Lancaster University, LA1 4YD, UK Tel: +44 (0)1524 594266 Email: j.warin@lancaster.ac.uk

Date: 30th September 2016

Dear _____,

I would like to ask for your consent to have a look at your child's 'Learning Journey' as part of my PhD thesis research with the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

Before you decide if you wish to give your consent, you need to understand why the research is being done and what it would involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Talk to others about the study if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

This document includes:

• Information about the purpose of the study (what I hope to find out).

- Information about what your consent means and how to withdraw it if you change your mind.

- Details of what notes, recordings and other sources of information may be used as 'data' in the study.

- Information about how this data will be secured and stored.

- Information about how any quotes will be used and how you will be involved in checking, agreeing and consenting to their use.

- How the information will be used in the thesis and for other purposes such as conference presentations or publication.

The purpose of the study

This research is for my thesis on the PhD programme in Educational Research with the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster University.

My research aims to explore whether male and female early years practitioners have a distinct approach to the way they accompany play. If it is discovered that there are some gender differences in practitioner approaches to play then these findings can contribute to a discussion about opportunities that may be lacking for young children if they have limited interactions with male practitioners. It may also help us to understand how to develop the most effective professional practice when working with young children.

What your consent involves and how to withdraw if you no longer wish to participate

Why is my consent required?

I will be talking to your child's key worker about their views on play. I will ask them to show me, and talk about photographs, they have taken as part of children's 'Learning Journeys'. This may include photographs of your children.

Do my child's photographs have to be included?

No, consent is entirely voluntary. If you are happy for your child's 'Learning Journey' to be included then please let me know.

You can withdraw your consent at any time during the study and there is absolutely no obligation on you to continue nor penalty for withdrawing. No notes will have been made about your child so there will be nothing which could identify your child that needs to be destroyed. This is because I am only interested in how the practitioner talks about play. I don't want them to talk about your child specifically; I want them to talk about children in general

What would giving my consent involve?

The practitioner will be asked to take part in a 45 minute interview around the subject of play which will take place in the setting your child attends. They may bring your child's Learning Journeys so that they can discuss aspects of children playing in the setting. The photographs will only be used to give us a focus for our discussion. I will not ask to copy any photographs, take any photographs away from the setting or ask to include any when I write up my research. Nor will I ask or make a note of your child's name.

Protecting your child's identity

What will happen to the data?

'Data' here means the researcher's notes, questionnaires, audio recordings and any email exchanges we may have had. The data will be stored securely for a minimum of ten years after the successful completion of the PhD *Viva* as per Lancaster University requirements, and after that any personal data will be destroyed. Audio recordings will be transferred and stored on my personal laptop and deleted from portable media.

There will be no data which identifies your child as I will not ask, or note, any personal details about them such as their name, age or ethnic background. The name of your child's setting will also be anonymized

so that it is not possible to trace any participants. The completion of this study is estimated to be by April 2017 although data collection will be complete by Dec 2016.

Data will only be accessed by myself and my supervisor.

The research may be published in journal articles and used conference presentations.

Who to contact for further information or with *any* concerns

If you would like further information on this project, the programme within which the research is being conducted or have any concerns about the project, participation or my conduct as a researcher please contact:

Professor Paul Ashwin – Head of Department

Tel: +44 (0)1524 594443

Email: P.Ashwin@Lancaster.ac.uk

Room: County South, D32, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YD, UK.

Thank you for reading this information sheet.

Appendix 8: Parental Consent form

Parental Consent form

Title of Project: An investigation into the approaches of male early years practitioners when engaged in playful pedagogy with young children

Name of Researcher: Joanne Josephidou

		Please Tick
1.	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 30th September 2016 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2.	I understand that participation in this research study is voluntary. If for any reason I wish to withdraw my consent during the period of this study, I am free to do so without providing any reason.	
3.	I understand practitioners in my child's early years setting will use a selection of photographs (Learning Journeys), which could include my child, to talk about children's play in an interview which will take place in the setting. Only photographs taken as part of the setting's everyday practice, and which I have already given the setting consent for, will be used. The researcher will not copy or remove any photographs from the setting. Nor will she ask to use any in any work she has published.	
5.	I understand that the information provided in this interview will be used for a PhD research project and the combined results of the project may be published.	

| 6. | I agree to my child's photographs (Learning Journey) being used as part of the interviews in this study. | |

Name of child:

Name of parent/carer

Signature

Date

Appendix 9: Draft interview questions included in ethics application

The interviews will be semi-structured and it is my intention that the questions

and terminology used will be very much informed by responses to the

qualitative survey. Therefore, it is inappropriate to provide the interview guide

at this point in time. However below are some questions that may be asked:

- Talk to me about play in your setting
- Can you show me some photographs that show good/interesting examples of play?
- Why did you choose these examples?
- Can you talk to me about what is happening in this photograph?
- What do you think the child is learning in this photograph? Why? How?
- Why did you take this photograph?
- Do you remember what you did next?
- When a child is playing like this, what do you think your role is as the adult?
- How do you know when to intervene in play?
- Did you intervene here? Why?
- Do you think you intervene in a certain way because of your gender?

Appendix 10: example of initial analysis of surveys

P1

1.1 What does the word play mean to you?

To explore, investigate, create, act out, enjoy and learn.

> **Commented [JJ1]:** This is last in the list!

To have the freedom to follow your interests and extend them.

> **Commented [JJ2]:** Some of this is quite Piagetian

To learn about and experience objects and people.

To have fun.

Play is the foundation for children's learning and development. To play alone, alongside other children / adults, with other children / adults, to initiate play with others, are all vital aspects of a child's social and emotional development, as well as their communication and language development.

> **Commented [JJ3]:** Lang of EYFS

> **Commented [JJ4]:** I do feel a bit as if I am marking an essay though.

> **Commented [JJ5]:** EYFS

Children learn and develop uniquely, the way a child plays is their own unique form of expression and method of processing experiences.

> **Commented [JJ6]:** Unique is language of EYFS – this is where my professional background impacts on the analysis

To support and scaffold, but where possible be a fleeting presence, dipping in and out of play where necessary, possibly to encourage positive behaviour, to ensure safety, or to encourage and praise where appropriate.

> **Commented [JJ7]:** Vygotsky

> **Commented [JJ8]:** This is a lovely expression

> **Commented [JJ9]:** Okay but not really extend learning then?

A practitioner can encourage children to use their own problem solving skills without interfering, and by providing stimulating open-ended resources for play a practitioner promotes independent learning and creative play.

> **Commented [JJ10]:** Quite Piagetian

I think all practitioners have preferences for certain types of play, and will naturally be influenced by their own childhood play preferences and experiences, which may well be quite gender specific.

> **Commented [JJ11]:** It would be good to have more detail here.

> **Commented [JJ12]:** Socialisation?

However, to be honest in my own past experiences of working with male practitioners, I didn't see a significant difference in their play approach, other than due to personality rather than gender. For example, one male practitioner I worked with was very loud and boisterous with the children, and would play very physical games. But at the same time I have worked with several female practitioners who have been equally loud, boisterous and physical with the children.

> **Commented [JJ13]:** Genderblind discourse? Different ways of being male?

I also worked with a very gentle quiet male practitioner who would often play home corner role play games with the children, brushing dolls hair, having tea parties etc. He had a young daughter of his own, so this possibly impacted on his play with the children.

> **Commented [JJ14]:** This is interesting becos he could be both challenging and reinforcing gender stereotypes. For example why was he not playing cars with his daughter?

Appendix 11: example of using Connell's lens to analyse surveys

P1

......

However, to be honest in my own past experiences of working with male practitioners, I didn't see a significant difference in their play approach, other than due to personality rather than gender. For example, one male practitioner I worked with was very loud and boisterous with the children, and would play very physical games. But at the same time I have worked with several female practitioners who have been equally loud, boisterous and physical with the children.

> Commented [JJ1]: hegemonic

I also worked with a very gentle quiet male practitioner who would often play home corner role play games with the children, brushing dolls hair, having tea parties etc. He had a young daughter of his own, so this possibly impacted on his play with the children.

> Commented [JJ2]: Subordinate or complicit?

I wonder, as male practitioners are usually in a minority in early years environments, whether their play approaches may be influenced by how they fit into a very female dominated team. Do they always have a voice when activities are planned/ initiated in a setting?

> Commented [JJ3]: Marginalised?

For some young children, a male practitioner may be their only male role model, and their only experience of play with an adult male, or vice versa a child may lack a female role model at home.

> Commented [JJ4]: hegemonic

If children see healthy respectful relationships taking place between male and female practitioners they will learn by example, particularly children experiencing negative male role models at home.

Sometimes I think young children are often surrounded by female practitioners in early years, often all female teachers in many small primary schools, then launched into secondary education where male teachers are part of a very formal, often intimidating environment – More male early years teachers are needed!

> Commented [JJ5]: hegemonic

....

Appendix 12: example of using play label lens to analyse surveys

P1

1.1 What does the word play mean to you?

To explore, investigate, create, act out, enjoy and learn.

To have the freedom to follow your interests and extend them.

To learn about and experience objects and people.

To have fun.

Play is the foundation for children's learning and development. To play alone, alongside other children / adults, with other children / adults, to initiate play with others, are all vital aspects of a child's social and emotional development, as well as their communication and language development.

Commented [JJ1]: Co-player

Children learn and develop uniquely, the way a child plays is their own unique form of expression and method of processing experiences.

To support and scaffold, but where possible be a fleeting presence, dipping in and out of play where necessary, possibly to encourage positive behaviour, to ensure safety, or to encourage and praise where appropriate.

Commented [JJ2]: mediator

Commented [JJ3]: organiser

A practitioner can encourage children to use their own problem solving skills without interfering, and by providing stimulating open-ended resources for play a practitioner promotes independent learning and creative play.

Commented [JJ4]: stage manager

I think all practitioners have preferences for certain types of play, and will naturally be influenced by their own childhood play preferences and experiences, which may well be quite gender specific.

However, to be honest in my own past experiences of working with male practitioners, I didn't see a significant difference in their play approach, other than due to personality rather than gender. For example, one male practitioner I worked with was very loud and boisterous with the children, and would play very physical games. But at the same time I have worked with several female practitioners who have been equally loud, boisterous and physical with the children.

Commented [JJ5]: co-player

Commented [JJ6]: co-player

I also worked with a very gentle quiet male practitioner who would often play home corner role play games with the children, brushing dolls hair, having tea parties etc. He had a young daughter of his own, so this possibly impacted on his play with the children.

Commented [JJ7]: co-player

1

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Appendix 13: example of annotated interview

Em sort of I don't like to get too involved unless they want me to unless they ask me to so like I was standing there this morning on the balance beams and the children were talking to me from where they were and one of them was like I'm the captain of my ship so alongside them and getting involved if they want me to just because I think the child should lead their own play

> **Commented [JJ1]:** Agency of children

> **Commented [JJ2]:** Agency of children

I: right okay

And obviously I think the adult only really needs to get involved if you can see something going wrong or if you feel that it if you can develop it a bit further than what they were already doing

> **Commented [JJ3]:** Role of the adult

> **Commented [JJ4]:** policing

> **Commented [JJ5]:** extending learning MKO yet they hadn't done this with the blocks; they could have built a pirate ship

I: okay so would that mean sometimes you were like em one of the children like a co-player?

Sort of yeah I guess sometimes yeah

I: I mean do you see yourself as that sometimes?

Sometimes yeah

> **Commented [JJ6]:** Is she feeling pushed into this answer?

I: right okay and then other times would you be more like directing it

Yeah other times I can just step back completely and just let them play and I'll just be sort of over there

> **Commented [JJ7]:** observer

I: so when you if you see I think you said extend the play what sort of things would extend

Just like bring in other props other ideas other toys that they could use

> **Commented [JJ8]:** resources; stage manager

I: so can I ask do you think that if is any of the way that you play with children is any of it em because you are a woman you play in a certain way

Mmm I don't think so I don't know what I would be like if I was a man I don't think so cos obviously we've got a man and I've seen him do the same things so

> **Commented [JJ9]:** gender blind discourse

Appendix 14: example of looking for themes in interviews

I definitely think style was come from the primary I've had obviously em and obviously working with the older children em it's very much them self-help thing and move them in that way and I think that's something I learn and then take I mean I have worked with as I say like last year I was working with children from year one to year 6 and tailor the sessions to communicate with them in that sense so I think that helps as well being able to take it in

I: right but have you noticed a difference in the way that you approach children to maybe the female practitioners or other practitioners?

Em I mean some of the female practitioners I think it's more style I think a lot of it is just your you know the way your past experiences more than gender I mean there are some children here em who don't feel comfortable working with me I can see it some particularly this couple of girls you know when they are crying they won't come to me I'll help them they'll want to go to female member so staff whereas as I say some of the boys will gravitate towards em it's not just boys there are a couple of girls who as well em so I think it's I think for them maybe it's a visual thing or maybe they think you know maybe it is gender related slightly in that sense but as the way it's dealt with I'd say it's not much of a difference I'd say it's just more down to unique style

I: Okay but do you think that   anything to do with your style is to do with you being a man?

Em yeah em I would say so em again em a lot of the stuff orientated from I did a lot of work at playtimes with the children and lunch times em and working with children in that sense so em with the more sportier children the males generally em so em I think the style that I've grown into em from a sports coaching background from male side of that em definitely comes across so I would say that my style is influenced em being a male but I don't think it differs too much

Themes

There's really no difference (gender blind includes *Intersectionality*),

I want you to think this is how I do it (also includes *Practitioner as professional*):

Males do it better (includes *Gendered distinct approaches; Connell's framework)* though in the case of this male practitioner it could be **I** do it better

Males are constrained in their practice (Male as other, Connell's framework also)