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Early Years Practitioners' understandings of gender-equal play.

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Abstract

Gender stereotypes can have an impact on children's lives and the expectations placed on them (Education Scotland, 2017; Haines et al., 2017). Children have been seen to display classic play behaviours in Early Childhood education, mostly influenced by the adults in their immediate environment (Koenig, 2018; Reddington, 2020). Significantly, the playroom environment, including the resources, can also reflect gendered play behaviours (Orenstein, 2011; Paul, 2011). Additionally, gender stereotypes might affect children's confidence in the subject areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (Alparone, 2011; Hallström et al., 2015; Romero-Abrio et al., 2021). To overcome gender stereotypes and promote a gender-equal play ethos in education, different constitutional and non-constitutional frameworks and regulations have been established at the national and international levels.

The interpretive paradigm is used in this study to explore how Early Childhood educators observe gender equality in play. Early Years staff members working in a nursery school within the Glasgow local authority were questioned about their views on gender-equal play through the use of online questionnaires. Further, a thematic analysis as suggested by Boyatzis (1998) was applied to the participants' responses to understand and interpret data. The findings demonstrated that practitioners needed further education and training on gender equality in playrooms, beginning with the adoption of reflective practice (Driscoll, 1994). Practitioners can collaborate to combat gender stereotypes and make progress toward a gender-equal play culture by adhering to national standards and guidelines. Improved practice and the potential eradication of gender stereotypes can both be achieved by cooperating as a community of practice (Wegner, 1999).

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List of abbreviations and acronyms

CDO - Child Development Officer

EC - Early Childhood

ELC - Early Learning and Childcare

EY - Early Years

EYE - Early Years Education

EYPs - Early Years Practitioners

GCHSCP - Glasgow City Health and Social Care Partnership

GDPR - General Data Protection Regulation

GIRFEC - Getting It Right for Every Child

IGBE - Improving Gender Balance and Equalities

NHS - National Health Service

PE - Preschool education

SFC - Scottish Funding Council

SLT - Social Learning Theory

SSSC - Scottish Social Services Council

STEM - Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths

UK - the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

UN - United Nations

UNCRC - The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Chapter 1 - Introduction and rationale

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the evolution of gender in humans, as well as how gender inequities manifest themselves in society (Snowman and McCown, 2015; Oakley, 2016). According to Oakley (2016), ‘sex’ refers to the biological differences between males and females, whereas ‘gender’ refers to a social process that begins at birth. Similarly, Chapman (2016) highlights that gender differences are visible from a young age, with gender being a fluid situation in which adults are affected and forced to act following the culture in which they live. According to Albert Bandura’s (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT), both contextual and cognitive factors have an impact on how people learn and behave. Humans, and by extension children, learn specifically through watching, modelling, and imitating the emotional and behavioural actions of others. According to McHale et al. (1999), parents encourage gender-stereotypical behaviour in children and serve as models for gender stereotypes based on their behaviour. On the other hand, the gender schema theory originated from Bem (1981) contends that children’s gender schemas are first shaped by their parents’ interactions with them, which may include gender-specific experiences. Children can integrate and structure information about whether toys or clothes are appropriate according to their gender because not only their parents but also other children and the media have an impact on their behaviours.

1.1 Gender-stereotyped play

The consequences of gender stereotyping and how cultural standards restrict children and adults due to their gender have been highlighted by recent advancements in gender equality. Injustice and gender discrimination have harmful effects that are evident in day-to-day living (NHS, online). Our society is prominent with gender stereotypes, which are harmful to both boys and girls because they constantly subject them to messages about how they should behave and look (Education Scotland, 2017). In addition, Scotland’s policy for eliminating violence and discrimination against women and girls (Scottish Government, 2018) recognises the need to promote positive gender roles from a young age, toward a gender-equal society.

Significantly, children engaging in gendered activities like rough-and-tumble play, dramatic play, and role-playing in the home corner within PE demonstrate gender-stereotypical

behaviour (Wohlwend, 2011; Fehr and Russ, 2013; Lynch, 2015). Numerous studies in the field of STEM education concur that boys and girls approach technology, science, and math in very different ways, especially when impacted by the gender-specific expectations of their parents (Casad et al., 2015; Hallström et al., 2015; Günther-Hanssen et al., 2020; Romero-Abrio et al., 2021). As a result, adults contribute most to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and expectations, which in turn affects how children choose their academic and career paths (Endendijk et al., 2013; Chapman, 2016; Ertl et al., 2017; Koenig, 2018). However, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) and Cloughessy and Waniganayake (2019) acknowledge that PE can serve as the basis for removing gender stereotypes through EYPs. Therefore, as proposed by Rolfe and MacNaughton (2010), EYPs can contribute to the reduction of gender stereotypes within their profession through research. Similarly, Ragland (2006) emphasised the value of practitioner enquiry in enhancing the work of EYPs.

1.2 The adults' role and the Scottish context

For the implementation of this dissertation, this study sought to explore EYPs' perceptions of gender-equal play within a local authority nursery class. According to research by Schober and Finsterwald (2016) and Kollmayer et al. (2018), gender attitudes among practitioners have a significant influence on the standard of the environments and interactions they provide for children. Thus, an emphasis on how the environment might contribute to a gender-equal ethos through play is necessary to eliminate gender disparities in the classroom (Education Scotland, online a). Breaking down gender stereotypes at a young age can help children grow into individuals who are not limited by sex-based expectations, decreasing the harmful consequences of inequality and prejudice (Education Scotland, online a).

The Scottish Government has made gender stereotyping in EY settings and beyond a priority. This is seen in several efforts targeted at fostering gender equality and decreasing negative gender stereotypes in EC settings. Significantly, gender imbalances and other inequities in STEM education and training are addressed in the Scottish Government's 'Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics: education and training strategy' (Scottish Government, 2017a). As a result, the Scottish government and the Care Inspectorate have published guidelines, such as the 'Gender Equal Play' guidance (Care Inspectorate, 2018); the 'Improving gender balance and equalities 3-18' (IGBE) programme (Education Scotland,

online a); and the ‘Early Learning and Childcare: National Induction Resource’, (Scottish Government, 2022) to assist practitioners in the ELC sector in improving gender equality and combating stereotypes. At the same time, the advantages to children and society from a more gender-balanced EY workforce (Scottish Government, 2018b) are an important aspect of promoting gender equality. The aforementioned advice is in keeping with the Scottish Funding Council’s ‘Institutional Gender Action Plan 2020-2023’ (SFC, 2020), which looks into how institutions may improve their efforts to achieve gender equality results. Therefore, this project aimed to encourage critical reflection on practice, which would lead to improved practice.

According to Driscoll’s theory of reflection (Driscoll, 1994), reflection discusses an event’s significance. After reflection, the event is examined to attain and put into practice the new knowledge and guide future practice. Further, a workforce that is ‘gender aware’ and exhibits ‘gender consciousness’, as underlined by Warin and Adriany (2017) is necessary to develop a gender-inclusive environment and an inclusive and diverse curriculum. Finally, the findings from this research study could elaborate further on our small community of practice - a cluster of 6 EY establishments - and the EY community of practice in general. Farnsworth et al. (2016) focused on the communities of practice as an SLT, which was primarily developed by Wegner (1999), and explored the significance of these communities. As a result, building connections with numerous practices can result in ‘knowledgeability’. The communities of practice can therefore be defined as ‘...a learning partnership related to practice...where members engage in the same practice...’ (Farnsworth et al., *ibid.*, 43).

1.3 Dissertation structure

As previously stated, the main aim of this project is to examine EYPs’ perceptions of gender-equal play. This paper has been divided into four chapters. In chapter one, I presented an introduction to my study topic and how my project will advance reflective practice, which can lead to more effective practice, as stated above. Staff will hopefully become more interested in the subject as a result and be more likely to point out any parts of their work or environment that should be improved. Taking the promotion of equal practice, as an illustration, preconceptions might be eliminated or challenged. The aims and objectives of my research study, which relate to the advancement of practice both inside my setting and within

the wider communities of practice, were also discussed. The most recent literature review's conclusions about gender equality and gender-equal play will be thoroughly analysed in chapter two. The main debates that have come up in the literature study relate to how gendered play is recognised in children and playroom environment design. Following the investigation of children's gendered play, considerations of the importance of adults' roles will be given. The most important constitutional and non-constitutional frameworks and policies within the UK and the global context toward gender equality will be presented from there.

This paper will continue with chapter three and a discussion of the primary strategies and methods used for the implementation of this research project after summarising the key outcomes of the literature review. The fundamental empirical methodologies of positivism and interpretivism will be described in the first section of the chapter, followed by a discussion of their philosophical foundations. The second section, which explains how my research fits within the interpretivist worldview and its research approach, will come after this. In section three of the chapter, an overview of the data analysis procedure will be covered, followed by a discussion of the major limitations of the employed approaches. To understand research ethics, this chapter will address any ethical compliance undertaken to comprehend research ethics and identify the ethical 'goodness' surrounds this study. The key conclusions and discussion of the project will be described in chapter four after the examination of the approach and procedures in chapter three. Chapter four will therefore summarise and examine the key findings that emerged from the participants' responses throughout the data analysis. As a result, chapter five will reflect on the main findings; discuss the limitations of the study, and outline the way forward. At this point, it is critical to emphasise that the key conclusions stated in chapter four will be strengthened by references to the evidence obtained from the literature review as described in chapter two. By sharing knowledge; findings; theory; and regulations, a final discussion of the primary findings will suggest the next steps and the direction that can be taken to improve practice in my setting and the greater community.

Chapter 2 – Literature review

Previous studies have revealed a growing interest in how gender develops in people as well as how gender inequity presents itself in society (Snowman and McCown, 2015; Oakley, 2016). According to Chapman (2016), gender is a fluid dynamic that inspires and encourages individuals to behave according to the culture in which they live. Importantly, Haines et al. (2016) observed that children continue to be exposed to gender stereotypes from birth through their parents, peers, and the media. Gender stereotypes abound in our society and may be detrimental to both boys and girls who are continuously subjected to messages about how they should behave and look (Education Scotland, 2017). Recent studies have shown that gender stereotypes believed by parents can affect children's performance in math and literacy, reading results, and STEM representation in education (Aplarone, 2011; Casad et al., 2015; Ertl et al., 2017; Muntoni and Retelsdorf, 2019; Carlana and Corno, 2021).

However, researchers acknowledge that PE offers a significant chance to address and eradicate gender stereotypes in the EY (Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2016; Care Inspectorate, 2018; Cloughessy and Waniganayake, 2019; NHS, online). In children's play, gender stereotypes are still prevalent, with both boys and girls participating in gendered activities (Wohlwend, 2011). Play has proven to be crucial for children's social, emotional, and cognitive growth as well as for the acquisition of concepts like literacy in math, science, language, and creativity (Goncu and Gaskins, 2011; Lynch, 2015). Further, Hattie (2012) and Lüftenegger et al. (2012) have previously highlighted that educators play a crucial role in initiating change, educators are aware of the typical play and consequently gendered-stereotypical play. As a result, EC educators, according to Halim and Linder (2013), must address interactions and the environments provided to help children challenge their gender norms. To address children's gendered play, the first section of the chapter will concentrate on play behaviours, STEM subjects, the use of toys, and the significance of the playroom setting. The discussion will then shift to examining the role of parents and EYPs in children's development of gender stereotypes. The main non-constitutional and constitutional structures and policies for gender equality in the UK and around the world will then be described. To support practitioners in facilitating a gender-equal play environment, the essential guidelines will be described in the conclusion.

2.1 Gendered play in children

Numerous studies have revealed specific gendered playroom behaviours for both boys and girls. They found that children engage in standard stereotypical play in the playroom, with boys preferring block play to establish their dominance while girls prefer more ‘feminine’ toys (Kavanaugh, 2011; Wohlwend, 2011; Lynch, 2015; Reddington, 2020). With free play ‘revealing’ normative gender roles, it is significant to notice that children’s risky or rough-and-tumble play is evaluated differently independent of gender differences (Hansen Sandseter, 2014; Bosacki et al., 2015).

2.1.1 Play behaviours

Previous research has revealed that rough-and-tumble play has typically been linked to aggressive play behaviours and weapon play (Fehr and Russ, 2013; Halim et al., 2013). Specifically, Halim et al. (2013) suggested that there are certain reservations, particularly from parents, regarding the acceptance of weapon play and superhero play. Based on a study by Hansen Sandseter (2014) it was found that boys participated in risky play at a higher rate than girls and their EC educators were more concerned with how girls perceived risky play. Similarly, Bosacki et al. (2015) found that if male teachers are involved in the rough-and-tumble play, physically aggressive children may be better liked and obtain higher grades in school in contrast with that female practitioners believe that physical play might result in exclusion (Bosacki et al., 2015). Additionally, other forms of play can be categorised as gendered.

According to a study from Lynch (2015), boys participate more frequently in the block play area while girls are more engaged in dramatic play. Practitioners were seen in the same study to select more ‘feminine’ resources for the dramatic play space, including dolls, prams, kitchen items, and costumes. Lynch (2015) concluded that the dramatic play space continues to be a gendered play environment. Additionally, Børve and Børve (2017) observed that the positioning of dolls in house corners by practitioners is a reference to the cultural connection between women and families. However, boys and girls were pleasantly engaged when crossed gender boundaries (Børve and Børve, 2017). Following the previous studies on children’s gendered play behaviours, the narrative will move on to examine other types of children’s gendered play, such as science, technology, and maths.

2.1.2 Science, technology and maths

Gender stereotypes can impact children's self-concept in STEM subjects and their ability to perform math (Aplarone, 2011; Casad et al., 2015; Ertl et al., 2017). In particular, Alparone et al. (2011) found that gender preconceptions can interfere with math that is mainly by mothers of girls who did not disagree with the notion that math is a 'male-dominated' field. Similarly, Casad et al. (2015) mentioned that children's math anxiety has been proven to be influenced by same-gender parent-child relationships, with daughters performing worse in math when mothers had reduced math anxiety (Casad et al., 2015). Furthermore, Ertl et al. (2017) emphasised how adverse stereotypes regarding women's competence in STEM fields affected their perception of their academic abilities. Ertl et al. (2017) discussed that teachers foster students' self-concept in STEM by encouraging both male and female students to interact with STEM topics. After examining how gender stereotypes affect children's math performance and STEM self-concept, it is necessary to take into account how children interact with technology and science in play environments.

A previous study by Hallström et al. (2015) showed a connection between gender and technology as well as how boys and girls use technology differently. Girls have shown a 'purpose' for building a structure, whereas boys' involvement in technological innovation is crucial. Boys have been observed playing with more conventional 'boys toys', including automobiles and trucks whereas girls are perceived as having less confidence when using technology (Hallström et al., 2015). According to Hallström et al. (2015), the teacher participates actively in the children's play in both contexts, either by physically helping them build something or by giving them appropriate direction verbally. Science experiments can disclose how children interpret physical in addition to revealing gender play in technology among children.

Recent studies have shown that integrating children in science topics may increase their confidence and excitement for science and technology skills (Günther-Hanssen et al., 2020; Romero-Abrio et al., 2021). Romero-Abrio et al. (2021) specifically found, through three distinct experiences, that there were no appreciable differences between boys and girls in the right trajectory of an object under gravity; sun's circular velocity around the earth; and understanding of the seasons. When asked about their career aspirations, boys in the same study by Romero-Abrio et al. (2021) exhibited greater interest in science than girls did. The

relevance of colour-coding in toys and the playroom setting should also be considered in addition to how STEM subjects might highlight gender discrepancies in children's play.

2.1.3 Toys and gendered play

The controversy over whether colour-coding promotes gender stereotyping has been brought to light by studies from Cunningham and MaCrae (2011); Orenstein (2011); and Paul (2011). Boys and girls exhibit a wide range of cognitive and social abilities when they use items that have been 'traditionally' categorised as 'boys' toys' or 'girls' toys' based on their colour. According to a study by Wong and Hines (2014) on the effects of gender colour-coding on toddlers' play with gender-typical toys, boys tended to play with trains more than girls, while girls preferred pink toys more than boys. Wong and Hines (2014) also showed that gender-atypical toys were more 'attractive' when their colour matched the child's sex, but gender-typical toys remained so even after their colour was altered.

Recent progress against gender stereotypes has highlighted the importance of taking action against colour-coding in children's toys (Let Toys be Toys, online). After a study conducted by 'Let Toys be Toys' (2017), there has been pressure on the toy business to advertising toys in more inclusive ways. This particular study demonstrated that stereotypical representations of children's play still exist, with boys more likely to play with vehicles and girls more likely to play with baby dolls. The most important components of a playroom are toys and resources, therefore it is important to take into account how physical environments affect children's play.

2.1.4 The playroom environment

Researchers like Alvestad (2013) and Fønnebø and Rolfsen (2014) acknowledged that the playroom atmosphere has a significant impact on children's learning and play. Similarly, a study conducted in Norway by Børve and Børve (2016) highlighted the value attached to playrooms that are expertly designed and organised, with a primary focus on the outdoors. The organisation of playrooms in Norway, which has a long history in doll corners and where women are frequently connected with family and childcare, is therefore entirely the responsibility of practitioners. This study by Børve and Børve (2016) also revealed that boys were reportedly louder and more active during physical play, whereas girls were reportedly quieter.

On the other hand, current findings from Scotland demonstrated the significance of environments in examining and addressing measures to reduce gender inequalities in the classroom (Education Scotland, online a). Through the 'IGBE programme' (Education Scotland, online a) establishments within their clusters throughout Scotland share their experience in combating gender stereotypes through the adjustment of the playroom environment. Similar to this, Casey and Robertson's (2016) 'Loose Parts Play' toolkit indicates that using loose parts in both indoor and outdoor play can encourage participation from all children, regardless of gender. The 'IGBE programme' (Education Scotland, online a) also discovered that it is important to promote conversations regarding gendered toys and how boys and girls can play with toys regardless of whether they are designated as 'boys' toys' or 'girls' toys'. As mentioned above, practitioners and researchers have made a range of observations that suggest children exhibit gendered behaviour both inside and outside of the playroom. However, it is equally important to look at the perspectives of practitioners on gendered play with a special focus on how parents' gender preconceptions can influence children's play behaviour.

2.2 The adults' role

Reddington (2020) emphasised that there is a substantial correlation between preschoolers' early life experiences and how they exhibit their gender regarding gendered behaviour in the playroom. Furthermore, gendered norms and gender expectations held by parents may have an impact on their children's academic achievement and subject involvement, as mentioned by Endendijk et al. (2013) and Koenig (2018). However, Reddington (2020) proposed that practitioners could challenge stereotypical behaviour in the playroom regardless of gender.

2.2.1 The EYPs' role

As was already indicated in section 2.1, Chapman (2016) found that while many practitioners have attempted to put techniques in place to identify gender concerns, stereotyped play is still visible in the playroom. According to Chapman (2016), children should be given access to all activities in a playroom without gender-specific spaces. Within certain findings from the same study, boys are more likely to be spotted participating in dramatic play both indoors and outdoors than girls are. However, Lynch (2015) argued that gendered dramatic play is acceptable for children to participate in. Similarly, Schober and Finsterwald (2016) thought that teachers' perceptions of math performance had various motivational effects with girls'

maths failure can be attributed to a lack of skill whereas boys' math failure might be blamed on indifference. Kollmayer et al. (2018) made the important argument that educational materials can replicate gender prejudices based on cultural knowledge. According to the above findings, practitioners' perceptions of typical play affect how teachers interact with students and design learning experiences for them.

Particularly, research by O'Sullivan (2013) found that providing books that defy gender stereotypes and include traditional activities can help teachers create gender-equal play opportunities in the classroom. Interestingly, Odenbring (2014) published another study that showed that students who participate as teaching assistants adapt easily regardless of their gender. The studies mentioned above have made it clear that practitioners' perceptions of gendered play might affect both their planning for the classroom and their regular interactions with the children. However, some more research has demonstrated how practitioners' gender can influence the development of gender.

Specifically, male practitioners may exhibit more optimistic expectations during risky play, according to Bosacki et al. (2016). Brownhill and Oates (2016) highlighted that male practitioners are expected to have particular 'masculine requirements'. Despite these findings, a more recent study by Josephidou (2020) acknowledged the significance of more men working in childcare and the need for more male role models. The debate preceding suggests that practitioners of either gender are equally important for children's academic and social development, with their gender having no further influence. In order to improve gender-equal play and gender-equal opportunities in learning, practitioners should develop personal reflection skills in addition to effective communication skills, as indicated by O'Sullivan (2013), Odenbring (2014), and Kollmayer et al. (2018). Boys and girls should participate in the same experiences and develop their unique competencies without being constrained by gender stereotypes through reflective 'co-education', as stated in an earlier study by Finsterwald et al. (2013).

Finally, to provide gender-equal play opportunities and gender-equal environments in the classroom (Warin and Adriany, 2017; Warin and Price, 2020) there should also be awareness and implementation of a more 'gender flexible pedagogy' as well as 'transgender awareness' within EYE. In particular, Warin and Adriany (2017) found there should be the creation of gender-conscious practitioners and a gender-sensitive curriculum to combat 'gender blindness'. Similarly, Warin and Price (2020) concurred on the need for a workforce that is

gender inclusive, the development of staff knowledge through training, and the participation of transgender families, children, and staff in their practice. To establish a gender-neutral atmosphere and gender-equal opportunities for children to play and learn practitioners can undoubtedly use the variety of ideas and practices that have been described above. With an emphasis on their learning outcomes, parents' contributions to the emergence and perpetuation of gendered stereotype behaviour in children must also be taken into account.

2.2.2 Parental influence

Mothers showed more implicit gender preconceptions than fathers, who showed stronger explicit gender stereotypes, according to a study by Endendijk et al. (2013). In addition, Koenig (2018) noticed that stereotypes of boys and girls still imply that women should be less domineering and more communicative. Similarly, boys are supposed to exhibit less emotional weakness and physical femininity (Koenig, 2018). According to Koenig (2018), the aforementioned prejudices about toddlers are mostly concerned with their physical attributes and play behaviours. It is now vital to focus on how parents affect their children's academic performance with an emphasis on math, STEM, literature, and reading abilities.

According to the analysis in subsection 2.1.2, Alparone (2011) found that when young girls' gender identity was projected in pertinent activities, their math performance worsened. The fathers' gender stereotypes did not lessen the threat of gender stereotypes for daughters, according to another study conclusion. In a related study, Casad et al. (2015) found that math anxiety in parents interacts with math anxiety in their children to predict math competence. The same study also revealed that misconceptions about math and gender are the root cause of math fear. There is a significant impact of gender stereotypes within the STEM area and how female students develop their self-concept accordingly, similar to the outcomes for children's math education as described above.

According to studies by Ertl et al. (2017), STEM stereotypes affect students' self-concept, as also discussed in subsection 2.1.2. Particularly, it was found that female students' self-concept can suffer when parents promote STEM education. Therefore, as recommended by Ertl et al. (2017), indirect assistance should be given by giving children the chance to meet role models who are passionate about their STEM careers. A more recent study by Carlana and Corno (2021) asserted that pupils select a more gender-stereotypical course based on the recommendations made by their parents who share the same gender. As a result, boys are expected to select math based on their fathers' instructions, while girls are supposed to

choose literature based on their mothers' guidance. Not only may math and STEM topics show how parental stereotypes affect their children's choices, but parents' gender stereotypes also have an impact on their children's reading outcomes.

Finally, according to Muntoni and Retelsdorf (2018), sons of parents who gave girls the advantage when it came to reading had worse perceptions of their reading proficiency and were less inclined to read. On the other hand, their daughters' reading competency beliefs were unrelated to such beliefs. In particular, Muntoni and Retelsdorf (2018) found that parental reading stereotypes affected their children's competence beliefs in addition to their reading abilities. An emphasis on academic achievement has revealed several influences of parents' gender preconceptions in the discussion above. However, it is important to examine how gender equality is interpreted within national and international frameworks.

2.3 Constitutional and non-constitutional frameworks and policies

In recent years, there has been an increase in attention to the negative effects of gender stereotyping with injustice and gender discrimination affecting children's experiences, skills, and interests (NHS, online). A gender-equal approach to play will aid children in feeling safe, accepted, and capable in the EY (Care Inspectorate, 2018). Constitutional and non-constitutional frameworks and regulations encourage a commitment to gender equality as well as a strong anti-discrimination culture. The 'Equality Act 2010' forbids discrimination based on age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage or civil partnerships; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; gender; and sexual orientation.

2.3.1 The UK context

It is crucial to look into how children's rights are protected in the pursuit of a gender-equal education curriculum because these fundamental rights are legally guaranteed. The most widely ratified human rights convention in the world, the 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child' (UNCRC) (UNICEF, online), outlines the specific rights that all children have to enable them to realise their full potential, including the right to health and education, leisure and play, fair and equal treatment, protection from exploitation, and the right to be heard. The UK ratified the UNCRC (UNICEF, online) in 1991 and in 2022, the Scottish Parliament enacted the 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill’, marking a significant milestone in Scotland’s children’s rights.

As a result, practitioners should support a child-centred safeguarding strategy, with practitioners acting in the best interests of the child by providing safe and effective care so that the child can achieve the best potential results (Department for Education, 2021). Similar to this, many publications exist in the Scottish context that direct practitioners toward a gender-equal play ethos. The ‘Early Years Framework’ (Scottish Government, 2009) and the ‘GIRFEC’ strategy (Scottish Government, online a) assist in understanding that children should be at the centre of their decisions. Additionally, the impact of gender bias is emphasised in the most recent revision of Scotland’s national practice guidelines for the EY, ‘Realizing the Ambition - Being Me’ (Education Scotland, 2020). Through this guidance, it is acknowledged that children introduce gender-based academic choices, behaviour standards, and perceived skills into early learning settings.

In the same way, several organisations have recognised the significance of gender equality in education and society. ‘Engender’, Scotland’s gender equality organisation also recognised the influence of gender stereotypes with females being underrepresented in STEM experiences and how education might help to eliminate them (Engender, online). As a result, EC educators must raise educational awareness, fight misconceptions, and educate themselves. In addition, in 2021, the organisations ‘Sex matters’ and ‘Transgender Trend’ (2021) released recommendations for schools on preventing unlawful discrimination relating to the protected characteristics of sex and gender reassignment in England and Wales, as required by the ‘Equality Act 2010’. Several characteristics and benefits of the main educational and policy measures were discussed above. However, it is critical to consider how international constitutional and performance standards justify a gender-neutral attitude.

2.3.2 The international context

The 17 ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ set forth by the United Nations are an urgent call to action for all countries in a global partnership (United Nations, online). They understand that eradicating poverty and other forms of deprivation requires initiatives that promote health and education, reduce inequality, and stimulate economic growth. Goals four and five specifically pertain to gender equality and good educational quality, respectively. Gender equality and women’s empowerment, as well as an inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning, are crucial as stated in target five. Gender equality and the empowerment of women

are necessary through goal five as well as inclusive and equitable quality education, lifelong learning and opportunities for all as in goal four. The ‘National Performance Framework’ (Scottish Government, online b) combines sustainable development through localising the Sustainable Development Goals (Scottish Government, online c) to combat poverty and inequality through gender equality, education, and health. Similarly, the Scottish Government’s ‘National Improvement Framework’ (Scottish Government, online d) and the ‘2018 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan: Achieving Excellence and Equity’ (Scottish Government, 2017b) emphasise education’s vision by focusing on raising attainment with a variety of skills, qualifications, and achievements by both children and professionals. As a result, a focus on the environment, professionalism, leadership, children's evaluation progress, and parental engagement.

2.3.3 Conclusion

Within diverse educational contexts, I have addressed how children demonstrate gendered play behaviours in risky play, technology and science, dramatic play, and outdoor play (Alvestad, 2013; Wong and Hines, 2013; Fønnebø and Rolfsen, 2014; Hansen Sandseter, 2014; Hallström et al., 2015; Romero-Abrio et al., 2021) have also emphasised the importance of colour-coding in resources and how children adapt their engagement with them, as well as the impact of the environment on gendered play (Alvestad, 2013; Wong and Hines, 2013; Fønnebø and Rolfsen, 2014). In the 2.2.1 subsection, I focused on the practitioners’ important role and how their gender might influence their perceptions of children’s play (Lynch, 2015; Brownhill and Oates, 2016; Josephidou, 2020) with the majority agreeing on gender awareness training and programmes, as well as a more gender-balanced workforce. Within subsection 2.2.2 I highlighted the importance of parental gender stereotypes and how they can affect their children’s academic performance and future career aspirations (Alparone, 2011; Endendijk et al. 2013; Casad et al., 2015; Ertl et al., 2017; Koenig, 2018; Muntoni and Retelsdorf, 2018; Carlana and Corno, 2021). Finally, in subsection 2.2.3 I presented an extensive explanation for the necessity of gender equality in education by incorporating legislative and non-legislative frameworks and policies into national and international legislation. However, there are a variety of national programmes that can assist practitioners in their responsibility of encouraging gender-equal play opportunities for children.

Firstly, the STEM strategy (Scottish Government, online e) aims to improve Scotland's capacity to deliver high-quality STEM education and to close equity inequalities in STEM participation and achievement. STEM education and training aid in the acquisition of skills and capacities that are critical for success in a changing and technologically driven environment (Education Scotland, online c). The centrality of creativity and development for economic progress, and also the tight connections that exist within STEM. Secondly, the guideline on 'Gender-Equal Play' in ELC shows practitioners how to recognise and address gender inequalities and gender stereotypes in the playroom, and thereby fight these conventions (Care Inspectorate, 2018). A third important initiative in supporting practitioners is the NHS's 'Gender Friendly Nursery Support Pack' (2018) encourages nurseries, EC educators, and their communities to actively combat gender stereotypes by earning a 'gender-friendly' status and awards. For this project, I will now move on to the methodology chapter, which includes a detailed description of the main empirical approaches, as well as the methods and limitations of the methods I used; ethical issues that arose; a brief overview of how I conducted my data analysis; and the next steps.

Chapter 3 – Methodology and methods

The study of Blair (2016) defines methodology as the act of justifying and evaluating personal. Each methodology has its own set of strengths and drawbacks, as well as ethical standards by which the research must be done. In addition, Cohen et al. (2018) suggested that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to research since, in the end, there is no single truth to be revealed. To comprehend research methodology, it is necessary to examine the major paradigms that influence it.

With a primary focus on the positivist and interpretivist paradigms, the chapter will begin by explaining the key empirical methodologies as well as the philosophical foundations of research. The discussion will then shift to taking into account how my research will be positioned within the interpretivist paradigm and its arguments. After that, the chapter will look at the methods I thought about using to conduct my research study and my final choice to use online questionnaires; an analysis of the key elements that influenced my choice will be carried out. The limitations of the data collection approach will be discussed after I explain how I went about doing the data analysis by implementing a thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). The chapter will conclude with the ethics section by outlining any ethical compliance and ethical ‘goodness’ procedures followed. Finally, a thorough conclusion will summarise the important points and findings of this chapter and serve as the foundation for the development and discussion of the following chapters.

3.1 Description of the main empirical approaches

Considering Kuhn’s (1962) approaches to research methodologies, the word ‘paradigm’ has had immeasurable meaning. A ‘paradigm’ is a collection of beliefs about knowledge and our connections with it, as well as the practices that are based on these beliefs (Hughes, 2010). Cohen et al. (2018) draw our attention to a plethora of viewpoints that can be used to describe the domain of social sciences that focuses on educational research: empirical; interpretivism; critical theory; and feminist theory, to name a few. Because educational research employs a variety of perspectives, a summary of the primary research paradigms must be provided. As a result, Cohen et al. (2018) provide a detailed overview of the above range of research paradigms. However, for my research project, I will concentrate on the two main ideologies

of positivism and social constructivism/interpretivism due to the limits of the dissertation. It is now vital to take into account the main philosophies that underlie the major research paradigms.

3.1.1 The philosophical underpinnings of research

The fundamental philosophical ideas of social sciences are underlined effectively by Burrell and Morgan (2016), who explicitly mentioned ontological, epistemological, human nature, methodological, and axiological concerns. It has traditionally been claimed by Guba (1990) that ontology concentrates on the researcher who tries to determine if reality is seen objectively or subjectively. The relationship between the researcher and what must be known with a comprehension of knowledge and what constitutes knowledge is also a key focus of epistemology. The researcher must participate in the process and learn how the body of information can be acquired and shared with others to understand it. The axiology also stresses the value of ethics and values in research. Up until now, I have mostly concentrated on the primary empirical approaches and the primary philosophical foundations of research. For this dissertation, it is now crucial to analyse the primary research paradigms of positivism and interpretivism, as well as their underlying ideologies.

3.1.2 Positivism and the underlying research philosophy

The positivist paradigm can achieve ‘scientific knowledge’ through the eight stages of hypothesis; experiment design; observation of similarities and patterns; formulation of a hypothesis to explain normal patterns; testing of explanations and predictions; falsifiability of observations; creation of laws or rejection of hypothesis; generalisations; and development of new theories (Cohen et al., 2018: 14). As previously stated, the two major research paradigms are positivism and interpretivism, and the underlying ontology, epistemology, and axiology of these two major paradigms as significant philosophies in research have to be investigated.

According to Edirisingha (2012), the ontology underlying the positivist approach is that there is only one external reality. The world is objective and separate from each person’s unique subjective experiences. Also, the positivist approach’s epistemology is that the research focus is generalisation and abstraction guided by hypotheses and theories. Then, it is possible to obtain secure and objective information. As a result, from an axiological standpoint, the researcher must either control their biases or be free of them and not express them in a study. Thus, positivism’s epistemology maintains that every social standard has a well-defined and

predictable explanation. Furthermore, the axiology of positivism implies that the researcher's experience should not be tied to each individual being observed. I have provided an analysis of the positivist paradigm and its supporting research philosophy in the discussion above. As a result, it is now crucial to assess the interpretivism paradigm and its research philosophy.

3.1.3 Interpretivism and the underlying research philosophy

Historically, Guba and Lincoln (1994) alluded to the philosophy that supports interpretivism. The ontology of interpretivism asserts that reality is socially created and that there is no single universal truth waiting to be discovered and applied to everyone. The world is dependent on how each individual perceives and experiences it; it is contextual, and each person's experience determines whether or not it exists. Similarly, interpretivism's epistemology focuses on the researcher-researched interaction, and there is either subjectivity or objectivity when analysing facts. Reality is how each individual perceives the world around them, and the researcher's decisions should be founded on fairness, honesty, and dependability. Then, the interpretivist paradigm's axiology refers to the investigation of ethical and moral concerns and ideas. The researcher's theoretical background and expertise, as well as real-world experiences, can be used to interpret the data. Data should be valued according to ethical principles, and any resources utilised to analyse data should also be ethically grounded as highlighted by Sikes (2006) and White and Fitzgerald (2010). Edirisingha (2012) analyses the philosophy within interpretivism, in the same manner, she explains the philosophy underlying the positivist approach. A variety of research approaches can be applied to educational research. However, the positivist and interpretivist paradigms and their underlying ideologies were the emphases of this dissertation, and these have been described above. I will now discuss how I place my study and its underlying ideologies concerning the interpretivist approach.

3.2 Positioning my research

Ragland (2006) emphasised the value of practitioner enquiry by stating that '...anyone researching their practice is crucial for an assessing experience from multiple angles...' (Ragland, 2006: 166). According to Kemmis et al. (2014), practitioner enquiry can put quality into practice and, via reflection and evaluation, contribute to the larger field of educational science.

Consequently, I had to re-evaluate my own experiences while adhering to Ragland's (2006) stages of action research, finding the balance between objective and reflective viewpoints; my frames of reference; formal and practical theories; and my motives, all while taking into account how a practitioner should view practice. Considering the aforementioned lenses, I will discuss why I decided to locate my project inside the interpretivist paradigm. As a result, I use the 'bottom-up' inductive reasoning method (Trochim, 2022). My goal was to identify patterns in practitioners' responses using objective measures, generate researchable hypotheses, and elaborate on the overarching conclusions that arose. In addition, it is important to take into account the research ideologies.

Following the interpretivist paradigm, the ontology guiding my research is that gender-equal play within PE can question and erase gender preconceptions that are currently present in a preschool playroom (Wohlwend, 2011; Kavanaugh, 2011; Lynch, 2015; Reddington, 2020). The axiology maintains that every point of view should be given equal weight and that EC educators' beliefs on gender are founded on their personal experiences and ideas that have influenced them throughout their lives. According to Halim and Linder (2013), the EYPs' ability to address gendered norms in the classroom is associated with children's gender development; therefore the practitioners' participation is vital. As described in chapter two, practitioners have a significant role in observing and analysing gendered play in the playrooms and challenging these behaviours by carefully considering the nursery environment; parental involvement; national guidelines and frameworks. There are many justifications for my research project, all of which have been mentioned above. However, it is now crucial to outline the reasons for my chosen method and the data analysis process.

3.3 Methods

A qualitative technique was used in my empirical research study, as discussed in section 3.1, as I was maintaining ongoing contact with the data throughout the project both research-related and personal. To understand the perspectives of the participants, I observed the qualitative data acquired from the online questionnaires included in Appendix one which can be interpreted as primary data (University of California, online). Research questions according to Cohen et al. (2018) are thoughtfully constructed to fulfil the goals of the research by offering solutions that clearly state the objectives with reliable data. There are,

however, many different techniques for gathering data, such as surveys; interviews; observation; tests; the use of secondary data in educational research; personal constructions; role-playing and research; and the use of visual media in educational research (Cohen et al., 2018). For my research project, I chose open-ended questions in the form of online questionnaires.

According to Cohen et al. (2018), open-ended questions are perfect for small-scale research initiatives where participants are urged to be realistic and open. Open-ended questionnaires have the benefit that respondents are in charge of the material they provide, and they can produce valuable data and perceptive viewpoints. In contrast, closed questions do not reflect the respondents' articulation and are very structured, fast, and straightforward to code. Other benefits of the questionnaires are that they offer standardised, unrestricted responses to a wide range of questions from a large sample. By treating the respondents as subjects rather than as objects of research, I was able to provide a thorough grasp of their perspectives while also taking proper ethical considerations into account. Nevertheless, I also considered the usage of focus groups as a form of data collection.

Focus groups are a valuable tool for communicating with a group of people to further discuss the subject of study, according to several academics (Morgan, 1988; Krueger, 1988; Bailey, 1994; Robson, 2002; Gibbs, 2012; Denscombe, 2014). Focus groups can allow members to express their ideas and speak up, enabling a full examination of the topics brought up by a questionnaire. However, as will be further detailed in section 3.5 and subsection 3.6.2, a number of ethical concerns led me to decide against conducting the focus groups.

Since Cohen et al. (2018) have discussed the 'fitness for purpose' of the instruments of data collection, it is imperative to emphasise that my preferred form of data collection was the online open-ended questionnaire.

At this point, it is important to note that the research was conducted in my setting, which is located in Glasgow's East End and where I work as a qualified CDO. For this research, I recruited up to 25 participants from various age groups -18 years or older- and professional backgrounds as I specifically sought out qualified EYPs. Although the participants are my co-workers, there is no dependent relationship because I am not in a position of leadership. As a result, it is possible to view the qualitative data collected from the online open-ended questions which are identified as primary data (University of California, online). The online open-ended questionnaires consisted of 10 questions about EYPs' understandings of gender-

equal play, which can be found in Appendix one. In particular, the participants returned 11 of the 25 questionnaires that were provided. After considering the justification for my preferred method, I must now describe how I conducted the data analysis for my study, EYPs' understandings of gender-equal play.

3.4 Data analysis

For the purpose of this project, I adopted thematic analysis which according to Boyatzis (1998) is the process of identifying, analysing, and categorising data. Specifically, I had to manually generate initial codes that are mostly '...identifying a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative portion of language-based data...' (Saldaña, 2013: 3). As a researcher, I attempted to decipher the patterns in the responses of the participants and after examining their comments, I built a thematic map based on the themes that emerged.

In terms of data management, the data collection was finished in April 2022, and personal information such as work emails will be stored for ten years before being deleted in December 2022, close to the end of the research period. When I write about what I discovered, the participants' replies that were designated as research data are referred to as P1, P2, P3, and so on. The online questionnaires and research data were both anonymous, so I am not aware of the participants' identities. Additionally, because I used a qualitative approach, the validity (Cohen et al., 2018) was maintained. I attempt to interpret respondents' perceptions of gender-equal play by observing and reporting the data through the participants' eyes. Further, the project's generalisability as discussed by Maxwell (1992) refers to the theory developed from the data analysis as will be described in Chapter four, which may help understand related circumstances both within and outside of our small community of practice. Assuring clarity and justification with the findings and conclusions, as well as how the reader(s) understand(s) the procedures, can also highlight the idea of transparency as described by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) and Teusner (2016).

Finally, the investigation of the relationship between the collected data and what takes place within the organisation is the concept of reliability, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1997). However, as stated by Brocke and Utne (1996) alternate interpretations of the data can appear which could be studied further by presenting the results to the participants and gauging their reactions as stated by Cohen et al. (2018). As a researcher, I had constant

access to the data gathered through online questionnaires. I started by familiarising myself with the data by reading it again and making notes to pinpoint codes, categories, and themes. The understanding of the data was also improved by relating it to the meanings and patterns from preceding literature as outlined in Chapter two. I specifically discussed the data management strategy and the data analysis approach I used to comprehend and communicate my research findings as will be discussed in Chapter four. However, it is also critical to consider any limitations in the techniques employed for data collecting and processing.

3.5 Limitations of the methods

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) assert that while analysing the data, any ethical values and the participants' prejudices should be taken into account. However, there are several restrictions on my research project that need to be properly taken into account. The first restriction is the ability to access my research study while considering the likelihood of a new pandemic, which can have an impact on how the project is implemented. According to the regulations of the University of Glasgow (online a), a 'COVID-19 Fieldwork Risk Assessment' was undertaken to reduce potential dangers, such as the potential for COVID-19 transmission. In order to protect participants, all the questionnaires and data were collected online as an additional precaution.

A second important limitation is the sample of recruited participants. I was only able to recruit 25 practitioners due to the COVID-19 epidemic and the restricted access to other establishments for this investigation. The data were appropriate to interpret because this is an interpretative study and I gave participants extra time to complete the questionnaires by making sure they would not be over-burdened, a problem Cohen et al. (2018) describe. The extra week I gave participants to finish the questionnaire was a step I took as a researcher to increase the response rate from the participants as suggested by Cohen et al. (2018). As a result, I made sure to remind everyone through email how much time was remaining to finish the questionnaire. It is clear that my intention was not to put the participants under undue pressure by requiring ethical 'goodness', which will be clearly defined in subsection 3.6.2. The effectiveness of the questionnaire as a research method for the goals of my study is the third consideration. The use of questionnaires was fully justified by looking at their advantages, as stated in section 3.2. Additionally, I included a 'Consent Form', a 'Privacy

Notice’, and a ‘Plain Language Statement’ as included in the appendices to address any other ethical concerns.

Finally, I contemplated using focus groups as an extra technique of data gathering for my research project, as previously discussed in section 3.3. The main reason I decided against using focus groups was the staff’s availability due to personal responsibilities. I did not want to burden the participants as participants should not be coerced to participate in research projects while there should be no consequences for declining to do so, according to Oliver (2003) and Graham et al. (2013). I talked about the key limitations of the adopted methods in the discussion above. To ensure the quality and validity of the ethics approval system, it is crucial to analyse it while taking into account any ethical issues that occurred throughout the project’s implementation.

3.6 Ethics

According to Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007), one of the factors for assessing the quality of practitioner enquiry is ethics. Specifically, there are some ‘ethical’ principles for practitioners (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007) and these are:

1. The application of ethical protocols and procedures
2. A collaborative effort among practitioners
3. Transparency within the procedures
4. An impactful aspect of its purpose
5. Correlation and applicability within the larger community of practice.

3.6.1 Ethical compliance

When including others in research, it is necessary to first define the research’s purpose; how it will be carried out; how data will be collected and processed; any potential dangers; how confidentiality will be maintained; and the advantages of participating in research (Doyle, 2007). For all the above reasons, I had to seek approval from the ethics committee by following the University of Glasgow’s ‘School of Education research ethics’ (University of Glasgow, online b), where the ethics application had to be resubmitted. In order to move forward with my study, Glasgow City Council’s ‘Research Access in Schools’ (Glasgow City Council, online) procedure had to be approved and further permission from my organisation

to gain access to the participants. To ensure complete accountability in data collection, privacy, and secure storage of data that could be used to guide practice, I had to consider the 'Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002'; the 'Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research' (British Educational Research Association, 2018); the 'General Data Protection Regulation' (GDPR) (UK Government, 2018); and the 'Data Protection Act 2018'.

By safeguarding the participants' data and maintaining anonymity throughout the study, all participants felt secure in the knowledge that they will not be discriminated against or labelled through the availability of the 'Privacy Notice' as in Appendix four and the 'PLS' as in Appendix two. All hazards were minimised as clearly stated in section 3.5 because the questionnaires were created and distributed online using Office 365 Microsoft Forms from the University of Glasgow's official website. Access to online questionnaires was only made available in connection with specific research projects and only after an ethics application had been approved by the relevant College Ethics Committee (University of Glasgow, online b). If in the unlikely event, participants were upset, they were not required to respond to any questions. By assessing any ethical concerns during the project's execution, the consistency of the study has been enhanced.

3.6.2 Ethical 'goodness'

Based on Groundwater-Smith and Mockler's (2007) explanation of the elements of ethicality, I tried to preserve the quality of the evidence; the quality of the intent; and the quality of the result, as previously discussed. In particular, using online questionnaires was an ethical method choice since, as Cohen et al. (2018) indicated, I allowed participants extra time to complete them at their own pace and convenience. Also, participants had time to reflect on their performance and offer insightful comments. TA, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was ethically selected for data analysis since it can be conceptually adjustable; relate to people's perspectives and viewpoints and hence their professional experiences, and be used to build knowledge. In general, the project intends to support practitioners in critical reflection leading to enhanced practice (Driscoll, 1994; Farnsworth et al., 2016; Warin and Adriany, 2017), as fully described and detailed in Chapter one. The children, families, and larger professional community who access EY services will then benefit from the improved practice (Wegner, 1999).

Additionally, the decision to skip the focus groups, in the end, was another sign of the project's ethicality as stated in section 3.3. According to Rolfe and Mac Naughton (2010),

research can also not only aid researchers in the creation of ‘new information’, but also contribute to improving the lives of children. The discussion of the study’s findings in the next chapter will help the participants learn how to challenge gender roles in everyday practice and give children equal opportunities in play. Up to this moment, any ethical considerations have been explicitly articulated. But now I have to decide how proceeded with my project, concentrating on data analysis and how people’s experiences, thoughts, and emotions were handled with ‘goodness’ (Peshkin, 1993).

3.7 Conclusion

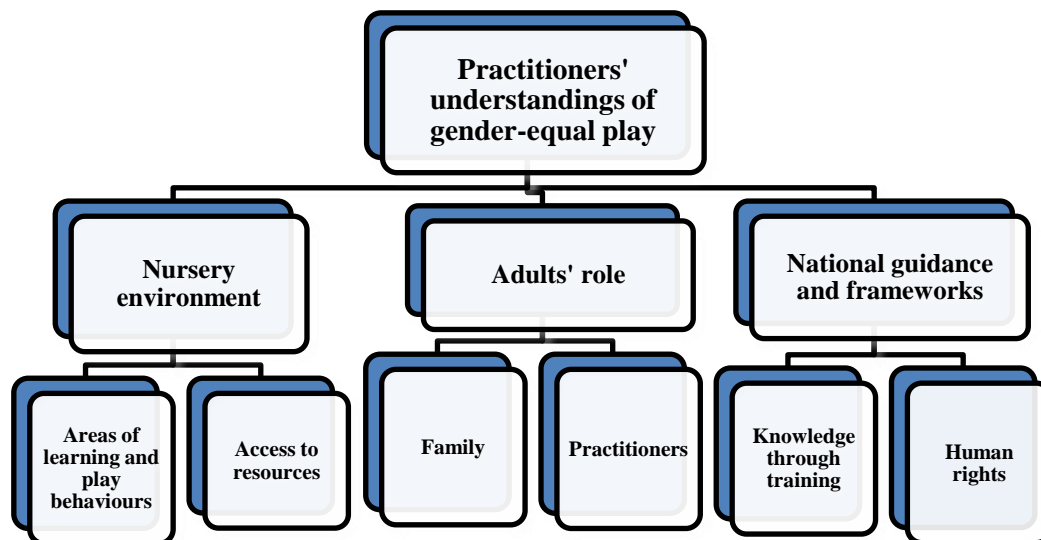
As indicated in section 3.1, positivism and interpretivism are the two main empirical techniques that I used to explain the research process throughout chapter four. To understand the knowledge and impart it to others, research must have philosophical foundations (Guba, 1990). Following that, subsections 3.1.2 and 3.1.3 provided in-depth explanations of the axiology; epistemology, and ontology of research with a focus on the main paradigms. In section 3.2, I continued after analysing the major philosophical foundations of research to discuss why I chose to locate my study inside the interpretivist paradigm. This study analyses EYPs’ understandings of gender-equal play within my preschool environment, which is significant to comprehend my own experiences and via reflection on my practice.

According to Wohlwend (2011), Chapman (2016), and Education Scotland (2017), gender-stereotypical behaviour is still evident in the playroom. In order to combat gender stereotypes in the playroom and promote a more gender-equal play ethos, EYPs’ participation is crucial. Additionally, in section 3.5, the methodologies’ limitations were discussed in detail about the COVID-19 epidemic; practitioners’ gender; the number of participants recruited; and the suitability of the questionnaires as the right research tool. Finally, the participants felt safe and were not subjected to discrimination according to the ethical compliance procedures and ethical ‘goodness’ as described in section 3.6. A project’s quality of evidence, quality of result, and quality of intent can be ensured by following the ‘ethicality’ of the methods, as described by Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007). The main methodology and methods used for this research project, which examines EYPs’ understandings of gender-equal play, have been described and reviewed up to this point. However, it is now crucial to summarise the key conclusions of the data analysis in the following chapter. To provide the final result,

the data were analysed, evaluated, and further discussed. To uncover themes and patterns in the material gathered, the process continued by employing TA. As a result, a connection was made between previous studies and the literature to make pertinent deductions and correlations.

Chapter 4 - Findings and discussion

For my empirical research study, I utilised the qualitative method to investigate EY practitioners' understandings of gender-equal play within my setting. As a researcher, I was in continual contact with the data collected via online questionnaires, beginning with data familiarisation through re-reading and writing notes to identify codes, categories and themes. Similarly, by identifying connections with literature as described in chapter two, the understanding of data was further enhanced (Braun and Clarke, 2006). By offering a brief explanation of the above-mentioned basic processes of data analysis, I provided my primary themes through TA as shown in thematic diagram four. The TA approach as described in section 3.4 will be further addressed in Chapter 4. In section 4.4, the concepts of data validity, reliability, and generalisability have also been covered.



Thematic Diagram 4 - Thematic analyses of the data from the online questionnaire

Cohen et al. (2018) claim that acknowledging the theory's role in perceiving, interpreting, and explaining, is essential for putting all elements of empirical data into a single conceptual context. After reviewing the procedures for my data analysis, I must now present a detailed description of my findings based on my three primary themes of the nursery environment, the role of adults, and national guidance and frameworks. The chapter will open with a discussion of findings on the value of the nursery environment, with an emphasis on learning areas, play behaviours, and resource accessibility. After examining the role of EYPs and the influence of families, it will then cover the findings regarding the construction and mitigation of gendered stereotypes by adults. Following that, key national frameworks and guidelines

will be highlighted while information and training opportunities are made available through the children's human rights perspective. To conclude, a quick explanation of the primary obstacles that EYPs encounter will be covered.

4.1 The nursery environment.

This topic emphasises the necessity of children displaying specific play behaviours in specific areas of learning in the nursery. According to Alvestad (2013) and Fønebbø and Rolfsen (2014), carefully constructed and organised environments can promote quality learning while also encouraging children's creativity and imagination. Børve & Børve (2016) also emphasised the value of a carefully planned setting, placing special attention on doll corners and outdoor spaces. A previous study from Lynch (2015) also revealed that practitioners have been observed to improve the home corner with dolls, prams, kitchens, and costumes since dramatic play spaces are thought to be gendered. Boys can be seen playing with cars and trains, while girls can be seen with dolls and prams in the home corner area. Although all children have equal access to resources, the role play area is one of the areas where practitioners can challenge traditional play habits (Lynch, 2015). It is also vital to assess if the practitioners provide equal access to resources through the participants' responses to investigate the link between areas of learning and children's play behaviour.

4.1.1 Areas of learning and play behaviours

The correlation between traditional play behaviours in the home corner, rough-and-tumble play, and the dress-up section is the focus of the key codes discovered. In response to the first question about whether all children demonstrate stereotyped behaviour during play, participants acknowledged that there are behaviours that can be considered stereotypical:

No. I don't think that as I have observed boys and girls both play with prams and dolls, making dinner, building structures with blocks and showing a genuine interest and participating in STEM activities. (P1)

Perhaps a little with some of the boys, typical boisterous behaviour, more hyper or playing in construction area etc. (P3)

I believe largely most children display stereotypical behaviour during play, young boys playing with stickle bricks join a few together on a line and use this as a gun, a few other boys join in and this can last for a while in their play... (P6)

These replies indicated that the practitioners felt that both boys and girls participate in all STEM and block play activities, with boys displaying more 'boisterous behaviour'.

Furthermore, children can play with the same item but still engage in stereotypical behaviour depending on whether they are boys or girls. Boys are more likely than girls to engage in risky play as observed by Hansen Sandseter (2014), although there are distinctions when youngsters participate in technology and science activities. According to Hallström et al. (2015), boys and girls view technology differently, with girls having a 'purpose' when building but both boys and girls engage equally in science activities as argued by Günther-Hanssen et al. (2020) and Romero-Abrio et al. (2021).

In addition, when asked if they believe there are areas of learning in their environment that promote gender stereotypes, the majority of the participants acknowledged that there may be areas of learning that are gender influenced, but that children's play behaviour varies:

Perhaps a little in the home corner regarding dressing up areas such as certain fashion accessories. (P3)

...The home corner is an obvious stereotypical area where you will see natural gender roles play out... (P8)

According to the above replies, some of the participants believe both the home corner and the dressing-up space to be stereotyped. In addition, Halim and Linder (2013) stated that it is during unstructured play that children can be seen displaying traditional stereotypical play, depending on the resources that they use. In addition, Lynch (2015) claimed that dramatic play is primarily gendered; however, Chapman (2016) demonstrated that dramatic play is not gendered. There should be a focus on changing the playroom environment, as suggested through the 'IGBE programme' (Education Scotland, online b), by providing more drama games, loose components, dolls, and neutral attire. The participants' opinions on children's access to resources based on children's choices will be evaluated after examining how children's play behaviour varies depending on the type of learning they engage in.

4.1.2 Access to resources

The emphasis on children's voice and choice, as well as the effects of colour-coding on toys and how children engage with them, were the key codes that were found. When asked if children had equal access to resources, participants agreed that all children are free to choose the field of learning in which they want to engage:

Yes. All children get access to all areas of the nursery regardless of gender. For example, we have a 'Mini-kickers' programme and it's a mixture of boys and girls that go and not just boys because it's 'football'. (P4)

Yes. Many of the children in the 2-3 room have a free-flow approach to play areas. Often you do see the boys in the home corner cooking, looking after the babies and pushing the prams... (P8)

We can see from the above comments that both boys and girls are encouraged to attend nursery and participate in programmes like 'Mini-kickers' as well as engage in free-flow play. However, it was also highlighted by the participants that colour coding has an impact on how children interact with the resources.

.....Having a range of resources for children to use and not having typical old-fashioned girl/pink toys or blue/boy toys, for example, allows children to play... (P11)

...It is important to have gender-neutral clothing and colour schemes....to have a blank canvas for all children to explore gender roles without bias... (P8)

According to the replies of the participants, colour-coding of toys can have a significant impact on how children interact with the resources and children's responses to colour coding can be influenced by their own experiences. Several studies have shown that colour-coding in toys has been proven to encourage stereotypical behaviour amongst children (Cunningham and MaCrae, 2011; Orenstein, 2011; Paul, 2011). However, gendered-atypical toys were deemed more 'desirable' when their colour matched the child's sex, according to a later study by Wong and Hines (2013), which revealed that boys' toy choices can be less biased against one gender over another. The gendered-typical toys continued to be 'attractive' despite their colour change. Last but not least, initiatives like 'Let Toys be Toys' (Let Toys be Toys, online) and 'Let Books be Books' (online) pushed for action against colour-coding in toys and the elimination of labels like 'for boys' or 'for girls' on books. So far, I have

concentrated on the nursery setting as a whole, including learning and play behaviours, as well as resource availability. The aforementioned findings could be used to challenge gender norms and reflect on the environment and resources. However, it is critical to look into how adults in the immediate environment might influence and challenge stereotypical behaviour in children's play.

4.2 Adults' role

According to Chapman (2016), gender disparities are influenced by adult society, which has an impact on children. As a result, there is a strong correlation between preschoolers' gender expression and their early life experiences (Reddington, 2020). Furthermore, EC educators have an important role in recognizing, correcting, and challenging gendered behaviours in the playroom. Additionally, as noted by Koenig (2018) and Endendijk et al. (2013), parents' gendered stereotypes and gender expectations might affect their children's academic performance and subject participation. Thus, participants were asked to answer questions about the effects of gender stereotypes on children's play and the challenges that practitioners may face in fostering gender-equal play in the playroom context. In addition, practitioners were asked if gender preconceptions may be challenged; as well as how much help they receive in encouraging gender-equal play opportunities for all children.

4.2.1 The role of the practitioner

The primary facilitators of overcoming gender stereotypes include staff behaviours and skills, as well as the promotion of inclusion, according to the main codes discovered through data analysis. Therefore, participants were asked whether gender stereotypes may be challenged through the EY practice to better understand how practitioners can play a vital role in fostering gender-equal play opportunities:

We can challenge gender stereotypes in EY practice; for example, a boy wants to be wearing the dress and is allowed in the nursery without any comments by either adults or peers... (P6)

Yes. With open conversations around stereotypes...creating inclusive environments, fostering a grown mindset, have a range of role models who challenge gender bias/stereotyping. Staff to be more aware of their own biases. (P8)

There is a common notion throughout the above comments that practitioners should be mindful of their biases before proceeding with knowledge and awareness of parental attitudes. Practitioners should be aware of gender preconceptions and prejudices and how they impact children's natural play, according to Reddington (2020), so they can combat those stereotypes. According to Finsterwald et al. (2013), both boys and girls should take part in the same experiences that help them recognise their talents. As stated by Warin and Adriany (2017) and Warin and Price (2020), practitioners should also take into account a focus on a more 'gender-flexible education' and 'transgender awareness'. Nevertheless, the results show that parental involvement is required to combat gender preconceptions. Practitioners should enhance attainment by developing a variety of skills, qualifications, and achievements, according to the Scottish Government's '2018 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan for Scottish Education: Achieving Excellence and Equity' (Scottish Government, 2017b). After looking at how practitioners might challenge gender stereotypes in their work, it is time to look at how participants think EYPs can support gender equality.

In relation to the above question, participants were also asked how EYPs could facilitate gender-equal play, and they responded in a variety of ways:

Encouraging all children's engagement in all areas and resources, perhaps providing more books in story corner promoting gender equality lifestyles. (P3)

Learning about the impact of gender inequality on children's lives. Identify areas of further development watch...and challenge behaviour in children and staff. (P8)

According to the participants' comments, professionals should promote children's equitable involvement in all activities and access to resources while preserving their ability to make their own decisions. Practitioners are therefore viewed as the primary agents of change (Fullan, 2002) through critical reflection that was inspired by observations of gendered play in the playroom. In order to support this outcome, practitioners can evaluate the resources and nursery environment that were previously covered in section 4.1. However, families have a huge impact on how gender stereotypes are perpetuated and upheld; therefore they may also play a key role in addressing them.

4.2.2 The influence of the family

Practitioners were asked about their thoughts on the main influence of stereotyped behaviour in all children in the second question. Although another code indicated the impact of television on their gender biases, family and community still exert the greatest influence. Some typical responses from the participants are as follows:

This comes from influences at home and from family members... (P2).

Parents influence this, for example 'my son is not pushing a pram', 'my daughter is not playing football'. (P4)

Adults-parent/carer passing on their beliefs... (P7)

The participants agreed that the biggest influences are parents and family members with children learning to recognise their own and other gender features based on stereotypical behaviour with a particular gender, according to O'Sullivan (2013). According to Koenig (2018) and Endendijk et al. (2013), gender prejudices among parents have an impact on children's educational outcomes, as analysed in subsection 2.2.2. Alparone (2011) and Casad et al. (2015) specifically focused on girls' math achievement and children's overall math anxiety. Additionally, Ertl et al. (2017) have put a particular emphasis on young people's aspirations for STEM careers and how parents might shape their choices. However, according to Muntoni and Retelsdorf's (2018) and Carlana and Corno's (2021) findings, parental influence can also be seen in children's reading and literacy outcomes. Further, when questioned about impediments to the promotion of gender-equal play, most practitioners felt that the biggest barrier is the parents:

...Yes. It usually comes from parents' ideas of what a girl or boy should play with and this influences their children's approach to play... (P1)

Parental understanding and knowledge. Supporting giving knowledge and examples to parents. (P10)

No. I think staff give children the freedom to choose, it is if the parent makes a complaint then it has to be relooked at. (P9)

Although parents constitute the major barrier to the promotion of gender-equal play opportunities, respondents feel it is up to the practitioner to challenge prejudices by providing

knowledge and awareness without disrespecting them, as shown in the replies above. In addition, practitioners agree that they should be aware of the impact of gender inequality and how they can challenge patriarchal relationships through their practice. So far, I have concentrated on how children's play behaviours in specific areas of learning and access to resources can indicate stereotypical behaviour. The responses of the participants reveal that both parents and practitioners play an important role in combating stereotypes. Participants acknowledged that it is important to raise awareness of the impact gender stereotypes have on children's play, as mentioned in Chapter two. This awareness aims to advance knowledge and practice both inside the nursery environment and within the larger community of practice (Wegner, 1999). The improved outcomes as a result of the professionals' teamwork in practice will benefit the children and their families who use EY services. However, it is critical to address participants' responses regarding their understanding of gender-equal play; the benefits; and curricular support for practitioners promoting gender-equal play.

4.3 National guidance and frameworks

Given the practitioners' role in promoting gender equality as analysed in subsection 2.2.1, it is critical to acknowledge the practitioners' responsibility to recognise the impact of gender inequalities (Engender, online). As a result, practitioners must be aware of how gender norms are displayed in the classroom and provide quality experiences for all children as recognised by a plethora of researchers (Finsterwald et al., 2013; Warin and Adriany, 2017; Kollmayer et al., 2018; Reddington, 2020; Warin and Price; 2020;). Simultaneously, constitutional and non-constitutional frameworks and policies have shaped practitioners' expectations in EY settings to promote gender equality.

For this theme, the questions tried to explore if practitioners can be supported in the promotion of gender-equal play. As a result, the participants responded by reflecting on their own work experiences and emphasising the importance of knowledge and continuous training. Not only were knowledge and training the most profound responses but there were also a high level of correlation between everyday practice and fundamental human rights. After emphasising the significance of practitioners' gender equality awareness, it is now necessary to present participants' responses regarding knowledge, training, and supporting curricula in their practice.

4.3.1. Knowledge and training

When asked if the current curriculum can support practitioners, participants provided a variety of responses:

Yes. We offer a variety of curriculum-related activities such as STEM that promote a cross-curricular approach through all children engaging in science, technology, engineering and maths. (P1)

Yes. ‘Realising the Ambition’ and the ‘Gender Equal Play’ documents from the Care Inspectorate should be used as a working documents at all times. (P2)

Yes as the curriculum can be vast and versatile. There are also several documents/frameworks which provide support and guidance to practitioners e.g. ‘Realising the Ambition-Being Me’, ‘GIRFEC’ and ‘Early Years Framework’. (P3)

Participants provided a variety of examples as well as frameworks and policies that assist EYPs in providing quality experiences in the playroom. For example, the STEM plan (Scottish Government, online e) aims to improve Scotland’s capacity to deliver high-quality STEM education while also addressing equity gaps in STEM participation and achievement (see subsection 2.3). Furthermore, the ‘Early Years Framework’ (Scottish Government, 2009) and the ‘GIRFEC’ strategy (Scottish Government, online a) help practitioners understand that children should be at the centre of their decisions. As a result, high-quality services should be involved in providing early intervention support to children, families, and communities.

Furthermore, the national practice guidance for EY in Scotland, ‘Realizing the Ambition - Being Me’ (Education Scotland, 2020), focuses on the impact of gender bias. Children are recognised to bring gender-based expectations of behaviours, academic preferences, and perceived abilities into early learning settings through this guidance. As a result, EYPs should challenge these stereotypes by providing a variety of experiences as well as the child’s right to self-select other experiences. Regardless of the curricular, framework, and policy support that practitioners receive in their daily practice, it was also highlighted that more knowledge can be obtained through training opportunities. The Scottish Government’s ‘2018 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan for Scottish Education: Achieving Excellence and Equity’ (Scottish Government, 2017b) emphasises education’s vision by focusing on raising attainment with a variety of skills, qualifications, and achievements for professionals. Furthermore, the guidance documents ‘Gender Equal Play’ in ELC (Care

Inspectorate, 2018) and ‘Gender Friendly Nursery Support Pack’ (NHS, 2018) assist practitioners in challenging gender stereotypes and improving their practice. The importance of knowledge and training through frameworks and policies that support reflection on practice (Schön, 1983) and its improvement has been thoroughly examined in the preceding discussion. Additionally, respondents emphasised the need for more training to advance their practice and services for children and their families. However, it is also important to consider the benefits of promoting gender-equal play in EY practice in terms of children’s rights.

4.3.2. Children’s human rights

When asked about their understanding of gender-equal play, all of the participants emphasised the importance of equality; diversity; non-discrimination; non-judgment; non-stigma; and the right to self-expression:

Children can play in any area with what they want to play with regardless of their gender....it shouldn’t affect their play. (P4)

That gender stereotypes aren’t put upon children... It’s about everyone being able to express themselves however and whatever they want. (P11)

According to the responses of the participants, the most common understanding of gender-equal play among children is the freedom of choice in play. According to the ‘Human Rights Act 1998’, freedom of opinion and expression is one of the most fundamental human rights. Within the context of children, the UNCRC (UNICEF, online) refers to the above right in article 13 which allows children to express themselves regardless of religion or culture (Children and Young People’s Commissioner Scotland, online). Furthermore, there is a common realisation that gender stereotypes should not be forced on children and that practitioners should look at children non-discriminatorily without taking children’s gender into account when providing quality experiences. As described in subsection 2.3. After investigating the relationship between gender-equal play and the right to self-expression without discrimination, it is necessary to consider participants’ perspectives on the benefits of promoting gender-equal play in the EY practice.

When asked about the benefits of gender-equal play in practice, participants primarily focused on the importance of challenging stigmas for children to successfully become responsible individuals in their future lives:

It allows children to express themselves and play with whatever they want to play with. The skills the children learn at a young age can help to develop them when they are older, 'boy playing with dolls hair, could become a barber' etc. (P4)

Children will grow up to become socially and emotionally secure adults who will support future generations with no barriers or stigmas accepting their personal choices in life. (P5)

It is clear from the responses above that gender-equal play can challenge gender stereotypes and provide children with the opportunity to become secure adults by challenging 'myths' in their future employment and life. It is acknowledged that the 'Curriculum for Excellence' (Education Scotland, 2022) prepares learners for the challenges of the 21st century. As a result, the skills and capacities developed for the future are primarily for children to be granted the right to equal opportunities in life under article 14 (Human Rights Act 1998). More specifically, under the 'UNCRC' (UNICEF, online) and the 'Equality Act 2010', all humans and children, should not face any kind of discrimination.

4.4 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter three main themes emerged from the responses of the participants: the nursery environment; the adult's role; and national guidance and frameworks based on international and national law and policies. The first section emphasised the importance of the nursery environment based on the displayed stereotypical behaviour of children in specific areas of learning as observed in subsection 4.1.1. Furthermore, within subsection 4.1.2, access to the resources that practitioners provide to children has been identified through specific toys; colour coding of the toys; and children's selection of the resources. In addition, the second theme referred to the significance of adults' roles in the lives of children with the family influences on gender stereotyping being more evident as discussed in subsection 4.2.2. Furthermore, in subsection 4.2.1 the role of the EYPs has been emphasised through the development of their skills; knowledge; inclusion; and discussion. The third major theme

included the main frameworks, policies, and laws that assist practitioners in promoting gender-equal play. Through the development of EYPs' skills and knowledge as discussed in subsection 4.3.1 and the relevance to fundamental human and children's rights in subsection 4.3.2 practitioners can achieve a gender-equal ethos.

Nonetheless, all of the above themes are interconnected, and all of the questions provided answers that apply to all of them. Finally, when participants were asked about the main barriers to promoting gender-equal play in the EY provided comprehensive responses:

Gender equal play in the EY setting has evolved and is continuing to evolve, enabling young minds to explore their ideas and have freedom during play to enjoy their experience, which can help to expand their minds in later years. The barriers are not always simple to dissolve but as each generation grows will become less because the adult influencing their EY will have developed a different perspective of gender equality. (P6)

Parental understanding and knowledge. Support giving knowledge and examples to parents. (P10)

There is a link between nursery environments and how EYPs provide equal play opportunities for all children in the playroom. Resources and learning areas such as a home corner, role play, construction, and STEM activities can help children combat gender stereotypes. Even though parents are the most influential in gender stereotyping EYPs should engage parents in their daily practices toward a gender-equal approach and lead by example. In conclusion, EYPs can challenge gender norms by reflecting on their practices; their environment; and the resources available to them. For the greater EY community of practice to enhance the outcomes for children and families, there is a critical need for awareness and additional knowledge. I will now move to the last chapter where I will reflect on the key findings and limitations and indicate the direction that results from the aforementioned findings could take.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion and the way forward

Following a reflection on the key findings, this study on EY practitioners' perceptions of gender-equal play will be summarised. A discussion of the study's potential limitations will next be offered. This dissertation will be concluded with an explanation of the next steps with some indicative recommendations in practice.

5.1 Reflection on the main findings

Tayler and Price (2016) claim that gender ambiguity explains the fixed categories in which both adults and children perceive themselves as either 'male' or 'female'. The aforementioned classification can be quite upsetting and difficult because children are a target of gender expectations from a young age (Chapman, 2016). As stated in chapter two, EYPs can address those behaviours and hence confront them to eradicate and combat gender stereotypes from an early age (Lynch, 2015; Halim et al., 2013; Scottish Government, 2018a; Engender, online). Stereotypes can be addressed and so countered through the playroom environment's organisation, resource choices, knowledge, and professional development (Alvestad, 2013; Care Inspectorate, 2018; Kollmayer et al., 2018; NHS, 2018). This research examines how EYPs interpret gender equality in play and how they might be guided toward a gender-equal ethos within the nursery environment.

As noted in section 4.1, the study's participants concurred that the nursery setting serves as the primary place to confront gender stereotypes. Therefore, EYPs should concentrate on including all children in all activities, which is obvious in my environment. The participants addressed the issue of boys participating in risky play and STEM activities by their engagement with particular learning and play behaviours. Girls also tend to spend more time in the home corner and the dressing-up rooms. Further, the use of colour-coding in toys has a big impact on how children use the materials. In addition, participants in section 4.2 have emphasised that professionals should encourage children's equitable participation in all activities, access to resources, and freedom to choose their play activities. As indicated by O'Sullivan (2013) and Odenbring (2014), practitioners' conceptions of gendered play can have an impact on both their planning and their interactions with the children. Participants also suggested that it is the responsibility of the professional to eliminate stereotypes by

sharing knowledge and awareness while still honouring the role of parents. Furthermore, according to Endendijk et al. (2013) and Koenig (2018), the family's influence can have a significant impact on children's educational outcomes. Even though parents are a significant obstacle to the promotion of gender-equal play, practitioners and parents can collaborate to achieve the same goals.

In addition, there has been agreement amongst participants, as discussed in section 4.3, that EYPs do receive assistance from various frameworks and curricula in implementing change. Some examples are the STEM strategy (Scottish Government, online); the 'GIRFEC' strategy (Scottish Government, online e); the 'Early Years Framework' (Scottish Government, 2009); and the 'Realising the Ambition – Being Me' national practice guidance (Education Scotland, 2020). Participants acknowledge that children still have the right to select the learning topic they wish to focus on. The responses from EYPs revealed a widespread consensus; EYPs should involve parents in their routine activities. Additionally, EYPs are in charge of advancing their knowledge through training and gender equality awareness. After providing a concise summary of the key findings, it is necessary to discuss any potential research study limitations.

5.2 Limitations of the study

The main topics that will be discussed in this section could be viewed as the study's main limitations. The suitability of the data gathered for effective and precise interpretation is one of the first factors to be taken into account. Participants' comments were truthful and open by being free from unwelcome pressure, as mentioned in section 3.5 since ethical 'goodness' was upheld (Cohen et al., 2018). The themes found in the participants' initial responses serve as a reflection of their perceptions by extensively applying TA (Boyatzis, 1998), as described in section 3.4. Additionally, through the emergent themes, it can be demonstrated that reality is socially constructed, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994). For this reason, the participants' replies are originally presented to comprehend EYPs' realities and belief systems.

Another implication of the study was the exclusion of focus groups as an additional method of data collection. Focus groups were not an appropriate method choice in terms of the ethics of not stressing and over-burdening the participants owing to personal commitments, as was

previously stated in sections 3.5 and 3.6 (Peshkin, 1993; Cohen et al., 2018). Additionally, keeping in mind the key conclusions about the role of adults in section 4.2, the involvement of practitioners in debunking gender stereotypes was crucial (Kollmayer et al., 2018; Reddington, 2020). However, the family's influence is very profound. In light of these findings, I wonder how ethical practices can help parents become more conscious without making them feel under pressure.

Even though additional training sessions for parents can be held within the nursery environment to promote knowledge sharing, parents still have the option to decline such training opportunities. However, frameworks and policies are accessible for people to investigate at their convenience. By making sure that the guidance and frameworks as analysed in section 4.3 are implemented, EYPs should make sure to lead by example and be supportive. Based on the comments and participation of EYPs, I have thus far summarised the study's main findings and limitations. It is now required to provide a conclusion to this dissertation by proposing potential directions for ELC practice.

5.3 The way forward

The relevance of the learning environment and the adult's role in promoting high quality in EL education is emphasised in the national practice guidance entitled 'Realizing the Ambition - Being Me' (Education Scotland, 2020). According to Sylva et al. (2014), the quality of the ELC promotes children's growth and learning, which will further increase their chances in school and life. Additionally, the 'Standard for Childhood Practice' (SSSC, 2016) suggests that the dedication to inclusiveness; diversity; social justice; and anti-discrimination toward children and their families should be included in the professional values. The aforementioned findings make it clear that practitioners should be in charge of their learning and ongoing knowledge development.

Additionally, as indicated by Bush (2011), 'collegiality' can be encouraged by allowing staff to work together and contribute to attainable goals, by sharing professional knowledge and practice. The fact that the results of this study can be applied within larger communities of practice (Wegner, 1999) by exchanging knowledge and building learning partnerships (Farnsworth et al., 2016), is another crucial component of that as well. To ensure and

implement gender equality as required by the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’, change can be feasible (Fullan; 2002; Rodd, 2013; Brookfield, 2017; United Nations, online).

As stated in chapter one, the purpose of this project was to encourage critical reflection on practice that would result in enhanced practice (Schön, 1983; Driscoll, 1994). Similarly, participants have recognised the value of more education and training as well as support their practice through constitutional and non-constitutional frameworks and regulations, as outlined in section 4.3. Motivated by the knowledge acquired, this research can enhance practice in my environment and effectively influence the nursery’s values and vision (Hattie, 2012; Lüftenegger, 2012). A workforce ought to be gender inclusive for all families and their children, including those who don't fit into the gender binary, as discussed by Warin and Price (2020). Thus, my establishment can implement potential changes toward a ‘gender-friendly’ nursery accreditation through the ‘Gender Friendly Nursery’ project initiated by Glasgow's City Health and Social Care Partnership (GCHSCP, 2021).

Beyond practitioner enquiry, the knowledge collected might also be shared among the cluster of 6 EY establishments with whom my establishment is associated, with other professionals sharing their reflection results to create wider communities of practice (Wegner, 1999). In addition, other EYPs can use the aforementioned results as a ‘mean for the journey’ in their practices to gender equality. Through their annual training workshops for Glasgow nurseries, the ‘Gender Friendly Nursery’ project (GCHSCP, 2021) could further enrich and improve their programme by referring to the findings and major arguments of this study. Finally, this study might be interesting to audiences from other local governments and the private sector in addition to the immediate community of practice. By presenting the findings at EY conferences organised by the ‘Scottish Government’ (online f); ‘Education Scotland’ (online d); ‘Early Years Scotland’ (online); and the University of Glasgow’s ‘School of Education’ (University of Glasgow, online c) EYPs from other clusters may have access to this information. Therefore, to improve practice and challenge gender stereotypes, there is a need for more staff training and awareness opportunities. Families can also gain from the growth of knowledge and work with professionals to improve their children’s learning performance. Finally, by boosting their learning outcomes by equal participation in all the experiences, children can raise their self-esteem and form meaningful aspirations for the future.

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Appendix 1: Questions for the online questionnaire

1. Do you think that all children display stereotypical behaviour during play? If yes, please provide some examples.
2. Which do you think is the main influence of stereotypical behaviour in all children and why?
3. Do you think that gender stereotypes can be challenged through Early Years' practice and why?
4. Do you think that there are areas of learning in your setting that reinforce gender stereotypes?
5. Do all children have equal access to all the resources provided in your setting? If so, how do you encourage equal access to all children?
6. What is your understanding of gender-equal play?
7. Do you think that there are any barriers to the promotion of gender-equal play in an Early Years' setting? If yes, can you think of any ways that these barriers might be overcome?
8. What do you think are the benefits of promoting gender-equal play in Early Years?
9. How can Early Years' practitioners support gender-equal play?
10. Do you think that the current curriculum can support Early Years' practitioners in promoting gender-equal play? Please provide some examples.

For the online version of the questionnaire, please refer to the following link

@<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=KVxybjp2UE-B8i4ITwEzyHAJGpzjsiZEsTdm1OenqidUOVc3MUYxUIMzSTIPQThNMFpPNzRCTzBHUi4u>

Appendix 2: Plain Language Statement



Plain Language Statement

Title of project and researcher details

Early Years practitioners' understandings of gender-equal play

Researcher: XXXXX [@student.gla.ac.uk](mailto:XXXXX@student.gla.ac.uk)

Supervisor: Craig Orr craig.orr@glasgow.ac.uk

Course: MEd in Childhood Practice, School of Education

You are being invited to take part in a research project in a Master's Research study. Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me, XXXX, or my supervisor, Craig Orr, via the contact details above 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. I hope that this sheet will answer any questions you have about the study.

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The goal of this study is to learn about Early Years practitioners' understandings of gender-equal play for my Masters' dissertation. Gender distinctions are perceived from an early age and gender is a fluid situation in which adults are influenced and driven to act in accordance with the culture in which they live (Chapman, 2016). Educators in Early Years settings, in particular, play an important role in fostering gender equality and justice for all children (MacNaughton, 2000). As a result, my primary goal is to study staff perceptions of gender-equal play and how they may support high-quality gender-equal play opportunities in order to promote children's right to self-expression and a gender-balanced play ethos in a nursery setting.

2. Why have I been chosen?

You are being asked to take part because you work in an Early Years setting and you are a trained Early Years educator. Your participation in this study will allow you to explore how you think about gender-equal play in your everyday practice and how you might support children. Furthermore, this study project may provide new research ideas and areas for development in our community of practice, which will hopefully strengthen our community ethos by allowing all children to participate in gender-equal play opportunities.

3. Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this study. If you decide not to take part, you will still be treated the same as just now and it will not affect your work or any assessment grades

awarded to you. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know and I will not use any information you have given me in my writing.

4. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you participate, I will send an online questionnaire to your work email asking you to answer 10 questions regarding your perceptions of gender-equal play. I will use Office 365 Microsoft Forms through the University of Glasgow to design the online questionnaire and collect data online. You are not obligated to respond to any questions that you do not wish to; this could take up to 30 minutes. I will receive the completed questionnaires via email once they have been finished, and they will all be anonymised.

5. Will the information that I give you in this study be kept confidential?

By March 2022, I will have completed data collection; the research data (questionnaires' responses processed through thematic analysis) will be detained for 10 years and will be stored in my University OneDrive account, after which it will be securely destroyed, in line with GDPR requirements. All the personal data (work emails) will be detained for the duration of the project and will be destroyed once the project is complete, in December 2022. When I write about what I have found, your name will not be mentioned. When I write about what I have found, your responses (research data) will be referred as P1, P2, P3 and so on. However, if I notice anything which makes me worried that you might be in danger of harm through your responses, I might have to inform relevant agencies of this.

6. What will happen to the results of this study?

I will analyse the data I gather from participants and present it in the dissertation I'm preparing for my MEd in Childhood Practice qualification. After the data analysis is done, all participants will receive a written summary of the findings.

7. Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and agreed upon by the School of Education Ethics committee, University of Glasgow.

8. Who can I contact for further information?

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me, XXXXX
(XXXXXX@student.gla.ac.uk)

or my supervisor, Craig Orr (craig.orr@glasgow.ac.uk)

or the Ethics officer for the School of Education, XXXXX@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this.

Appendix 3: Consent Form



Consent Form

Title of Project: Early Years practitioners' understandings of gender-equal play.

Name of Researcher: XXXXX@student.gla.ac.uk

Name of Supervisor: Craig Orr craig.orr@glasgow.ac.uk

I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research:

- ♦ Personal data (work emails) and research data (questionnaires' responses) likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- ♦ The personal data will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage until the end of the project.
- ♦ The research data will be treated anonymised and kept in secure storage for 10 years, in line with GDPR requirements.
- ♦ The personal data will be securely deleted once the project is complete.
- ♦ The research data will be securely deleted after a period of 10 years.

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to complete the given questionnaire.

I agree to take part in this research study

I do not agree to take part in this research study

Name of Participant Signature

Date

Name of Researcher XXXXX.... SignatureXXXXXX.....

Date

Appendix 4: Privacy Notice

Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project: Early Years practitioners' understandings of gender-equal play. Name of researcher: Polyxeni Rodopoulou xxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk GUID: xxxxxxxx. Name of Supervisor: Craig Orr craig.orr@glasgow.ac.uk

Your Personal Data (work emails)

The University of Glasgow will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project Early Years practitioners' understandings of gender-equal play. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and contact details in order to conduct our research. We need your name and contact details to potentially follow up on the data you have provided.

We only collect data that we need for the research project and will de-identify samples or your personal data from the research data (your answers given during the completion of the online questionnaire) through a reversible process whereby identifiers are replaced by a code.

Please note that your confidentiality may be impossible to guarantee for example due to the size of the participant group, location etc. Please see accompanying **Participant Information Sheet**.

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed by staff at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe: encryption of files and access to the available files by password only. Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way.

We will provide you with a copy of the study findings and details of any subsequent publications or outputs on request.

What are your rights?*

GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see [UofG Research with personal and special categories of data](#).

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact dp@gl.a.ac.uk

Complaints

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.

Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This study has been reviewed and agreed upon by the School of Education Ethics committee, University of Glasgow.

How long do we keep it for?

Your **personal** data (work emails) will be retained until the completion of the project in December 2022. After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your research data (participants' responses processed through thematic analysis) will be retained for a period of 10 years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines and GDPR requirements, and then research data will be securely deleted. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.