

**A Psychosocial approach to understanding children's emotional experiences in a nursery
setting**

Karla I. Elizondo de la Garza

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies

University of Essex

Date of submission for examination: July 2025

Abstract

Nurseries play a significant role in many children's lives in industrialised countries as a combination of financial, societal and psychological factors lead to increasing adult participation in the labour market. As children increasingly spend their time within nursery settings, it is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences within these environments. In the current policy around nursery settings, developmental milestones and *attachment* tend to be emphasised, leaving aside the complexities that might arise from context and unconscious dynamics. The process of socialising a child goes beyond achieving a developmental milestone, it is an emotionally charged experience for both the adult and the child. This process is further influenced by the habitus of the nursery, which differs from the habitus each child has in their own home.

This research examines the relationship between unconscious dynamics and sociological factors in early childhood experiences within nursery settings. It investigates children's emotional experiences and development utilising a psychosocial approach, which draws upon key theorists such as Donald W. Winnicott, Adrienne Harris, and Jessica Benjamin, among others; and sociological theories, such as Norbert Elias's habitus and the civilising process, Pierre Bourdieu's habitus and capital, as well as Alfred Lorenzer's *scenic understandings*. Through six individual nursery observations of four children, as well as interviews with their parents and four key staff members, the research offers insight into how institutional expectations, relational dynamics, and symbolic processes shape the child's early experiences. Concepts such as language as a third space, emotional regulation, containment, symbolic play, and the emotional labour of staff are brought into focus. The thesis argues that the nursery is not only a site of early learning but also a space of symbolic negotiation, where children's subjectivities are continually formed, challenged, and reworked.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my supervisor, Dr Norman R. Gabriel, for the unwavering care and support that carried me through this journey. His insight, patience, and thoughtful guidance helped me navigate not only the challenges of this research and degree but also the personal and emotional ups and downs along the way. I am deeply grateful for his generosity, encouragement, and ability to spark joy and curiosity in both work and life. It has been a privilege to be guided by someone who embodies such kindness and intellectual integrity.

I am sincerely thankful to my panel members, Dr Jessica Battersby and Dr Emilia Halton-Hernandez, whose guidance and encouragement sustained me throughout. I also want to extend my appreciation to Dr Arianna Pulsoni, who was part of the panel earlier in the process. Our conversations left a lasting impact on me; your insight and attentiveness shaped not only the direction of this research but also how I came to understand myself as a researcher and practitioner. I found strength, clarity, and a sense of purpose through your words. Another big thank you to Alison Evans, who guided me through every step of the administrative maze with such patience and kindness; always ready to answer my questions and grounding me in the process.

To my family, friends, and colleagues, thank you for believing in me. Your support, laughter, and encouragement helped me feel grounded and capable, especially in moments when I doubted myself. You made this journey lighter and more joyful.

I extend heartfelt thanks to all the participants who shared their stories and allowed me into their world. Your openness and trust made it possible to explore the research questions. This research is, above all, about the lives you generously allowed me to witness. Your stories and experiences

provided such rich landscapes to be able to answer a profound question of such great importance to me.

I am profoundly grateful to my psychoanalyst, Paola, for being a steady presence through it all. Her containment and insight have been essential to my thinking and emotional endurance throughout this process.

To my husband, Oscar, thank you for your love, patience, and unwavering support. Your care held me together in difficult moments when I felt overwhelmed. You always remind me to rest and keep going. Your warmth and humour sustained me in ways words cannot fully capture. And to Sakura, my beloved pup and co-writer, thank you for your companionship and comfort. You were my anchor on many long days.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Acknowledgments	3
Table of Contents	5
Chapter 1: Introduction	10
Summary of Chapters	12
Chapter 2: Literature Review	18
Introduction	18
2.1 Emotional Dimensions of Nursery Policy and Practice	20
2.1.1 Beyond Attachment Theory	25
2.2 Nurseries as institutions for socialisation	29
2.2.1 Desymbolisation of Care	32
2.3 Peer culture in the nursery	35
2.3.1 Role play, the social and the intersubjective	37
2.4 Unconscious processes in the nursery	40
2.5 Intersubjectivity in the nursery	42
2.5.1 Dynamics of Aggression	44
2.6 Dialogues as Transitional Spaces	48
2.6.1 The role of language in shaping peer culture	52

	6
2.6.2 Singing in the Nursery	54
Conclusions: The Nursery as a Site of Social, Emotional, and Unconscious Development	56
Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework	63
Introduction	63
3.1 Psychoanalysis and Child Development	65
3.1.1 Early states of the infant	66
3.1.2 Containment and holding	69
3.1.3 Transitional phenomena	72
3.1.4 The Potential Space	73
3.2 Language and the unconscious	79
3.2.1 Language and the Symbolic Order	81
3.2.2 Language and socialisation	84
3.2.3 Language and intersubjectivity	86
3.2.4 Language as a Transitional Phenomena	88
3.3 Being socialised	90
3.3.1 Elias's Habitus and Symbol Emancipation	92
3.3.2 Bourdieu's Habitus, Capital and Field	95
Conclusions: Towards a Psychosocial Theoretical Framework	98
Chapter 4: Methodology and Research Design	107
Introduction	107

4.1 Ontology and Epistemology	109
4.2 Psychosocial Methodology	110
4.2.1 Nursery Observations	112
4.2.2 Interviews	115
4.2.3 Reflexivity	118
4.3 Research Design	120
4.3.1 Data Collection	122
4.3.2 Data Analysis	125
4.3.3 Trustworthiness of Findings	127
4.3.4 Ethics	128
Conclusions: Establishing a Psychosocial Methodological Framework	129
Chapter 5: Echoes Within: A Reflexive Entry into the Nursery's Emotional Landscape	130
Introduction	130
5.1 Parental Entry Into the Habitus	132
5.2 Ambivalence, Institutional Defence, and the Relational Habitus of the Nursery	137
5.3 Carriers of the Everyday - Introducing the Staff as Emotional Anchors in the Nursery	141
5.4 Coming Into View - Introducing the Children as Subjects	148
Conclusions: Tracing Emotional Undercurrents in the Nursery Figuration	159
Chapter 6: Figurations of Childhood - the Civilising Habitus in the Nursery	162
Introduction	162

6.1 The ‘Good Child’ and Emotional Regulation	166
6.2 Gendered Scripts of Emotion and Behaviour	173
6.3 Parental Phantasies and Developmental Desires	188
Conclusions: Scripts, Fantasies, and the Emotional Life of the Child	194
Chapter 7: Emotional Labour and Institutional Defences	199
Introduction	199
7.1 Feeling Rules and the Management of Emotion	201
7.2 Institutional Defences, Splitting, and Role Lock	218
7.3 Silences, Omissions, and Unconscious Processes	226
Conclusions: Holding, Defending, Forgetting - The Psychological Life of the Institution	236
Chapter 8: Language, Symbolisation, and the Nursery as Transitional Space	239
Introduction	239
8.1 Language as Transitional Space	240
8.2 Embodying the Institutional Habitus	249
8.3 Containment, Misattunement, and Relational Meanings	255
Conclusions: Symbolic Threads and Embodied Silences - Meaning in Motion	273
Chapter 9: Concluding Reflections on Weaving Intersubjectivity, Habitus and the Symbolic through the Spaces In-between Care	277
Introduction	277
9.1 Language as Transitional Space - The Bridge Between the Inner and Outer Worlds	281

9.2 Intersubjectivity - Emotional Co-Creation and Symbolic Negotiation	284
9.3 Habitus, Symbolic Capital, and the Emotional Infrastructure of the Nursery	288
Conclusion: The In-between and the Possibilities of Care	293
References	301
Appendices	321
Appendix 1: Approval Letter from the Ethics Board	321
Appendix 2: Letter of Invitation to Nursery	322
Appendix 3: Flyer for Recruitment	323
Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet	324
Appendix 5: Consent Forms	327
Appendix 6: Staff's Interview Schedule	330
Appendix 7: Parent's Interview Schedule	331

Chapter 1: Introduction

Nurseries occupy a central role in the lives of young children, especially in industrialised societies where both parents often participate in the labour market (Stanley, Bellamy, & Cooke, 2006). In the United Kingdom, this shift has led to increased reliance on formal childcare services.

According to the Department for Education's Childcare and Early Years Survey (2018), nearly half of all preschool children aged 0–4 attend nursery settings, spending an average of 18 hours per week in institutional care. These arrangements reflect economic pressures, changing family structures, and broader cultural shifts towards dual-income households (Armstrong & Rustin, 2014). At the same time, immigration and multiculturalism diversify the social fabric of British childhood, creating a context where children are raised within varied familial norms yet enter shared institutional environments.

While research often focuses on structural indicators such as staff qualifications, ratios, and curriculum content (Phillipsen et al., 1997), the affective and relational life of the nursery is frequently marginalised in both scholarship and policy. The emotional labour involved in caring for young children, and the complex psychic processes children navigate within institutional environments, remain under-theorised. Early years policy continues to be shaped largely by *Attachment Theory* which, although valuable, does not fully address the unconscious, intersubjective, and symbolic dimensions of emotional development in institutional contexts (Elfer, 2015). There is a need for a framework that attends both to the inner world of the child and to the socio-cultural and institutional structures that shape it.

This thesis adopts a psychosocial approach, integrating psychoanalytic and sociological theory to explore how emotional, symbolic, and relational processes unfold within the everyday life of the

nursery. Drawing on theorists such as Frosh (2003), Bourdieu (1977, 1990), Elias (2010, 2011, 2012), Lacan (1966), Kristeva (1982), and Winnicott (1971), it treats children's interactions as moments of active meaning-making rather than passive adaptation. Psychosocial theory makes it possible to explore what is spoken and unspoken, expressed in language and conveyed through gesture, silence, or repetition. It provides tools to examine how emotional life is organised, regulated, and at times disavowed within the symbolic and material architecture of the nursery.

The research combined ethnographic observation with semi-structured interviews conducted with staff and parents in a nursery located in Southeast England. Attention was given to verbal exchanges, bodily expression, spatial positioning, routine, and rupture. These scenes are read not as neutral childcare moments, but as affective constellations shaped by social structures, *institutional habitus*, and unconscious communication. The researcher's emotional responses formed part of the analytic process, guided by reflexivity to acknowledge the intersubjective dimensions of psychosocial inquiry.

Cultural and linguistic diversity further complicate the relational landscape of the nursery. Children arrive with different repertoires of emotional and communicative practices shaped by home life yet must navigate the often tacit affective and behavioural codes of the institution. These codes are transmitted through gesture, routine, and relational alignment rather than explicit instruction. Theories such as Elias's *civilising process* and Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus*, *capital*, and *field* illuminate how children come to inhabit institutional expectations at bodily and psychic levels. At the same time, psychoanalytic theories of symbolisation, containment, and recognition help explain how these expectations are internalised, negotiated, or resisted.

The central concern of this thesis is to explore how the affective life of the nursery is organised, experienced, and negotiated by children and staff. How do the emotional, social, and symbolic dynamics within the nursery shape children's development and socialisation? By examining everyday processes of inclusion, regulation, and misattunement, the thesis seeks to understand how subjectivities are formed within this institutional field. Here, care is not seen merely as provision, but as a contested and emotionally charged practice, embedded within systems of power, meaning, and recognition.

Summary of Chapters

In Chapter 2, the *Literature Review*, I critically explore existing scholarship on the emotional dimensions of nursery life, highlighting the prominence of Attachment Theory within early years policy and questioning its limits in capturing the nuanced reality of institutional life. I turn instead to theories of peer culture, language, and unconscious dynamics to develop a broader lens through which to understand children's emotional experiences. This chapter lays the theoretical foundation for a psychosocial analysis that attends to the interplay of structure, affect, and symbolic meaning. I argue that the nursery is not simply a site of care and education but a social field in which cultural norms, emotional histories, and relational negotiations converge. While sociological perspectives illuminate how nurseries reproduce social structures, psychoanalytic and intersubjective approaches show that development is shaped by unconscious transmissions, moments of misrecognition, and the struggle for relational meaning. In acknowledging this social, unconscious, and intersubjective complexity, early childhood education must move beyond developmental outcomes to engage with the emotional foundations that shape how children learn to think, relate, and be.

Chapter 3, *Theoretical and Conceptual Framework*, develops a psychosocial framework weaving psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives. This framework examines how caregivers, language, play, and institutional norms shape children's emotional life. Drawing on Bion (1962) and Winnicott (1960), I describe caregivers as emotional containers whose presence helps children regulate affect and build secure attachments. Language emerges as both a symbolic structure and emotional tool mediating expression and regulation (Spielrein, 1912; Dolto, 1995; Lacan, 1977). Play, following Winnicott (1971) and Benjamin (2013), is framed as a transitional space where children explore inner conflicts and social positions. Meanwhile, the internalisation of social norms ensures children learn culturally intelligible ways to express and manage feeling (Elias, 2010, 2012; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). Concepts such as *transitional space*, the *Symbolic Order*, *habitus*, and the *civilising process* are central to analysing how emotional meaning is produced and constrained. The chapter highlights how emotions are shaped through early relational encounters, institutional structures, and linguistic negotiation. Psychoanalytic theory attends to unconscious processes and the struggle for recognition, while sociological perspectives situate these within historical and cultural contexts shaping emotional habitus and regulation.

Chapter 4, *Methodology and Research Design*, outlines the psychosocial methodology underpinning this study. It describes an ethnographic approach combining participant observation and theme-centred interviews with staff and parents, while reflecting on the researcher's emotional presence in the field. Reflexivity is presented as integral to analysis, recognising how unconscious processes and affect shape what can be noticed, said, and interpreted. This methodology remains attuned to complexity, intersubjectivity, and power, tracing how individual subjectivities and broader social structures are mutually implicated in the nursery's emotional life.

Chapter 5, *Echoes Within: A Reflexive Entry into the Nursery's Emotional Landscape*, introduces the context and participants by attending to the affective atmosphere of the nursery. Rather than a neutral backdrop, I approach it as a shifting landscape of relational tensions, unconscious currents, and institutional pressures. Feelings refracted through silence, gesture, and repetition reveal how staff and children inhabit roles shaped by history and defence. Through a scenic lens (Lorenzer, 1986), these moments are read as symbolic condensations of the institution's psychic structure. Language emerges as both a medium of meaning and a boundary: what remains unspoken is often as revealing as what is voiced, pointing to the limits of institutional discourse to hold emotional truth.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 explore how institutional *habitus*, emotional expression, and language interweave within the nursery's daily life.

Chapter 6, *Figurations of Childhood and the Civilising Habitus*, examines how children's subjectivities are formed at the intersection of institutional, cultural, and unconscious forces. Rather than development as linear, I frame it as relational and symbolically mediated. The chapter explores emotional regulation and the 'good child', gendered scripts, and parental fantasies of transformation. Drawing on Elias (2012), Bourdieu (1977), and Benjamin (1995; 2017), I argue the nursery is not only a developmental setting but a field where children become legible through staff perceptions, parental desire, and cultural scripts. Becoming emotionally 'ready' is shaped by habitus, affective economies (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009), and the *Symbolic Order* (Kristeva, 1982; Lacan, 1966). When children's emotional expressions align with institutional norms, they are supported and recognised; when they resist, they risk misrecognition or marginalisation.

Chapter 7, *Emotional Labour and Institutional Defences*, examines the staff's emotional labour. It explores how feeling rules shape staff responses, how institutional defences manage

psychological strain, and what remains unsayable. Drawing on Bion (1962), Hochschild (1983), and Menzies Lyth (1988), care is expected but structurally unsupported, leading to containment that is often fragile. Defensive patterns, including splitting and scapegoating (Hinshelwood, 2001; Clarke & Hoggett, 2009), redistribute emotional strain, shaping who can feel and who must contain. Silences and omissions mark the institution's psychological edges (Kristeva, 1982; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). The nursery is a setting where emotional meaning circulates unevenly: recognition is longed for but not always found; containment is offered but sometimes fails.

Chapter 8, *Language, Symbolisation, and the Nursery as Transitional Space*, explores how language mediates emotional life. The chapter follows language as *transitional space*, embodiment of institutional *habitus*, and moments of containment and misattunement. Language is not only words but rhythm, silence, and gesture. Following Harris (2013), language becomes a space where affect may find form but meaning collapses without a receptive other. The unsaid speaks through the body: withdrawal, repetition, or tense movements. Language positions children within a symbolic and institutional field shaped by desire and regulation. The nursery emerges as a site where subjectivities are co-constructed, resisted, or foreclosed.

Chapter 9 concludes by drawing together key arguments and insights. Rather than presenting the nursery as fixed or fully knowable, I approach it as a constellation of spaces in between: between gesture and recognition, *habitus* and expression, children's emotional needs and the institution's capacity to respond. These interstitial spaces, charged with affect and marked by silence as much as speech, are where care is enacted, negotiated, and disrupted. They form the shifting ground upon which the nursery's emotional and symbolic architecture is built, challenged, and occasionally reimaged.

I weave together themes of *transitional space*, language, intersubjectivity, institutional *habitus*, and symbolic capital to show care is never simply delivered but co-created emotionally, symbolically, and relationally. The nursery is a relational and emotional field, a symbolic space where children encounter, interpret, and sometimes resist emotional norms, shaped by an interplay of private histories and institutional structures. These spaces are dynamic zones where meaning is produced, tested, or withheld. The nursery is always in negotiation: between adult and child, internal feeling and institutional life, recognition and misrecognition. Such spaces rarely offer resolution but open possibilities for care as relational and symbolic practice, marked by fragility, contradiction, and moments of repair.

Language emerges not simply as communication but as *transitional space* through which children navigate inner feeling and shared recognition. Language mediates emotional expression, structuring what can be named and what remains unspeakable. It serves as both bridge and boundary within the nursery's *Symbolic Order*. This mediation is not neutral: language reinforces institutional norms, legitimising some emotions over others, forming part of the emotional and symbolic negotiation shaping children's development and relational understanding.

Intersubjectivity is central, understood as the ongoing dance of mutual recognition and misrecognition between children, staff, and parents. Recognition is a psychological need and a socially mediated process structured by wider social forces such as class, gender, and race.

Misrecognition creates emotional ruptures shaping children's emerging selves and relational capacities. Intersubjectivity is a symbolic negotiation revealing how care is co-constructed, constrained, and transformed within nursery life.

Emotional and relational dynamics were shaped by broader institutional structures of *habitus*, symbolic capital, and socialisation. *Habitus* is inherited but continually reshaped through

language and relational experience in the nursery. The distribution of symbolic capital reveals emotional hierarchies embedded in everyday practice. These processes reflect societal patterns of inequality, showing the nursery as intimately connected to wider social forces. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) attention to internalised social norms and Elias's (2012) focus on relational and historical shaping, this thesis provides insight into how emotional meaning, care, and belonging are constructed and contested.

The final reflections emphasise that care, in its most vital form, is always relational, always negotiated, and always in the process of becoming. Rather than offering definitive answers or models of best practice, this thesis argues for holding open the complexity of the nursery's emotional and symbolic life. It invites a view of care as something shaped in the partial, often uncertain spaces where language, silence, recognition, and misrecognition meet. It is precisely within these fragile, unfinished encounters that meaning emerges, identities are shaped, and the possibilities of care continue to unfold.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter critically examines existing literature on the emotional, social, and symbolic dimensions of early childhood education, with particular attention to nursery settings. It explores how policy frameworks, theoretical paradigms, and institutional practices shape the affective and relational experiences of children and caregivers. In the UK context, key policy initiatives such as *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (DfE, 2021) provide the statutory and ideological backdrop for nursery practice. These frameworks emphasise safeguarding, welfare, and integrated services while also advancing priorities of school readiness and accountability, thereby revealing the sociopolitical underpinnings of early years education and care.

This chapter also situates early years policy and practice within their historical context, recognising the important influence of psychoanalytic thinking during and immediately after the Second World War. The work of Donald Winnicott and Susan Isaacs, in particular, shaped nursery provision by emphasising emotional continuity, responsive caregiving, and the creation of “holding environments” that supported children’s play, autonomy, and inner emotional life (Winnicott, 1964; Isaacs, 1933; Bar-Haim, 2021; Shapira, 2013). These psychoanalytic insights were not only theoretical but were mobilised in postwar debates on maternal responsibility and child-rearing, influencing policy and practice in early years settings (Alexander, 2012; Bar-Haim, 2021). These historical insights provide a lens through which to examine contemporary tensions between developmental targets and the emotional realities of nursery life. By tracing these historical contributions alongside contemporary frameworks such as *Every Child Matters* (DfES,

2003) and the EYFS (DfE, 2021), the chapter shows how past and present understandings of emotional wellbeing, institutional care, and early learning are intertwined.

Drawing on Elfer (2015), Thompson (2016), and Melhuish (2004), I will consider how policy often foregrounds cognitive and developmental outcomes while overlooking the emotional realities of nursery life. Despite rich theoretical discussion, few studies integrate historical psychoanalytic perspectives with contemporary policy and sociological insights to examine the emotional lives of children in nursery settings, which this thesis addresses. Moving beyond the dominance of *Attachment Theory*, it integrates psychoanalytic, sociological, and developmental perspectives to consider how children are emotionally held, socially positioned, and symbolically shaped within institutional contexts.

In this chapter the psychoanalytic frameworks of Fraiberg et al. (1975), Benjamin (1988, 2013), Winnicott (1964, 1971), and Stern (1985) will be used to explore the unconscious and intersubjective dynamics that underlie early relational experience. These are placed in dialogue with sociological perspectives from Elias (2010, 2011, 2012), Bourdieu (1977), and Corsaro (1988, 2000), which highlight how institutional norms, peer culture, and embodied practices contribute to the formation of habitus. The chapter also draws on Gitz-Johansen's (2020, 2022, 2024) psychosocial studies, which explore how emotional labour, inter-affective processes, and de-symbolisation are embedded within the material and discursive structures of nursery life. Together, these perspectives establish the theoretical foundation of the thesis by providing a psychosocial analysis of the nursery that investigates the complex interplay between structure, affect, and symbolic meaning.

Building on existing literature, this thesis develops a distinctive psychosocial framework that illuminates the complex interplay between children's emotional worlds, institutional norms, and social structures in the nursery. Chapter 2 situates this framework within existing theoretical debates, demonstrating where gaps and tensions in the literature highlight the need for a pluralistic psychosocial approach. It shows how psychoanalytic, sociological, and psychosocial perspectives can be held in dialogue to understand children's role play, peer interactions, and everyday experiences.

Chapter 3 develops the original psychosocial framework in detail, demonstrating how care, recognition, and emotional meaning are co-constructed through intersubjective exchanges, language, play, and the embodied enactment of habitus and symbolic capital. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology and methods that operationalise this framework in the field, linking theory directly to empirical investigation. Chapters 5–9 then apply the framework to explore children's interactions, institutional processes, and symbolic negotiation, showing how different theoretical lenses illuminate distinct aspects of nursery life. By selectively deploying complementary perspectives, this thesis demonstrates the value of a pluralistic approach to capture the complexity of children's emotional and relational experiences. The findings have far-reaching implications for professional practice and policy, offering new ways to understand and support children's emotional and social development.

2.1 Emotional Dimensions of Nursery Policy and Practice

The emotional life of nurseries cannot be separated from the wider social, political, and historical contexts in which they are embedded. Understanding how care is structured and experienced in these settings requires attention to both the institutional frameworks that govern them and the

affective undercurrents that shape everyday practice. Previous research has examined early years policy, recognising both its strengths and limitations (Elfer, 2009; West, 2020). However, the complexities inherent in studying early years care are multifaceted and continuously evolving as shifting societal factors and economic demands exert influence on policy direction (Pomykacz, 2011). Since 1999, mothers of children under two have been actively encouraged to join the labour market through the expansion of nursery provision. This stands in contrast to post-Second World War policy, which advised mothers to remain at home (Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, 1945; Department of Education and Employment, 1999; Elfer, 2006). These shifts illustrate how broader socio-political forces shape early childhood education, highlighting the need for policies that consider not only access to childcare but also its relational and emotional dimensions. This recognition highlights the need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to policy development.

Psychoanalytic thinking held a particularly influential place in the development of early years education and care during and immediately after the Second World War, shaping both theoretical understandings of child development and practical approaches to nursery provision (Bar-Haim, 2021; Shapira, 2013). The work of psychoanalysts such as Susan Isaacs, Melanie Klein, and Donald Winnicott contributed significantly to post-war discourses on emotional wellbeing, play, and caregiving within group settings. Winnicott's BBC radio broadcasts between 1943 and 1962, including talks compiled in *The Child, the Family and the Outside World* (Winnicott, 1964), translated psychoanalytic ideas for parents and teachers. He presented the nursery as a form of holding environment supporting children's emotional continuity amid wartime evacuation and family disruption. His practical engagement with the Hampstead War Nurseries provided observational evidence of children coping with separation and trauma, informing his theoretical

ideas on the role of the nursery in emotional development (Shapira, 2013). Winnicott emphasised the importance of reliable routines, empathetic caregiving, and responsive adult-child interactions in fostering healthy emotional growth. He argued that nurseries should not only meet children's physical needs but also support their inner emotional life, allowing for play, spontaneity, and gradual negotiation of dependency and independence. This framework directly informed early years practice, reinforcing the idea that early institutions could cultivate emotional resilience and a secure sense of self, bridging the gap between family and school contexts (Alexander, 2012; Bar-Haim, 2021).

Similarly, Isaacs' work at the Malting House School exemplified how psychoanalytic principles could inform progressive nursery pedagogy, emphasising the role of play and emotional expression in early learning (Graham, 2008). The Malting House School, as a research-oriented nursery, allowed observation of children in naturalistic settings to study their social and emotional development. In *Social Development in Young Children* (Isaacs, 1933), she explored how imaginative play enables children to manage conflict and internal experience, reflecting her broader integration of psychoanalytic thought into educational practice (Graham, 2008).

While this discussion focuses on Winnicott and Isaacs, it is important to recognise that other psychoanalysts also played pivotal roles in shaping early years theory and practice. Melanie Klein's pioneering work in object relations theory emphasised children's early relationships and unconscious processes, providing foundational insights into emotional development (Klein, 1946; Shapira, 2013). Anna Freud's contributions to child psychoanalysis offered methods for understanding and addressing children's emotional conflicts, focusing on applying psychoanalytic principles to the child's inner world (Freud, 1936, 1946; Shapira, 2013). These figures were central to postwar debates on caregiving, play, and emotional development; however, a detailed

examination of their work falls beyond the scope of this study. This thesis therefore selectively engages with Winnicott and Isaacs to illustrate how psychoanalytic ideas were translated into nursery practice, while acknowledging the broader psychoanalytic landscape that shaped contemporary understandings of early childhood (Shapira, 2013; Bar-Haim, 2021).

These ideas aligned closely with the emerging welfare state's emphasis on maternal guidance, emotional health, and preventive care, with postwar debates on "good mothering" and child-rearing informed by psychoanalytic theory (Alexander, 2012; Bar-Haim, 2021). Shapira (2013) notes that psychoanalytic expertise was deliberately mobilised by the state to shape parenting norms, framing emotional development as a civic as well as a familial concern. Alexander (2012) highlights how Winnicott's concept of the "good enough" mother was extended into public health messaging, illustrating the translation of psychoanalytic ideas into social policy. Bar-Haim (2021) further argues that these postwar constructions of maternal responsibility and child guidance were deeply intertwined with emerging discourses on citizenship and social democracy. Policies and professional training disseminated by the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education reflected these concerns, framing emotional wellbeing as central to early childhood provision (Hendrick, 2003). Although later decades saw early years policy shift toward developmental targets and school readiness, the psychoanalytic legacy of the mid-twentieth century remains crucial for understanding how emotional life and institutional care were first conceptualised in the UK's early years context (Elfer, 2015).

In situating these shifts, it is important to note the key UK policy frameworks that have shaped early years education and care. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS, first introduced in 2008 and subsequently revised in 2012, 2017, and 2021) sets statutory standards for learning, development, and care for children from birth to five years of age (DfE, 2021). Earlier initiatives,

such as Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003), positioned early education within a broader social policy agenda that emphasised children's well-being, safeguarding, and the integration of services. These policy frameworks provide a sociopolitical context for understanding nursery practice, highlighting how shifting ideological priorities, from welfare provision and social investment to school readiness and accountability, have shaped institutional expectations and everyday practices in the sector.

Elfer (2015) provides a useful overview of Early Years Policy development which highlights the diverse challenges generated by the progress of the service into holistic, affordable and accessible care. He emphasises the importance of investing in high deprivation areas to address the disparities in access to quality childcare services, and for greater service integration to foster a collaborative and coordinated approach to early childhood development. In recognition that a fragmented system can lead to gaps in service provision and inequitable outcomes for children, he stresses the need for detailed, professional guidance tailored specifically for those working with children under five, acknowledging the unique challenges and responsibilities associated with this age group.

Central to Elfer et al.'s (2012) argument is support for the *Key Person Approach*, this model assigns each child a specific caregiver who is primarily responsible for their emotional and developmental needs. This approach promotes secure attachments and individualised care, recognising the importance of consistent and responsive relationships in early childhood. Implementing this model enhances children's well-being and learning outcomes, while also promoting more equitable opportunities within early years settings. One of the most influential frameworks in this discussion is *Attachment Theory*, pioneered by Bowlby (1969) and later expanded by Ainsworth (1978). This theory describes how crucial it is for infants to relate to a

mature, consistent figure who provides them with personal attention. Having a secure *attachment* depends on having a reliable person who protects them physically and is responsive to their interests and emotional states. The child constructs an internal working model of the self and the *attachment figure*, through which the attachment history integrates with their personality structure. Through this, the individual regulates their behaviour by being in proximity to the *attachment figure*, seeking and trying to regulate their sense of security.

Attachment Theory therefore emphasises the crucial role of early relationships in shaping a child's emotional and social well-being. Secure attachments formed during infancy and early childhood are foundational for emotional regulation, self-confidence, and interpersonal competence.

Thompson (2016) further develops this idea, demonstrating how early *attachment* experiences influence children's ability to regulate emotions and navigate social relationships. Policies that fail to recognise the importance of stable, responsive caregiving risk undermining children's long-term emotional health. Given these findings, early years settings should prioritise strong, secure attachments between caregivers and children by implementing models such as Elfer, et al.'s (2012) *Key Person Approach*, which ensures that children receive individualised emotional support from a consistent caregiver.

2.1.1 Beyond Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory has become the dominant theoretical and policy discourse in early years education and care in the UK, shaping curriculum guidance, staff training, and professional practices (Elfer, 2015). Alongside this, EYEC policy also engages with cognitive development milestones, learning outcomes, and broader developmental frameworks, reflecting a dual focus on emotional and educational achievement. This section situates Attachment Theory within this

wider policy and developmental landscape, highlighting both its utility for understanding early relationships and the critiques that have been raised regarding its application. As Elfer (2015) notes, its prominence in public guidance has been valuable for policy development and for deepening understanding of how babies and children relate to others, as well as how these relationships can impact development. Notwithstanding the emphasis on *Attachment Theory* within the policy, this theory has been challenged and questioned by researchers:

Overall, it does seem important that whilst attachments may be an important part of policy, there is an opportunity now in professional reflection to give more serious attention to the form, contribution and limitations of nursery attachments as part of the overall nursery environment's response to children's emotional experience. Such attention is being given to the theory of nursery attachments as well as how they are being implemented in practice. (Elfer, 2015, p.503)

Moreover, *Attachment Theory* has tended to position women and caregivers who deviate from the constructed 'normal' mother–infant dyad unfavourably. A hierarchy of roles is created within caregiving that privileges those in power, producing exclusion and inequality (Knestrick, 2002).

According to Foucault (1980), dominant discourses and power in a society construct knowledge and can limit its alternative forms; thus, meaning and context are created through language. As Knestrict (2002) argues, the dominant discourse on motherhood governs women through a language based on the expectation that mothers must be the most important human-being in their child's life. In a similar way, Rutter (1995) criticises the importance of an exclusive primary caregiver and the 'all or nothing' maternal care as empirical studies do not support this. When *Attachment Theory* is also applied to extra familial contexts, it does take into account wider social

interactions and internal processes. For example, *attachment* becomes deterministic when it is taken as a causal explanation for complex developmental outcomes (Knestrict, 2002). Although *Attachment Theory* is important for understanding the impact of early relationships in child development, it is important to further consider that a person is comprised of an internal inter-relational field made up of internal and external circumstances (Benvenuto, 2018).

Beyond *Attachment Theory*, early years policy should also draw upon research on emotional regulation and social-emotional development. Emotional regulation refers to the processes by which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify emotional reactions to achieve adaptive outcomes (Gross, 2014). Early years policy in the UK, including the EYFS framework, explicitly includes emotional regulation within the Prime area of learning, Personal, Social, and Emotional Development (DfE, 2021). While this formal recognition ensures that nurseries are encouraged to foster emotional skills, the translation into everyday practice remains uneven.

Research by Morris et al. (2007) highlights the role of the family context in emotional regulation development, showing that parental modelling, family discussions about emotions, and the emotional climate of the home all contribute to a child's ability to manage their emotions. If the early years policy is to support emotional development effectively, it must move beyond a cognitive focus to explicitly foster emotional intelligence and self-regulation strategies. This aligns with the increasing emphasis on Social-Emotional Learning frameworks, which advocate for integrating emotional development into early childhood curricula (Denham et al., 2012).

These frameworks emphasise skills such as empathy, self-awareness, and interpersonal communication, which are crucial for long-term emotional well-being and academic success.

However, these approaches tend to emphasise the child as an individual, with less attention paid to the relational and intersubjective dimensions of emotion. Children's experiences of care are co-

constructed through interactions with peers and staff, shaped by processes of mutual recognition, affective attunement, and peer culture (Harris, 2013; Corsaro, 1988, 2000). Recognising these relational dynamics provides a more nuanced understanding of emotional development that complements the individual-focused perspective embedded in policy.

A broader developmental perspective is offered by Mia Kellmer Pringle (1974) who identified four fundamental needs in early childhood: love and security, new experiences, praise and recognition, and responsibility. According to Pringle, these needs must be met holistically for children to thrive emotionally and socially. If early years policy neglects the emotional aspects of childhood development, it risks failing to provide the secure foundation required for later learning and adaptation. Policies should therefore foster emotionally enriching environments that support cognitive growth and place the child's emotional and psychological well-being at the centre of their overall development (Elfer, 2015).

These perspectives highlight the importance of embedding emotional well-being into early years policy and practice. While *Attachment Theory* stresses the significance of secure early relationships, research on emotional regulation emphasises the need to cultivate self-regulatory skills from an early age (Gross, 2014; Morris et al., 2007; Denham et al., 2012). Each person has an internal world and lives through intersubjective experiences that shape their life and sense of self (Benvenuto, 2018). Additionally, Pringle's (1974) developmental framework emphasises the necessity of holistic approaches to early childhood care. Policymakers must integrate these insights into early years frameworks by ensuring that nurseries and preschools offer environments that promote secure attachments, emotional intelligence, and a balanced developmental approach (Elfer, 2015). Without these considerations, early years policy risks prioritising structural and educational outcomes at the expense of the emotional and psychological health of young children.

2.2 Nurseries as institutions for socialisation

Throughout history, different philosophies, theories of the mind, and social sciences have theorised about the social being that is human; are we all the same, or are we fundamentally different? That is a question that emerges when trying to understand humans in cultural groups (Krause & Davids, 2018). A third position, as Britton et al. (1989) describe, is not simply another standpoint between universalism and relativism, but rather a reflective space that allows us to recognise both our subjective inner world and the external social context. This can be understood through a psychoanalytic perspective, where one of our main human motivations is the need to be affectively connected to or recognised by others. There is a focus on the internal representations of the self and others through processes like projection and introjection. However, focusing solely on either the inner or outer world would be reductionist, as it overlooks how the two continually shape and influence one another. This idea of a third position can also be seen as a way of thinking that brings together psychoanalysis and sociology, recognising that individual psychic life is always shaped by broader cultural and social structures. Winnicott's (1971) concept of the transitional space highlights an area of experience that is neither wholly internal nor external but emerges in the relational space between self and other. Similarly, *relational psychoanalysis*, drawing on Lacanian theory, views the subject as formed through language and the *Symbolic Order*, emphasising how social and cultural discourses are internalised and shape psychic life (Slavin & Kriegman, 1990; Laplanche & Pontalis, 1988).

The concept of the third position as a reflective space that bridges inner experience and social reality echoes early attempts by Freud to connect psychoanalysis with broader social theories. This is observable through Freud's works describing religion, civilisation and group psychology, namely *Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices* (1907), *Civilised' Sexual Morality and Modern*

Nervous Illness (1908), as well as *Totem and Taboo* (1912-1913). Freud (1913) in *The Claims of Psychoanalysis to Scientific Interest*, argues that psychoanalysis can contribute to other domains of knowledge such as sociology, which is a useful stance to understand the complexity of human development. In relation to socialising institutions for children, Elias (2012) argues in *On the Process of Civilisation* that the standardising effect of a ‘normal’ childhood sets the tone for relations between individuals. Institutions standardise how people interact and institutionalise practices which are considered objectively good (Berger & Luckman, 1991).

According to a study by Gilliam & Gulløv (2014), civilising projects reflect the society around them, especially the dominant shifting structures in social figurations. Institutions such as nurseries can be targets for such projects, as behaviour is regulated through a structure of norms which uphold social order. Their study found that the training in nurseries changed over time, reflecting ideas about children, society and alterations in social figurations. They argue that institutions that are concerned with bringing up children contribute to the standardisation of the norms on how they must behave, learn, relate to others and express themselves under dominant evolving notions of what is proper and what is not. Nurseries, schools, and centres for children therefore play a central role in the development of specific codes of conduct. These specific codes are standardised through the incorporation of norms, which are routinised, referring to dominant ideologies, as well as to the integration of social groups of children.

Being in the nursery is an educational process of becoming socialised, and how it is managed and regulated reflects the society around it (Gilliam & Gulløv, 2014). In Elias’ (2010) work of *The Society of Individuals*, we can see that education plays a crucial role in shaping self-perception and identity, reinforcing power structures. The unconscious is inherently social, constantly interacting with meaning-making processes (Gripsrud, Mellon, & Ramvi, 2018). Habitus refers to

the internalised social dispositions shaped by past experiences and social environments that guide perceptions, thoughts, and action (Bourdieu, 1977); this concept is explored in more depth in Chapter 3, including its historical development and relevance to understanding children's socialisation. Within the layers of *habitus*, conflicting identities may emerge, leading individuals to suppress aspects of themselves to avoid social rejection (Croteau et al., 2008). Marginalisation and social positioning further complicate identity formation (Tummala-Narra, 2016), as children often adapt their identities based on contextual social advantages but may struggle to integrate them, leading to splitting and psychological distress.

Understanding these divergent and contradictory cultural identifications focuses attention on subjectivity and conflict. Tummala-Narra (2016) explains that children develop their cultural identity based on what is most socially advantageous in different contexts, often shifting between multiple cultural identifications. If they are unable to creatively integrate these differing identities, they may resort to splitting significant objects, which is understood in object relations theory as a defence mechanism where the mind separates conflicting feelings or parts of the self into 'good' and 'bad' to reduce anxiety and maintain a sense of internal stability (Klein, 1946). These shifting identifications call for awareness of how privilege and marginalisation coexist across different contexts: 'In addition to the problem of societal oppression, marginalisation of subgroups of individuals within a cultural group further imposes conflict in the formation of cultural identity' (Tummala-Narra, 2016, p.178). This can be explored through a culturally aware psychoanalytic lens, complemented by sociological theory, recognising that while unconscious and developmental factors shape identity, they are also influenced by historical, political, and structural conditions (Krause & Davids, 2018). Within these interwoven layers of the *habitus*,

identities have contradictory narratives, which can lead individuals to hide aspects of the self to avoid anticipated social rejection or aggression (Croteau et al., 2008).

2.2.1 Desymbolisation of Care

In the article *Childcare in Uncaring Times: Emotional Processes in a Nursery and Their Political Context*, Gitz-Johansen (2020) explores the emotional dynamics of children aged zero to three years old in Danish nurseries. The study is conducted from a psychosocial perspective and uses infant observation to examine how institutional and political pressures shape children and staff experiences within the nursery. Denmark's public day-cares have undergone significant structural changes driven by cost-cutting and performance evaluation, as well as a dominant learning paradigm that focuses on skill development. This learning paradigm leaves aside children's emotional needs as the policy favours promoting evaluation and quality control while failing to support the children and staff's psychological well-being. This is reinforced by the rise of New Public Management, which promotes a culture of surveillance that fuels caregivers' anxieties. The anxiety that staff feel in the face of assessment and the possibility of losing their jobs lowers the emotional availability they have for the children.

Financial pressures based on enrolment numbers further add to the overburdened caregivers and the understaffing of the nurseries. These factors lead to institutional conditions and inadequate emotional and structural support to the staff, who then have less capacity to provide adequate care for the children. Additionally, a political discourse prioritises competence development over emotional support, which in turn causes the caregivers to have difficulties with articulating the importance of their work outside the framework of learning objectives. Emotional aspects of care are overlooked, leaving caregivers feeling undervalued and unsupported. This study thus

highlights the emotional burden on caregivers who struggle to provide care without having adequate support. However, it is important to note that UK policy frameworks such as the EYFS explicitly include children's emotional well-being under the Prime area of *Personal, Social and Emotional Development* (DfE, 2021). This suggests that, although policy discourses often foreground learning and outcomes, they also contain strands that recognise the centrality of emotions.

Moreover, Gitz-Johansen (2020) mentions that 'When a young child cries, the only thing an empathetic carer can do is to try to find out what the child needs to feel better, such as sleep, food, calming, comforting, encouragement or entertainment' (p. 267). They found that in their study, the staff members used a large portion of their time trying to attend to and care for the children's emotional and psychological needs. However, the staff seem to find it difficult to articulate the aspects of their work that have to do with care, and when they speak with parents, administration or policymakers, they are forced to use the vocabulary of learning. The participants expressed that they lacked adequate language to be able to communicate the less tangible aspects of their work, which were important to them. Significantly, Gitz-Johansen (2020) uses Alfred Lorenzer's term of *de-symbolisation* to explain this lack of language of expression that has been lost due to repression. Caring thus became *de-symbolised*, excluded from communication through language. 'The learning paradigm also makes the emotional pressures on the staff as well as their emotional needs invisible and culturally unconscious' (p.268). Even if the staff were concerned about the emotional development of the children, it was not something that could be seen in the official discourse in the nursery.

The emotional life in the nursery is therefore swept aside by a system that prioritises efficiency over empathy and emotional health. Having a framework that favours assessment over

attunement, not allowing room for spontaneity and creative emotional wealth, fails both the children and the care workers in the nursery. *De-symbolisation* is best understood not as the complete erasure of emotional life, but as an ongoing tension between policy recognition of emotional needs and institutional pressures that render them invisible in practice. Gitz-Johansen's (2020) study reveals how the dominance of a learning driven policy framework has stripped caregiving of its emotional significance, reducing staff to figures that solely promote skill development rather than nurturing figures in children's lives. As financial pressures mount and performance evaluations dictate practice, caregivers experience anxiety, exhaustion, and an increasing inability to articulate the core emotional aspects of their work. The de-symbolization of care leaves both children and staff vulnerable, as the language and legitimacy of emotional labour are erased from professional discourse. Without policy reform that reinstates the centrality of emotions and attunement for psychological well-being, nurseries risk becoming sterile institutions of regulation rather than spaces that strive for the emotional and psychological health of children. The discussion of desymbolisation highlights the emotional constraints and challenges faced by practitioners within a learning-driven policy framework. While this perspective emphasises the pressures and limitations experienced by staff, it represents one dimension of nursery life. Other dynamics, including subtle forms of practitioner and child agency, operate alongside these structural constraints. Children's peer interactions, discussed in Section 2.3, demonstrate how they negotiate and reinterpret rules through secondary adjustments and interpretive reproduction (Corsaro, 1988, 2000), while role play and intersubjective processes, explored in Section 2.3.1, show how relational spaces for negotiation, experimentation, and mutual recognition emerge even within constrained environments. Recognising these relational and creative dynamics

complements the account of desymbolisation, providing a fuller understanding of the interplay between structural pressures, emotional labour, and agency in the nursery.

2.3 Peer culture in the nursery

Building on the observational approach discussed in the previous section, this section focuses on William Corsaro's (1990) ethnographic research and the emergence of *peer culture* in the nursery. His work provides a useful perspective on childhood as an active and dynamic social category. His ethnographic studies in the United States and Italy describe the complexity of children's interactions, the development of peer cultures and how they navigate structures that are imposed by adults. In this section, I explore Corsaro's major contributions, including interpretative reproduction, peer cultures, *secondary adjustments*, role play, and the impact of social policies on childhood. Corsaro (2000) defines peer culture as 'a stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values, and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers' (p.92). These cultures are not static but evolve through constant negotiation and reinterpretation. Within peer cultures, children develop a sense of belonging by engaging in collaborative activities. Nevertheless, children assert autonomy by challenging adult-imposed rules and negotiating power within their groups. When children produce and participate in culture, they are actively participating in their socialisation:

Socialisation is not something that happens to children; it is a process in which children, in interaction with others, produce their own peer cultures and eventually come to reproduce and become members of the adult world. (Corsaro, 1988, p.24)

Corsaro (1988) explains the concept of *interpretive reproduction*, arguing that children creatively appropriate and transform cultural knowledge from adults to address their peer concerns. This

concept challenges the traditional internalisation model of socialisation, which views children as passive learners of adult norms. He argues that, through everyday peer interactions, children shape their understanding of social relationships, power dynamics, and societal norms. In *Peer Culture in the Preschool*, William Corsaro (1988) examines how young children construct peer cultures within nursery school settings, arguing that socialisation is not merely a process of passive absorption but an active and collective endeavour. Many variables affect children as they transition from home to nursery, where they encounter multiple authority figures and a large peer group. Children quickly distinguish adults as figures of control and the other children as peers of equal status. Within the peer group, a shared culture emerges, full of collective routines, understandings and strategies for navigating the nursery. These interactions unfold with play as a central mechanism, enabling children to create social bonds, negotiate group dynamics and establish their own cultural norms.

Children's resistance to adult authorities is a key theme in Corsaro's (1988) analysis, which he conceptualises through Goffman's (1961) notion of *secondary adjustments*. These *secondary adjustments* are strategies used by individuals to bypass institutional rules while maintaining social cohesion. In the context of the nursery, *secondary adjustments* can be seen in behaviours such as pretending not to hear the teacher, delaying clean-up or smuggling forbidden objects into school to secretly share with peers. Corsaro (1988) argues that such behaviours demonstrate children's agency in negotiating power structures within institutional settings: not merely acts of defiance, but integral to children's social learning.

Through secondary adjustments, children come to see themselves as part of a group (in the nursery school, students sharing a peer culture) that is in some instances aligned with, in others opposed to, other groups (in the nursery school, teacher rules and culture) (p.24).

Group identity emerges as children form exclusive peer groups, affirmed through verbal cues such as asking if they are friends with another child (Corsaro, 1988):

Nursery school children's references to friendship, to mark temporary sharing or the recognition of community demonstrates the children's growing awareness of distinctions among themselves. The general category of child versus adult is becoming more differentiated. There are now different types of children, those with whom you are now playing and others who can be a threat to ongoing play. (p.21)

Friendships at this developmental stage differ from those of older children; here, friendship is tied to doing things together and, through repetition, children gradually develop their social identity and place within the shared culture. Children are engaged in complex negotiations of power, identity and autonomy. The foundations of social agency and cultural participation emerge in peer interactions early in life.

2.3.1 Role play, the social and the intersubjective

Children both absorb and reflect their socioeconomic realities through play. Corsaro (1993, 2000) explores the role of *sociodramatic play* in shaping children's understanding of social norms and power dynamics. Role play serves as a mechanism through which children interpret and reproduce adult behaviours, societal expectations, and cultural narratives. Children, without deliberate intention, create socially structured yet spontaneous patterns of behaviour during play. Through this process, they internalise a set of predispositions, their *habitus*, which shapes how they navigate their everyday lives.

Corsaro (2000) draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* to explain how children's role play serves as a form of regulated improvisation, a structured yet flexible way of engaging with their social realities:

Finally, in the words of the social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, the children's 'intentionless invention of regulated improvisation' in their role play contributes to their development of a set of predispositions through which they confront the objective structures of their daily lives (Bourdieu, 1977: 79). Although the set of developing predispositions (or *habitus*, Bourdieu, 1977) of these young girls seem to be, to a large degree, one of sober recognition of the difficulties of their circumstances, these predispositions are not determined in advance. (Corsaro, 2000, p.96)

Bourdieu's (1977) *habitus* refers to the embodied social dispositions individuals acquire through experience in a particular social environment. This idea will be explained in further depth in Chapter 3, as it is central to understanding how children's role play not only reflects but also reshapes their social positioning in the nursery. In this case, Corsaro (2000) suggests that children's role play reflects their recognition of their social circumstances, so that their developing *habitus* is shaped by an awareness of the challenges they face in daily life. However, despite this recognition, Corsaro (1977, 2000) emphasises that these predispositions are not entirely predetermined and that there is still room for agency and transformation. Even though children's role plays mirrors the constraints of their environment, it also serves as a site where they can experiment with different ways of engaging with the world. Thus, while their developing *habitus* is influenced by their social realities, it remains adaptive and open to change rather than being entirely fixed in advance.

From a relational psychoanalytic perspective, Benjamin (2013) describes how role play contributes to the development of *intersubjective relatedness*, a process centred on negotiating similarity and difference:

In the third year of life this tension can be expressed in symbolic play. The early play at retaliatory reversal may now be a kind of empowerment in which the child feels ‘I can do to you what you do to me.’ (...) The child who can imaginatively entertain both roles, leaving and being left, begins to transcend the complementary form of the mother-child relationship. The complementary structure organizes the relationship of giver and taker, doer and done to, powerful and powerless. It allows one to reverse roles, but not to alter them. In the reversible relationship, each person can play only one role at a time: one person is recognized, the other negated; one subject, the other object. (p.54)

This dynamic does not eliminate *omnipotence*; it redirects it between one person to the other. In psychoanalytic terms, *omnipotence* refers to the fantasy of absolute control over the self and others, which must be relinquished to make space for recognising the other as a separate subject (Benjamin, 1988). This transition from a relationship rooted in complementary power dynamics to one grounded in mutual recognition marks a key step towards dissolving *omnipotence*. Power is gradually deconstructed in this back-and-forth. However, this process is not a singular event or a definitive achievement but rather an ongoing negotiation between complementarity and mutuality. The act of being able to do or role play, to enable this shift of power, is an important part of symbolic play which is a fundamental part of separation and *intersubjectivity*.

From a similar perspective, Harris (2013) examines how role play in mother-child interactions shapes the construction of self and object relations. When the mother and child engage in

symbolic play, it shapes the child's emerging identity through role-playing and narrative structures. The interaction she details in her case study of 'Blankie's Birthday' which will be discussed in the following section, demonstrates how parental projections influence the child's developing self-concept, reinforcing Winnicott's (1967) idea that transitional objects and play are essential to a child's development, which will be further discussed in Chapter 3. Role play in childhood is a fundamental means through which children test their fantasies, explore their identities, and navigate their emotional worlds. Play and language serve as *transitional spaces* where children can symbolically negotiate separation, attachment, and emerging social rules.

2.4 Unconscious processes in the nursery

Expanding from peer interactions to intrapsychic processes, this section examines how unconscious dynamics shape the nursery context. Drawing on psychoanalytic perspectives that attend to what is felt but not yet named, it discusses two seminal frameworks: *Ghosts in the Nursery* (Fraiberg et al., 1975) and *Angels in the Nursery* (Lieberman et al., 2005). Unresolved childhood trauma does not disappear alone; it is passed down through generations, shaping the way parents treat their children. *Ghosts in the Nursery* is a concept originating from the developmental research of Selma Fraiberg, Edna Adelson, and Vivian Shapiro (1975). In their influential paper, *Ghosts in the Nursery: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Problems of Impaired Infant-Mother Relationships*, they describe how intergenerational transmission of repressed emotional experiences can shape parents' caregiving and lead to the transmission of distress. The 'ghosts in the nursery' are echoes of early emotional pain that parents do not recognise as they perpetuate cycles of trauma.

Lieberman, Padrón, Van Horn, and Harris (2005) expanded this perspective by introducing *angels in the nursery*, a complementary concept that acknowledges how positive early relational experiences serve as protective factors, promoting resilience and breaking cycles of trauma. Both frameworks provide an understanding of how past experiences, painful or nurturing, shape children's emotional development and parent-infant relationships. Fraiberg et al. (1975) discuss the inability of a parent to provide an attuned and responsive caregiving experience to their children, which can result from unconscious remnants of their own early traumatic experiences. These unresolved experiences cause parents to re-enact or defensively reject harmful patterns they have endured.

However, these 'ghosts' are not inevitable. Through psychoanalytic intervention, parents can become aware of, acknowledge, mourn, and work through these persistent patterns. Lieberman et al.'s (2005) work with mothers and infants in therapeutic settings encouraged parents to explore their childhood experiences and recognise the impact on their caregiving. Bringing these ghosts into consciousness enables parents to develop healthier and more attuned relationships with their children. They propose that just as traumatic experiences shape parental responses, so too do experiences of love, attunement, and emotional security. These positive experiences, which they refer to as 'angels in the nursery', provide an internalised sense of safety and holding. Moments of warmth and protection in early life serve as emotional anchors, fostering resilience even in the face of adversity. When a parent experiences neglect from their own parents but has another caring and validating adult figure in their life, they unconsciously model aspects of that positive caregiving relationship with their child. Lieberman et al. (2005) argue for the importance of helping parents reconnect with their 'angels', the moments of attuned caregiving that can serve as a blueprint for positive parenting.

Both *Ghosts in the Nursery* and *Angels in the Nursery* offer critical insights into the intergenerational transmission of affective experiences. While the concept of ‘ghosts’ highlights the lingering presence of trauma in parenting, ‘angels’ provide a hopeful counterbalance, demonstrating the enduring power of love and attunement. Together, these concepts illustrate that cycles of trauma are not inevitable. Through conscious awareness and therapeutic engagement, parents can disrupt negative relational patterns and cultivate nurturing, secure relationships with their children. Recognising both the ghosts that haunt and the angels that protect allows for a more holistic understanding of how early experiences shape human development.

2.5 Intersubjectivity in the nursery

Building on the previous exploration of unconscious processes, this section turns to the concept of *intersubjectivity* as framed by developmental psychology. It considers how shared experiences between children and caregivers contribute to emotional regulation, social connection and the construction of self (Trevarthen, 1979; Stern, 1985; Gitz-Johansen, 2022). Trevarthen (1979) described primary and secondary *intersubjectivity*, with primary *intersubjectivity* involving early wordless dialogues through eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures, while secondary *intersubjectivity* emerges later when children and caregivers communicate about shared external objects or events. Stern (1985) further developed this concept, emphasising that *intersubjectivity* is not just about shared attention but about the mutual recognition of subjective experiences. He argued that these shared moments are essential for the development of emotional regulation and social belonging. Trevarthen (2001) also pointed out that intersubjective experiences help children feel that their inner states matter to others, reinforcing their sense of self-worth and social connection.

Stern (1985) suggests that language allows children to share their inner experiences by playing a fundamental role in *intersubjectivity*, expanding the range of shared experiences (Harris, 2013). As children acquire verbal skills, their ability to communicate emotions, intentions, and social meanings grows (Gitz-Johansen, 2022).

Thomas Gitz-Johansen's (2022) research employs psychoanalytic infant observation to examine moments of shared experiences between children and caregivers, highlighting how intersubjective interactions contribute to emotional, cognitive, and social development. The study examines *intersubjectivity* through direct observations in the nursery setting. His findings reveal that while caregivers facilitate *intersubjectivity*, children also actively seek these shared moments. Instances of pointing, showing, and sharing indicate children's desire to engage others in their experiences. The study also distinguishes between interactions that lack *intersubjectivity*, where caregivers perform tasks without emotionally engaging, and those where caregivers fully participate, enhancing children's emotional experiences through activities like arts and crafts, storytelling, and pretend play, helping children develop a sense of agency, creativity, and relational understanding.

However, Gitz-Johansen (2022) emphasises that 'Children do not need to experience *intersubjectivity* all the time or even most of the time. Sometimes, just sitting or lying in a big net-swing with one's nursery-mates while relaxing or looking at the surroundings is just fine'. (p.117)

Gitz-Johansen's (2022) study concludes that *intersubjectivity* is central to early childhood development, giving children a sense of shared meaning, emotional security and social connection. He argues that developmental psychology offers valuable insights for childhood studies, as it highlights the relational nature of development:

Regarding the role of language, a few of the observations confirm that while lots of *intersubjectivity* can take place before a child develops verbal language the development of verbal language expands the child's possibility of intersubjective sharing. Rather than focussing on the more technical aspect of language acquisition the focus on *intersubjectivity* leads to a sensitivity to why children begin to speak, and here the desire to share experiences and inner states with attentive others seem to be a major motivation. (p.123)

Intersubjectivity thus lies at the heart of early childhood development, shaping how children form relationships, regulate emotions, and construct a sense of self. From the earliest moments of life, shared affective exchanges between caregivers and children create the foundation for emotional security and social connections (Trevvarthen, 1979; Stern, 1985). Gitz-Johansen's (2022) research emphasises that *intersubjectivity* is a vital process through which children actively seek connection, meaning and recognition. As language emerges, it expands the possibilities for intersubjective sharing, allowing children to verbalise inner states, negotiate meaning, and co-construct shared realities. The idea that development is inherently social is reinforced. Intersubjective interactions foster cognitive growth, creativity and relational understanding through eye contact, language, or play.

2.5.1 Dynamics of Aggression

Extending the discussion of *intersubjectivity*, this subsection focuses on the dynamics of aggression, hate and envy in early childhood. It examines how these affective experiences shape self-construction and relational capacities, drawing on Winnicott (1963, 1964), Benjamin (1988, 2013) and Roiphe (1991). Winnicott (1964) emphasised that aggression in infancy is a crucial

aspect of emotional development; it allows the child to test their unconscious fantasies with external reality. When the caregiver withstands the child's aggression without retaliation, the child learns that their destructive impulses do not destroy the other, fostering a clearer sense of reality. This process enables differentiation between their internal and external realities, a process that will be further described in Chapter 3. However, when the aggression of the infant is met with withdrawal or retaliation, it can lead to a defensive internalisation of aggression, turning destructive impulses inward and shaping the inner world with persecutory fears.

Jessica Benjamin (1988) expands on this Winnicottian idea by highlighting the intersubjective dynamics of aggression. She argues that aggression is shaped by the relational matrix in which it occurs, and it is more complex than just an expression of an innate drive. Benjamin also explores how aggression is intertwined with the struggle for recognition. Subjectivity emerges through mutual recognition between the self and other; through this dynamic process, autonomy and connection coexist. Individuals recognise each other as separate yet connected beings in this intersubjective exchange. The act of recognition between caregiver and child is crucial, yet often misrecognition occurs as the caregiver projects their subjectivity onto the child. This can result in feelings of frustration, aggression, and destructive impulses in the child.

Benjamin (2013) argues that destruction plays a key role in development, not merely as aggression but as a necessary part of establishing a sense of self. The ability to destroy metaphorically, by rejecting an imposed identity, is an essential step towards differentiation. There is a need for balance between recognition and assertion. The caregiver's role is crucial to acknowledging and containing this aggression, helping to foster self-cohesion. 'When the destructiveness damages neither the parent nor the self, external reality comes into view as a sharp, distinct contrast to the inner fantasy world' (Benjamin, 2013, p.52). However, if the

caregiver retaliates or negates the aggression, it may intensify destructiveness and withdrawal in the child. The inevitable conflict between a child's self-assertion and a caregiver's authority creates a dynamic where the child must balance autonomy whilst maintaining a relationship:

What cannot be worked through and dissolved with the outside other is transposed into a drama of internal objects, shifting from the domain of the intersubjective into the domain of the intrapsychic (...) It is the loss of balance between the intrapsychic and the intersubjective, between fantasy and reality, that is the problem. (p. 52)

When recognition is absent, aggression can escalate into destructive hatred, transforming the caregiver's role from a supportive presence into one of oppression. Another crucial aspect of Benjamin's (1988) work is her discussion of the dialectic of domination and submission, which can arise when recognition fails. When a child's aggression is not met with attuned recognition but with control, neglect, or excessive punishment, they may oscillate between two problematic positions: domination, where they seek to control others to avoid feeling powerless, and submission, where they suppress their own agency to maintain *attachment* (Benjamin, 2013). This can lead to relational patterns in which aggression is either excessively acted out or completely repressed, making emotional regulation difficult.

Furthermore, aggression and envy emerge as responses to perceived deprivation or frustration. Winnicott (1963) differentiated between aggression that facilitates development and pathological envy, which disrupts relational capacities by fostering feelings of inadequacy and resentment. Roiphe's (1991) study examines the social dynamics of aggression and victimisation in early childhood settings, highlighting how peer interactions shape children's roles as either tormentors or victims. In nursery-aged children, aggression manifests through physical actions, verbal taunts,

and social exclusion. However, aggression emerges as a part of broader relational dynamics. Some children consistently adopt a controlling role, while others face persistent victimisation.

The active form, as expressed in the teaser-tormentor behaviour, still more or less reflects a basic confidence in the integrity of the self and in the fundamental availability of the object. The passive form, as seen in the clinging victim behaviour, seems to reflect a more compromised confidence in the integrity of the self and the emotional availability of the object. (Roiphe, 1991, p. 463)

These roles are fluid and can be further impacted by relationships, group structures and adult interventions. Those who are victimised can suffer from distress, withdrawal, and anxiety, while aggressors can experience social isolation or emotional repercussions if the behaviour is unaddressed. The aggressors seem to find pleasure in the fact that the one who is suffering is not themselves. However, the victims:

... may create situations again and again in which they are reduced to a passive, painful, helpless state, so that their mothers must come to the rescue. These children do not actively express their anger but instead regressively assume the passive, helpless state. (p.451)

Roiphe's (1991) study emphasises the crucial impact of adult interventions in mitigating aggression by fostering inclusive peer relationships, modelling positive social behaviours, and implementing structured activities that reduce conflict. Early emotional development is shaped by aggression, hate, and envy, which are central to forming a sense of self and relational capacities. Aggression enables children to test fantasies against reality and, when met with non-retaliation, fosters a clearer perception of reality (Winnicott, 1963, 1964). Benjamin (1988, 2013) further

explains the dynamics of intersubjective aggression by showing its connection to recognition, whose absence can lead to destructive hatred and a dialectic of domination and submission. Aggression and envy can also arise from deprivation and managing these depends on early caregiving. Overall, aggression plays a complex role in children's development, and how it is handled in relationships shapes their emotional health.

2.6 Dialogues as Transitional Spaces

Building on the earlier discussion of language as a site of negotiation, this section explores Harris's (2013) concept of *dialogues as transitional spaces*. In her study, Harris (2013) illustrates how mother-child dialogues can be 'studied as the site of self- and self-and-object structure' (p. 136). *Dialogues as transitional spaces* refer to conversational exchanges between caregiver and child that mediate between the child's inner emotional world and the shared social world, thus shaping identity and emotional regulation. To explore this concept, Harris draws on psychoanalytic and linguistic theories to examine how early parent-child interactions shape self-development. She also offers a critique of contemporary academic disciplines such as:

Mainstream psychology, for example, is deeply fissured, its boundaries often marked by alienation, misunderstanding, and contempt. Developmental psychology produced many internal splits, separating the study of the child from that of the adult, and most crucially, isolating the study of the speaking and thinking child from that of the feeling and loving child. A child's brain, mind, emotions, and relationships are each taken as the province of methodologically incompatible intellectual and research enterprises. (p.119)

Harris (2013) discusses the power of an integrative and relational approach in examining how the use of symbols shapes the development of both self and object relations, as well as their

representation. She argues that symbol use is not just a cognitive or linguistic function but a deeply relational process that is co-constructed within interpersonal exchanges. By integrating psychoanalytic, developmental, and sociolinguistic perspectives, Harris highlights how symbolic activity mediates the emergence of subjectivity, emotional regulation, and relational bonds. She weaves together the ideas of Winnicott (1967, 1971), Benjamin (1988), Stern (1973, 1985), and Lacan (1970), among others, to develop a nuanced understanding of how self-construction occurs within relational and linguistic exchanges.

Harris's (2013) study focuses on how speech and symbolic exchanges between caregiver and child have a crucial role in identity formation, emotional regulation and the emergence of subjectivity. In her observations of dyads, she studied the discourse between them as a site for 'meaning making of family meaning and social context' (p.136). She emphasises how transitional objects serve as both material and linguistic constructs that facilitate identity formation in relational contexts. Harris further analyses how mother-child dialogue functions as a transitional space, allowing identity to shift fluidly between mother, child, and symbolic objects. 'Transitional objects are both material objects and linguistic objects, part symbol, part fetish' (p.122), highlighting their dual role in self-development. She goes on to compare Lacan and Winnicott's ideas, stating that 'Lacan's tropism is for rules and Winnicott's for playfulness' (p.132).

Lacan's (1949, 1953) *Symbolic Order* and Mirror Stage, both further explained in Chapter 3, are incorporated into Harris' (2013) study as it describes how language itself functions as a transitional space. When a child enters the realm of language, they gain access to a shared system of meaning, yet this process is also structured by loss and separation. The fundamental lack that comes with entering the symbolic world is the realisation that words can never fully capture our subjective experience. Harris highlights this paradox in a developmental context by noting that

symbolic activity is a means for connection and an acknowledgement of separation. Harris emphasises how language mediates subject formation, noting that ‘identity moves fluidly through speech’ (p.138), thereby demonstrating that meaning is never fixed but continuously reconstituted in dialogue.

Incorporating Jessica Benjamin’s (1988) theories of *intersubjectivity* and recognition, particularly concerning power dynamics between mother and child, Harris (2013) explores how complementarity and mutuality exist in a tension that must be continuously negotiated. She describes Benjamin’s (2004) notion of the third, a space beyond omnipotent power struggles, where mutual recognition can occur. She explains, ‘This movement refers not to a one-time sequence or final accomplishment, but an ongoing tension between complementarity and mutuality’ (p. 130), stressing that the process of moving beyond *omnipotence* is never fully completed but remains a dynamic struggle. This is further integrated with Stern’s (1985) concept of *affect attunement*, emphasising that symbol use is embodied and multimodal as it is shaped by rhythm, tone, and gesture, as well as verbal language. Harris (2013) describes how caregivers engage in co-regulation through voice modulation, facial expression, and bodily movements that align with the child’s emotional states. This is what Stern (1985) refers to as *affective correspondence*, a mirroring process which allows the child to encode emotions symbolically, linking inner affective states with external representations.

Additionally, drawing on Lorenzer’s (1986) *scenic understanding*, explored in more detail in Chapter 3. Harris (2013) suggests that meaning is renegotiated, and identity is reconstituted through relational engagement. Lorenzer’s (1986) ideas suggest that symbolic forms emerge within social interactions and are continuously reshaped through relational dynamics. Symbols are living constructs that shift depending on context, dialogue and affective resonance.

Dialogues as inherently dual, shaped both by public meaning and individual consciousness. This duality allows for moments of misalignment and repair, which, in turn, foster a deeper awareness of self and other. The child learns that words can have multiple meanings, depending on the interlocutor, which fosters an expanded sense of subjectivity. In her observations, Harris (2013) found,

the movement of these symbolic objects, how mother and child alternately speak as and on behalf of the transitional object, that is, for its benefit and as its representative. It is possible to see that identity moves fluidly through speech and that mother, child, and symbolic objects alternate in representing experience and interaction. (p.143)

The mother's speech to her child functions as both a linguistic and emotional bridge, offering a continuity of meaning and interaction that supports the child's emerging identity. Harris links psychoanalytic theory with contemporary perspectives on language acquisition, showing how the symbolic function of speech enables a child to transition from raw emotional experience to structured self-representation. Harris (2013) extends Winnicott's idea of the maternal holding function to include how mothers hold their children in thought, constructing them through narratives and play. Her notions of holding:

include the mother's holding the child in thought, both consciously and unconsciously. This form of holding is manifest in the style and content of her speech to her child. Her dialogues, the construction of fantasy and play and narrative through discourse elaborate the mother's deep construction of her child. (p. 142)

By integrating insights from psychoanalysis, linguistics, and developmental psychology, Harris presents a compelling argument for viewing early *dialogues as transitional spaces* that enable

children to navigate tensions between dependence and autonomy, reality and imagination, and sameness and difference. Through the back-and-forth exchange between caregiver and child, language becomes more than a communicative tool; it is a site of intersubjective meaning-making that shapes the self in profound ways.

2.6.1 The role of language in shaping peer culture

Extending the focus from caregiver–child dialogues to peer interactions, this subsection examines Corsaro’s (2000) and Corsaro & Rizzo’s (1988) research on language as a central tool in constructing peer culture. Similar to the intersubjective psychoanalytic perspective on socialisation, Corsaro (2000) challenges traditional developmental models that view children as passive recipients of cultural norms. Instead, he frames socialisation in the nursery as an active, co-constructed process in which children engage from the earliest stages of development. Through complex negotiations of power, identity, and autonomy, Corsaro shows how children actively shape social agency and cultural participation within peer interactions.

In *Discussion and Friendship: Socialization Processes in the Peer Culture of Italian Nursery School Children*, William Corsaro & Angelo Rizzo (1988) explore the role of language and argumentation in shaping peer culture among Italian nursery school children. The authors emphasise that through peer interactions, children actively engage with, reinterpret, and co-construct social knowledge. Their study focuses on ‘discussion’, a distinct form of structured yet flexible verbal debate that serves as a primary means for children to negotiate relationships, establish group boundaries, and integrate elements of adult culture into their social world. *Discussion* plays a crucial role in cognitive and social development, as it allows children to practice reasoning, argumentation, and perspective-taking. Unlike simple disputes or playful

exchanges, *discussione* involves structured verbal interactions, where children articulate their viewpoints, challenge each other, and refine their ideas through dialogue. Children acquire linguistic and logical skills, and they develop an early awareness of moral reasoning and social norms.

Corsaro and Rizzo (1988) emphasise the crucial role of *discussione* in shaping friendship formation and peer group dynamics in Italian nursery schools. Unlike Corsaro's (1988) study of American pre-schoolers, where peer culture is largely structured around nonverbal play routines and collective resistance to authority. Italian children actively use language as a social tool to define group boundaries (Corsaro & Rizzo, 1988). Through *discussione*, children determine who belongs within the peer group and who does not, reinforcing social bonds while also marking distinctions between insiders and outsiders. This linguistic engagement not only strengthens shared group identity but also reflects a culturally embedded practice in which verbal interaction is central to socialisation.

Beyond friendship dynamics, Corsaro & Rizzo (1988) argue that *discussione* serves as a bridge between peer culture and adult cultural values. While children engage in their forms of reasoning and debate, their discussions often incorporate elements of adult discourse, reflecting broader cultural norms about communication, power, and authority. However, rather than imitating adult conversations, children modify these ideas to fit their peer interactions. In this study, they illustrate that language is not merely a tool for communication but a key mechanism for identity formation, social organisation, and cultural negotiation. Their findings emphasise the interactive and interpretive nature of socialisation, demonstrating that even in the earliest years of life, children actively engage in complex processes of negotiation and meaning-making. This

perspective shows that peer culture is not passively received but actively co-constructed, highlighting the interpretive and creative role of language in children's early social worlds.

2.6.2 Singing in the Nursery

Complementing linguistic exchanges, this subsection explores Gitz-Johansen's (2024) study of singing as an emotional and relational practice in the nursery. Gitz-Johansen (2024) examines how musical activities foster emotional development by supporting self-regulation, social bonding, and cultural learning within early childhood education. Singing provides a sense of structure and stability, serving as an emotional regulator that helps children transition between activities. The observed day-care follows a Steiner Waldorf approach, which emphasises rhythm, repetition, and artistic expression as central to learning and emotional well-being. Within this pedagogical framework, singing functions as a tool to create security and harmonise group dynamics. The repetitive nature of songs aids in the internalisation of emotional rhythms, fostering a balanced and secure environment.

Gitz-Johansen (2024) observed that regular musical engagement assists in emotional self-soothing, particularly for younger children who struggle to adjust to the day-care environment. Music and rhythm create predictable patterns that offer the children comfort and reassurance, allowing them to feel more secure and familiar in their environment. Gitz-Johansen (2024) argues that through singing, children develop empathy, patience and self-awareness, which contribute to their long-term emotional well-being and resilience. Singing also fosters social integration and enhances expressive communication.

The intersubjective nature of singing is therefore highlighted by Gitz-Johansen (2024), where adults and children participate in a shared emotional and cognitive experience. 'This

intersubjective field is also shown to be an inter-affective field in that the singing includes and co-regulates the participants' emotional states' (p.12). Through communal signing, the children can develop an attunement to others' emotions, as well as develop empathy and mutual understanding. A synchronised emotional field is cultivated through the rhythmic and melodic aspects of the music. Children engage in the co-regulation of emotions with their peers and caregivers, allowing them to feel connected and valued in the group and reinforcing their sense of belonging.

Adults also play a crucial role, as they act as a *holding* space for children's emotional development through singing (Gitz-Johansen, 2024). In the day-care's approach, the care-workers are active participants who guide and shape the emotional atmosphere of the group. The adults maintain a calm and supportive presence that allow children to feel safe to explore their emotions through music. This study emphasises that the tone, volume, and emotional expressiveness of the adult's singing influence how children engage with the activity:

While more individualized emotional care activities, including comforting, soothing, encouragement, and the provision of stable *attachment figures* are indispensable parts of childcare in institutions (not to mention families), collective singing activities play an important role in organizing daytime activities (e.g. gathering and moving children) while providing developmentally beneficial group-based care (Gitz-Johansen, 2024, p.13).

Singing in early childhood education serves multiple emotional and developmental functions: it aids self-regulation, fosters social integration, and enhances expressive communication. The Steiner Waldorf approach highlights the holistic benefits of music, demonstrating its importance as an essential component of early education. By embedding singing into daily routines, educators

create emotionally supportive environments that nurture children's psychological growth and well-being. Singing thus functions as both a pedagogical and relational tool, creating a synchronised emotional field in which children learn to co-regulate affect and deepen their sense of belonging.

Conclusions: The Nursery as a Site of Social, Emotional, and Unconscious Development

This concluding section synthesises the preceding discussions, reflecting on how nurseries function as sites of social, emotional, and unconscious development. Early years policy plays a fundamental role in shaping both structural provisions and the emotional climate of nurseries, influencing children's social, cognitive, and psychological development. While significant progress has been made in expanding access to childcare and professionalising early years education, a persistent gap remains between policy and practice, especially regarding the emotional dimensions of caregiving (Elfer, 2015). Research highlights the necessity of secure attachments, responsive caregiving, and emotional attunement, yet policy frameworks often prioritise cognitive and skill-based learning over emotional well-being (Melhuish, 2004; Thompson, 2016). Although the dominance of *Attachment Theory* has contributed to a greater focus on early relational experiences, its application within institutional settings requires a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach (Rutter, 1995; Benvenuto, 2018).

In this chapter, I have argued that to support children's holistic development, early years policy must integrate insights from psychoanalysis, social-emotional learning, and developmental psychology, recognising that children are both socialised by external structures and shaped by unconscious, affective experiences (Gross, 2014; Denham et al., 2012). Historically, the work of Winnicott and Isaacs illustrates how psychoanalytic thinking provided a conceptual and practical

foundation for understanding children's emotional worlds in institutional settings, emphasising the importance of "holding environments," play, and responsive caregiving (Winnicott, 1964; Isaacs, 1933; Bar-Haim, 2021; Shapira, 2013). The Key Person Approach (Elfer, Goldschmied, & Selleck, 2012) offers a promising model for aligning policy with practice, reinforcing the importance of consistent, individualised emotional support in nurseries. Without embedding emotional well-being at the core of early years policy, there is a risk of reducing childcare to a system of regulation rather than a space for meaningful, relational growth. A comprehensive approach that balances structural organisation, educational goals, and emotional security is essential to ensure nurseries support early learning while nurturing the psychological resilience and relational capacities of young children (Elfer, 2015; Pringle, 1974).

From a broader social perspective, nurseries play a key role in structuring childhood, standardising expectations, and shaping identity formation (Elias, 2012; Gilliam & Gulløv, 2014). As labour markets shift and societies increasingly rely on institutionalised childcare, nurseries have become spaces where social norms are transmitted and where children learn to navigate inclusion, exclusion, and authority structures (Stanley, Bellamy, & Cooke, 2006; Armstrong & Rustin, 2014). Corsaro's (1988, 2000) work on peer culture is particularly important here as it challenges the traditional notion that socialisation is a unidirectional process in which children absorb adult-imposed norms. He demonstrates that children actively participate in shaping their social worlds, negotiating group boundaries, and asserting agency through play, verbal interaction, and collective resistance.

Moreover, socialisation is not solely about adopting external norms; it is also significantly shaped by unconscious emotional patterns that influence early relationships. The concept of *ghosts in the nursery*, introduced by Fraiberg, Adelson, and Shapiro (1975), reveals how parents' unresolved

childhood traumas unconsciously shape their caregiving, leading to the intergenerational transmission of emotional distress. These ghosts manifest in how caregivers respond to their children, either through re-enacting past patterns or defensively rejecting them. Lieberman et al. (2005) have developed this perspective by introducing *angels in the nursery*, arguing that positive early experiences of attunement, warmth, and emotional security serve as protective factors, helping to break cycles of trauma. Together, these concepts emphasise that early relational experiences are shaped not just by the present moment but by the deep emotional histories embedded in caregiver–child interactions.

The psychoanalytic concept of *intersubjectivity* further explains how children’s emotional and social development is rooted in shared relational experiences (Trevarthen, 1979; Stern, 1985). *Primary intersubjectivity* refers to early, non-verbal emotional exchanges between infant and caregiver, such as mutual gaze, facial expression, and vocalisations, which form the foundation for emotional regulation and social connection (Trevarthen, 1979). *Secondary intersubjectivity* involves coordinated attention and intentional communication about external objects or events, marking the emergence of shared meaning and joint engagement (Tomasello, 1995). Through these processes, children learn to navigate relationships with increasing complexity and develop their capacity for social understanding (Gitz-Johansen, 2022).

These early interactions shape a child’s ability to feel understood, regulate emotions, and establish a sense of self in relation to others. Winnicott’s (1956) concept of the *holding environment* illustrates how secure, responsive caregiving allows children to explore their emotions, test their independence, and build trust in relationships. When caregivers provide a stable, attuned presence, children develop emotional resilience and social competence, but when emotional

attunement is absent or inconsistent, difficulties in self-regulation and relational security can emerge.

Play, in particular, serves as a crucial space for experimentation, identity formation, and emotional processing. Corsaro (2000), drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus*, describes children's role play as 'regulated improvisation', where they internalise and creatively adapt social norms, power structures, and relational patterns. However, play is not only a social process; it is also a psychological and intersubjective one. From a relational psychoanalytic perspective, Benjamin (2013) argues that symbolic play allows children to navigate power dynamics and recognition, shifting from complementary roles of control and submission to mutual recognition. Similarly, Harris (2013) explores how early dialogues between caregiver and child function as *transitional spaces*, shaping self-construction, emotional regulation, and intersubjective engagement. This perspective aligns with Winnicott's (1971) theory that language and play serve as *transitional phenomena*, helping children to bridge the gap between internal emotional states and shared symbolic meaning.

Aggression, another central aspect of early emotional development, is shaped by the child's struggle for autonomy, recognition, and relational security. Winnicott (1964) describes aggression as a natural and necessary process through which children test reality and differentiate themselves from others. If caregivers acknowledge and survive a child's aggression without retaliation, the child develops a secure sense of self. However, when aggression is met with excessive control, rejection, or punitive responses, children may develop destructive relational patterns, either acting out aggression or repressing it internally. Benjamin (1988) reframes aggression as relational rather than instinctual, arguing that it emerges from the child's need for recognition and can escalate when recognition is absent. Roiphe (1991) extends this discussion to the peer context,

examining how aggression in nursery settings often manifests through exclusion, teasing, and social power struggles. Adult interventions that foster recognition, containment, and constructive conflict resolution are crucial in helping children navigate these early relational challenges in a healthy way.

Language further shapes how children make sense of their experiences, emotions, and relationships. Harris (2013) argues that language is not merely a tool for communication but a *transitional space* where meaning, identity, and emotional experience are continuously negotiated. Integrating Winnicott's (1971) theory of *transitional objects* with Lacan's (1970) theory of the *Symbolic Order*, Harris suggests that language allows children to mediate between their internal emotional world and the structured meanings imposed by society. Entering the realm of language provides connection and shared understanding but also introduces a fundamental sense of loss: words can never fully capture subjective experience. This dual role of language emphasises the tension between autonomy and relationality, individual experience and social belonging, and recognition and misrecognition, all of which are central themes in early childhood development. By integrating insights from psychoanalysis, linguistics, and developmental psychology, she demonstrates how speech mediates subject formation, emphasising that meaning is never fixed but continuously reconstituted through relational exchanges.

Similarly, Corsaro and Rizzo (1988) explore how children use *discussion* as a tool for peer identity formation and cultural negotiation, reinforcing the active role of language in socialisation. Peer relationships play a crucial role in shaping children's emotional and social experiences in nurseries. Corsaro (1988) emphasises that children do not simply internalise adult-imposed norms but actively engage in interpretive reproduction, adapting and transforming cultural knowledge to fit their peer interactions. Socialisation is a dynamic process, where children are not passive

recipients of culture but active participants in its creation. Beyond verbal interactions, Gitz-Johansen (2024) illustrates how singing fosters intersubjective and emotional co-regulation in early childhood settings. Through communal musical engagement, children develop empathy, patience, and social attunement, reinforcing their sense of belonging and shared emotional experience. Whether through dialogue, debate, or music, language in its various forms serves as a transitional bridge, allowing children to navigate the complexities of self, relationships, and cultural integration.

These studies by Harris (2013), Corsaro and Rizzo (1988), and Gitz-Johansen (2024) focus on the crucial role of communicative and symbolic processes in shaping early psychological and social development, positioning language and music as vital tools for emotional security, cognitive growth, and social cohesion. I have emphasised in this chapter that the nursery is far more than a care and educational setting; it is a social field where cultural norms, emotional histories, and relational negotiations converge. While sociological theories emphasise how nurseries function as institutions that reinforce social structures, psychoanalytic and intersubjective perspectives reveal that early development is just as profoundly shaped by unconscious transmissions, relational experiences, and the struggle for recognition.

Finally, by reconnecting these contemporary insights with the historical psychoanalytic contributions of Winnicott, Isaacs, and other early theorists, this chapter demonstrates that the emotional and relational dimensions of nursery life have long been recognised as central to child development. The historical perspective highlights that these concerns are not new but remain highly relevant to contemporary policy and practice, emphasising the continuity of psychoanalytic thinking in shaping our understanding of nurseries as sites of both care and psychological growth.

An understanding of nurseries through macro-social and micro-psychological lenses is therefore important for enabling a more comprehensive view of childhood, one that takes into consideration the complex interplay of history, relationships, and emotion in shaping the formation of self-identity from the very beginning of life. To support early childhood development in a more holistic way, policies and practices must go beyond structural concerns, such as access and efficiency, and instead prioritise relational, emotional, and intersubjective dimensions of care. By acknowledging the social, unconscious, and intersubjective nature of nursery life, this chapter has argued that we can move towards a more holistic approach to early childhood education, one that values not only the development of skills but the deep emotional foundations that shape a child's capacity to relate, to think, and to be.

This chapter has argued that early childhood development is shaped not only by structural and cognitive processes but also by unconscious transmissions and relational experiences. By adopting an integrated perspective that draws on psychoanalysis, sociology, and developmental psychology, we can move beyond viewing nurseries merely as educational spaces, recognising them instead as complex relational fields that nurture children's capacities to think, relate, and be.

This chapter has argued that early childhood development is shaped not only by structural and cognitive processes but also by unconscious transmissions and relational experiences. By adopting an integrated perspective that draws on psychoanalysis, sociology, and developmental psychology, we can move beyond viewing nurseries merely as educational spaces, recognising them instead as complex relational fields that nurture children's capacities to think, relate, and be. Building on these insights, this thesis develops a distinctive psychosocial framework that illuminates how children's emotional worlds, peer interactions, and institutional structures are co-constructed in nursery settings. By integrating psychoanalytic, sociological, and developmental

perspectives, the framework demonstrates that care, recognition, and emotional meaning are produced through intersubjective exchanges, language, play, and the embodied enactment of habitus and symbolic capital. This approach provides a basis for the empirical work in subsequent chapters and has far-reaching implications for professional practice and policy, offering new ways to support children's emotional and relational development.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Introduction

This chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework guiding my research, drawing together psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives to explore how children develop emotional regulation, symbolic capacity, and social identity. Symbolic capacity refers to the child's emerging ability to use language, play, and other forms of representation to express inner states and meanings (Harris, 2013; Winnicott, 1971), and is a central concern developed throughout this chapter in relation to processes of symbolisation and meaning-making. Social identity, meanwhile, concerns how the child comes to understand themselves as part of a social world, shaped by cultural, linguistic, and relational contexts. This is approached through sociological theories of interdependence and habitus, drawing particularly on the work of Elias (2010, 2011) and Bourdieu (1977, 1990), which will be discussed further in Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2. Grounded in a psychosocial approach, it recognises that subjectivity is not a static or purely internal construct but is shaped through early relational experiences and embedded within wider cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts.

Central to this framework are psychoanalytic theories that examine the formation of the *self* within the caregiving relationship. In particular, Winnicott's (1962, 1971) work on *ego*

integration, transitional phenomena, and potential space demonstrates how the infant's continuity of being and capacity for creative living are supported by a 'holding environment'. Bion's (1989) concept of *containment* further extends this by showing how caregivers transform raw, overwhelming emotional states into experiences the infant can process, fostering emotional regulation.

The chapter also considers the foundational role of language and symbolisation. Freud (1900) first proposed that unconscious thoughts and desires are expressed through language and symbolic acts. Later, Lacan (1958, 1977) argued that subjectivity itself emerges through entry into the *Symbolic Order*, governed by language and social law. Dolto (1995) and Spielrein (1912/1995) emphasised that children respond to symbolic meaning even before acquiring language, highlighting the emotional and unconscious significance of preverbal experience. Adrienne Harris (2013) extends these ideas by showing how symbolic development emerges within intersubjective exchanges between caregiver and infant, where affect and meaning are co-constructed.

Building on this, Lorenzer's (1986) concept of *scenic understanding* suggests that early affective experiences are internalised as symbolic 'scenes', linking personal experience to collective cultural meanings. Benjamin's (2004) notion of 'thirdness' further illustrates how mutual recognition creates a shared relational space where autonomy, dependency and symbolic thought can develop.

Complementing these psychoanalytic insights, sociological theorists situate emotional development within historical and structural contexts. Elias (2010, 2011) highlights how emotion regulation reflects cultural norms shaped over generations. His idea of 'symbol emancipation' shows how behaviour becomes guided by symbolic systems such as language, law and custom.

Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) theory of *habitus* explains how children internalise durable dispositions shaped by family, class and education, structuring how they perceive and engage with the social world. His concept of 'symbolic capital', when read alongside Lacan's work, shows how power, authority and identity are mediated through language and symbols.

Taken together, these perspectives support an integrated psychosocial framework that recognises children as active 'subjects-in-information'. Emotional life, language and identity emerge not in isolation but through dynamic processes of mutual recognition, symbolic negotiation and affective attunement within social contexts. This chapter thus establishes the theoretical grounding for later analysis of how children in nursery settings move from early dependence toward relational autonomy, co-constructing meaning and selfhood within historically and culturally mediated spaces of care.

3.1 Psychoanalysis and Child Development

Over the years, child development has been studied by different disciplines. How a child develops and the complexities this entails can be understood and thought about from various perspectives, even within one discipline such as psychoanalysis, particularly *relational psychoanalysis*.

Winnicott (1962) proposed that the *ego*, a core component of the personality structure, is present from birth but is initially fragile and reliant on the mother's ability to satisfy the infant's needs.

This section will detail the necessary stages the baby must go through to develop a sense of *self* and *going-on-being* as they begin their ability to live creatively. I will focus on illustrating the initial moments of a child's life, aiming to provide an understanding of their developing psyche during the early years. While this study focuses on children aged three to four, it is important to understand their developmental stage and the processes that have contributed to it. The discussion

will also explore the significance of language and *thirdness* in their development, explaining their relating and developing identities.

3.1.1 Early states of the infant

In his influential 1962 paper on *Ego Integration* in Child Development, Winnicott delved into the intricate processes underlying the beginnings of the ego and object relations in infants, highlighting the indispensable role of the environment, particularly the mother, at this stage. The ego is a part of the developing personality, inseparable from human existence from birth. According to Winnicott (1962), the initial ego is fragile, depending on a *good enough mother* who is preoccupied solely with taking care of their infant, enabling her to operate a supportive ego-function. He goes on to elaborate that any failure in this developmental process can lead to an unthinkable anxiety that disrupts their *going-on-being*. If these failures are persistent, the infant may experience a sense of fragmentation of being, leading towards various forms of psychopathology.

Winnicott (1956) used the term *good enough mother* to describe a mother who is responsive and attuned to their infant's needs. This type of mother can consistently and adequately respond to the infant's initial needs, enabling a brief *experience of omnipotence* (Winnicott, 1971). In these early stages, the infant cannot differentiate between themselves and the external world. Objects, such as the mother's breast, are not perceived as separate entities but as extensions of the infant's self (Winnicott, 1962). The *good enough mother* provides crucial support for the infant's ego, in turn enabling them to relate to objects subjectively as they gradually engage with reality (Winnicott, 1956). If the baby feels anxiety, an attentive mother will try to fulfil their needs and bring a pleasurable or fulfilling experience. Unthinkable anxiety refers to the extreme state of distress an

infant experiences when the ego's initial development is insufficiently supported by a responsive caregiver, potentially leading to a sense of fragmentation of being (Winnicott, 1962). This, in turn, allows the baby to relate to *subjective objects*, intermittently meeting the reality principle at that moment, but not yet in a universally consistent manner. In other words, the baby maintains areas of *subjective objects* alongside areas where there is some relation to objectively perceived or 'not-me' objects.

Winnicott (1962) suggests that as the ego matures and strengthens, it starts to integrate its experiences and construct a cohesive personality based on a sense of continuity and *going-on-being*. Through the mother's consistent and supportive ego function, the infant's sense of continuity and integration allows them to build a personality towards the unit of self.

Integration is closely linked with the environmental function of holding. The achievement of integration is the unit. First comes 'I' which includes 'everything else is not me'. Then comes 'I am, I exist, I gather experiences and enrich myself and have an introjective and projective interaction with the NOT-ME, the actual world of shared reality. Add to this: 'I am seen or understood to exist by someone'; and, further, add to this: 'I get back (as a face seen in a mirror) the evidence I need that I have been recognized as a being'. (p. 61)

Integration leads to the formation of the unit as the self is recognised as separate from the external world. The infant's psyche is unified with their body and body functions, and the skin acts as the limiting barrier. The skin can symbolise the boundary between the self and the external world. With *good-enough mothering*, the baby can initiate object relations, and with these favourable conditions, the psyche and body become one. The individual's psychosomatic life starts. The state of 'I am' and the psychosomatic cohesion is accompanied by a persecutory anxiety of the 'not-

me', the external world. When the complex exchange between the outside world and the inner world starts, a two-way interchange begins. The ego structure strengthens, and the baby moves away from dependence towards independence.

As the paper concludes, Winnicott (1962) emphasises the idea that object-relating is complex, and it requires an environment that presents objects in a manner that allows the infant to create an object. It starts with the baby having an unformulated need that develops into a vague expectation, which is met by the mother presenting an object. This object fulfils the baby's needs, fostering confidence in the baby's ability to create objects and shape their world. The infant experiences a crucial period of *omnipotence*. After the infant can use their intellect to experience themselves and others, then the self can be studied.

Winnicott's (1986) idea of creativity is inseparable from the idea that life is worth living; the person must operate from an unconscious place where there is a feeling of existing. 'Creativity is then the doing that arises out of being. It indicates that he who is, is alive. Impulse may be at rest, but when the word 'doing' becomes appropriate, then already there is creativity' (p.28). The opposite of creativity is simply being alive, reacting to stimuli and having a life that is built on this pattern of reactions. In this case, when there is no stimulus, then there is no life and *cannot be* used to describe such individuals. Most people are in the middle of both extremes, but to feel one *is*, impulse-doing must predominate over reactive-doing. The patterns which the individual develops depend on emotional growth and the earliest moments of life. The *omnipotence* that the baby feels at the beginning of life is retained as part of creativity. The baby creates the world to cater for their needs, facilitated by the good enough mother, and then retains it through being creative and having a personal view of life. The reality principle is gradually introduced, and it allows the baby to realise they are not omnipotent; there are limitations of the world that are

imposed on them. ‘Eventually the individual human being relinquishes being the wheel, or the whole gearbox, and adopts the more comfortable position of a cog’ (p. 39). However, retaining creativity allows the baby not to be annihilated by compliance or the impingements of the world. Creative living allows us to retain something unmistakably ours, no one can do it for us, strengthening our feeling of being alive.

3.1.2 Containment and holding

Bion (1989) describes the relationship between the mother and the infant as the container-contained. The mother can care for the baby by being attentive and providing support that fosters the psychological growth of the baby. It requires receptivity to be emotionally moved and to respond to another’s state of mind. The contained infant requires a container, the carer, to process and make sense of their overwhelming emotional experiences. The infant projects their raw emotional experiences, *beta-elements*, onto the carer, so the carer can act as a container and process these *beta-elements* into more linkable *alpha-elements*. These *beta-elements* are too primitive and overwhelming, experiences that are yet to be symbolised. The container, the mother, in this case, transforms and processes the *beta-elements* into meaningful thoughts, *alpha-elements*.

The raw experience is returned to the infant in a more bearable manner so they can adequately process and understand these experiences. To be a container, the mother needs to have the capacity to hold the anxieties and confusion of the infant without overwhelming them, allowing them to gradually process and internalise these emotional experiences. If the carer was to respond excessively or chaotically, this can be disruptive to the infant’s development and lead to psychological difficulties in their emotional processing. The container-contained is a necessary

process for the emotional development of the child, as it contributes towards an integrated and stable sense of self. Ogden (2004) elaborates on Bion's container-contained model, explaining that containment as a concept helps to explain how we think, placing importance on how we process our experience and what happens when we cannot tolerate that which we experience.

In the mother-infant dynamic, *primary maternal preoccupation* is the concept Winnicott (1956) used to describe the mother's state of mind in the early moments of the infant's life when she provides for their needs. The mother possesses an openness to be emotionally moved by their baby, and this state of mind arises from their experience of caring for the infant. A *good enough* maternal environment requires the mother to go through this heightened and temporal state of being attuned to the baby's needs, allowing the infant to experience *going-on-being*. In this state of *primary maternal preoccupation*, there is no such thing as a mother, as she fully identifies with the baby and allows the baby to experience her in their omnipotent state. The mother holds the infant in these moments, physically and mentally, and creates what Winnicott refers to as a *holding environment*.

This physical holding soothes and provides warmth, protection and comfort for the baby with psychological holding as well providing a consistent, emotionally responsive carer who is attuned to the infant's needs. The mother contains these raw emotional experiences that the infant cannot make sense of or those which are unbearable, to emotionally regulate their experience and gradually adequately process them (Ogden, 2004). In this nurturing environment, the child will feel secure and be able to express their desires, feelings and instincts without fear of rejection. This becomes the foundation for the infant's sense of self, towards their *true self*, equipped with the capacity to cope with later challenges in their development (Winnicott, 1956). Building on

psychoanalytic perspectives on the true self, Ruti (2010) highlights the nature of the true self in relation to aliveness and spontaneity, arguing that:

The True Self thus has no fixed content beyond the fact that it articulates the subject's sense of aliveness. It relates to the subject's spontaneous gesture, but it does not in any way dictate the shape or direction of this gesture (p. 361).

Winnicott (1956) formulates that the *true self* is the person's capacity to live creatively through self-expression and be authentic in their autonomy. The infant experiences life from within and develops a sense of identity. A failure to have an adaptive environment can lead to a *false self*, which means the infant's emotional needs are not adequately met. The *false self* will result in a compliant and adaptable person, who is responsive to others' needs whilst being disconnected from their own true emotions and desires. The carer's capacity to be good enough will enable a healthy development towards autonomy, allowing the infant to slowly experience manageable frustrations which build resilience and help their development towards a *true self*.

In holding, there is a process of coming together in one place within both physical and psychological dimensions, it has both a quality of self in relation to the other. Winnicott (1951) suggests that being held involves an *illusory experience*, where the child cannot differentiate whether it is created internally by themselves or externally presented to them: 'The important point is that no decision on this point is expected' (p. 239). This takes place in the intermediate space where symbolic links between the outer and internal world are made. Hence, the process by which the infant internalises the maternal holding function can be considered to belong to the transitional area.

In this transitional area, the child's internal world intersects with the outer world, and it marks the *root of symbolism in time*. The infant uses a transitional object to navigate between their fantasies and the external reality; it is a manifestation of the development of the child. The transitional object is not only a symbol but also a vehicle for the change in symbolic thinking as the baby grows up. As the child creates meaning by gradually reconciling their internal and external experiences, the child moves from subjectivity to objectivity. In this transitional area, the child can foster creativity and explore symbolic representations. The internalisation of the maternal holding function can also be seen when the infant acquires the capacity to be alone: the infant takes over and creates an internal *holding environment* and mental framework.

3.1.3 Transitional phenomena

In his book, *Play and Reality*, Winnicott (1971) explains his ideas surrounding transitional objects, *transitional phenomena* and play. He describes the intermediate area of experience (also referred to as *transitional space* or third area of experiencing), writing:

the oral erotism and the true object relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, (...) an infant's babbling and the way in which an older child goes over a repertory of songs and tunes while preparing for sleep come within the intermediate area as transitional phenomena. (p.7)

Besides the internal and external world, there is a third part of the human being's life, the area of *experiencing*. This intermediate area is affected by both the internal and external; it separates both of them, yet it keeps them interrelated. A transitional object symbolises the union of mother and baby. It is created by the baby, who identifies with the mother and trusts that she will reliably meet their needs. The object is not simply created by asking for it, but rather by reaching out for it

and taking it, to use or to waste it (Winnicott, 1986). This illustrates the paradox of the transitional object: it is simultaneously created by the infant yet pre-exists in the shared relational and cultural space, made available for the infant's use and manipulation (Winnicott, 1971). The infant's active engagement with the object, including loving, exploring, and sometimes mutilating it, demonstrates both the autonomy of creation and the reliance on the availability of the object.

Winnicott (1971) argues that the transitional object emerges around the age of four to twelve months and becomes crucial for infants in moments when they need to defend against anxiety, especially against depressive anxiety. This object gets carried around, and the mother knows that even washing it would break the continuity of the baby's experience with this object. The object is loved and mutilated, surviving love and hate, but it cannot change unless done so by the child. It shows a quality to the infant that shows that it has a vitality of its own, like warmth or texture. As the infant starts to acquire more objects and starts to use organised sounds, a word may appear to name it. Slowly, it loses its meaning as the *transitional phenomena* become diffused over the whole cultural field. It can also be that the mother is the only transitional object or that the object is interrupted early on, therefore, this process is carried on in some hidden way.

3.1.4 The Potential Space

This section will revisit some of Winnicott's previously discussed concepts to further understand the potential space, or third state and *thirdness*. In his paper, *The Location of Cultural Experience*, Winnicott (1967) defined the third state/potential space as differentiation takes place, and the infant realises the other is separate from them. The potential space comes into existence when the infant is capable of recognising objects as a whole, and the space between themselves and the other is acknowledged. Consciousness arises in an attempt to fill the gap in which phenomena

such as cultural experience, transitional objects, and play reside. At this moment, the infant would be capable of admitting I am and introduced to the concept of being. The primary carer functions as the baby's environment in the first instance, playing an essential role in the cultural material that is symbolised and played out in object relations (Winnicott, 1962). A toy, for example, can be used as a transitional object and as a symbol of the separateness between mother and child.

Winnicott (1967) explains that the transitional object allows the imago of the mother (the idealised mother who is symbolised in the infant's inner world) to be retained, even in her absence.

Winnicott (1967) relates this third state to the child's confidence in themselves and their environment, which is essential to consider when explain cultural experience and play, along with other interactions within the nursery that I observed. The content that resides and is created in this space allows for the process of separation and individuation of becoming a subject to take place. The differentiation that leads the child from sensory immediacy to symbolic awareness is what culminates in the infant's ability to play (Abram, 1996). Because the third state is exclusive to a feeling of confidence, through play a child explores their inner world and finds diverse ways to relate with others. Play thus becomes a tool in the exploration and creation of the inner and outer worlds of the child (Winnicott, 1967). Furthermore, the capacity to *live creatively* is accomplished through the complexity of being an established exister, as Winnicott (1986) calls it. This capacity to create or *live creatively* emphasises that we are ourselves, striving to fulfil our potential. For play without creativity would be just a game, a compulsion, or just a response to something in a compliant way.

This ability of being creative is possessed by someone capable of relating to objects along their existence, surging from the phase of *omnipotence* in which the mother adapts to the baby's needs

(Winnicott, 1986). This can also be described as maternal holding, a holding of the baby's emotions, where the mother creates a safe space for the baby. The mother mirrors the baby, allowing the infant to experience a sense of *omnipotence*, as if the world exists for and because of them. For example, the baby feels hunger, he cries, and he creates the breast that feeds him (Abram, 1996). In Winnicott's theory, we find that the baby is inherently creative; it is through the first feed (which in reality represents a collection of the early experiences of feeds) that the baby can start to create (Winnicott, 1971). An omnipotent baby cannot distinguish itself from others, perceiving everything as part of themselves. Later on, they come to perceive objects subjectively as they start relating to objects.

For Winnicott (1965), this primary state of being merged with the mother and is referred to as the *environment mother*, that which will enable the illusion of *omnipotence*. A *good-enough mother* can endure the ruthlessness of the baby; she also slowly introduces reality into the world that is being created by the baby. Although this is painful for both the baby and the mother, she cannot be compliant with the baby's needs forever, as she has her own *omnipotence* which needs to be provided for. The reality principle is introduced when the impositions of the world limit *omnipotence*. Slowly, impingements are made into the baby's *omnipotence*, and these start to let them know that the world and their mother were there before them, and they exist despite them. To be able to handle this loss, introjection and projection must be in place. Through projection, the infant manages anxiety by placing intolerable feelings or parts of the self onto the mother, while through introjection, the infant gradually takes in aspects of the caregiving mother, building an internal sense of security and stability (Klein, 1946; Ogden, 1982). These processes help the baby move from a merged state toward recognising the mother as a separate but reliable figure.

Furthermore, to do so successfully, creativity and the sense of going on being must be fomented by their surroundings. As Winnicott (1971) observed, primary creativity is thereby inherent in being alive, where the world exists solely as a subjective experience. Gradually, the objective world emerges, leading to the dissolution of the subjective world and all its details. This transition brings an inevitable disillusionment that comes with confronting an external world that goes beyond our creation. The self remains subject to the response of the Other, and it is in this relational dynamic that one's experience is recognised and reflected in a third space where creativity can truly flourish.

Each person is inherently equipped with the ability to be creative with their perceptions. Most of the time, we are unaware that we are creating this need to reconcile our internal worlds with what reality brings us, so it is not so painful. Realising that they are not the creators of the world and that it exists outside their control is associated with the reality principle. The inherited potential develops into the sense of the continuity of being when a good-enough environment allows for the area of *omnipotence* to take in impingements. This *transitional space* between the baby and the mother, the individual and the other, is what Winnicott refers to as the third state, the space where cultural experience, play, and transitional objects reside.

Through this sense of *omnipotence* that the baby creates the world with no conceptualisation that it was there before them. Even if a mother was already a mother to siblings before, it will be perceived as if we have created our own mother; she exists for us only, and this is why it is so hard to share when we are young. Winnicott (1986) states that even in a family of eight, each child will somehow have a different mother. The mother will have a distinct way of relating to each child who perceives her in their own way. In this example, we can argue that it is through creativity and this good-enough care that each child manages to have a positive and unique

experience with their mother (which will be the blueprint for all later relationships). The individual's point of view and creativity preserve a portion of that initial *omnipotence*. Feelings can be tested against reality as a way of relating inner and outer worlds. Although the first instances of the holding of the infant's needs are in early infancy through maternal holding, it goes on throughout the early development of the child. This framework is crucial for my understanding of the relations that happen within the nursery.

Alfred Lorenzer (1986) coined the term *scenic understanding*, which is another important way to elaborate on Winnicott's potential space. He locates the *scenic understanding* between subjective fantasy and concrete social reality (Hollway & Froggett, 2013). This allows a psychosocial understanding of the experience between external reality and the inner world. Lorenzer's perspective takes on a subjective experience that is simultaneously individual, relational, and social. Experiences of bodily and social interactions are represented through the structure of personality as it develops, and the drives are shaped into a subject (Gripsrud, Mellon, & Ramvi, 2018). After symbolisation, *transitional phenomena* emerge from the unit of self-object, which has yet to be differentiated, and are followed by the symbolic 'interaction forms' in language (Hollway & Froggett, 2013).

Interaction forms for Lorenzer are the pre-linguistic inner experiences of relations (Gripsrud, Mellon, & Ramvi, 2018). Transitional objects and phenomena can be named and take effect within a cultural field. Moreover, they possess unconscious social elements which are collectively produced: even when they are at a pre-symbolic level, they inform the processes of socialisation (Hollway & Froggett, 2013). As symbolic interaction forms develop and the infant gains the ability to differentiate themselves from the outside world, the potential gap between subjective fantasy and outer reality arises. Within this gap, 'something that has not yet been symbolised

‘presses’ into language’ (Hollway & Froggett, 2013, p.145). Through this perspective, we can understand how societal norms, culture and politics might be embedded in this potential space. These psychoanalytic concepts enable us to question structures and identity at a personal and social level. We live and have developed within a social and cultural frame, and even though we might question it, it has framed our identity (Foucault, 1980).

In conclusion, Winnicott and Bion’s theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the foundational role of early relational experiences in shaping emotional development, identity, and creativity. The early caregiver, particularly the mother, serves as an essential figure in the infant’s psychological formation, providing attuned responses through holding, containment, and transitional objects. These experiences create a secure base that allows the infant to develop a cohesive sense of self, enabling them to move from dependency to autonomy. Without this good-enough environment, the child risks developing a *false self*, leading to a fragile sense of identity, emotional dysregulation, and compliance at the expense of authentic self-expression. Bion’s (1989) container-contained theory further illustrates how emotional regulation is not only an individual process but a relational one, dependent on the responsiveness of caregivers and the surrounding environment.

As the child progresses, creativity and play emerge as vital mechanisms for self-exploration and adaptation to reality. The *transitional space*, as theorised by Winnicott (1971), acts as an intermediate area between subjective experience and objective reality, allowing children to process separation, navigate emotional conflicts, and engage with the symbolic world. This concept also extends into cultural life, as play and creativity are not merely personal experiences but are vital for the construction of meaning and social belonging. Alfred Lorenzer (1986) further

develops this idea, arguing that early interactions within the transitional space shape how individuals engage with social norms and cultural structures.

3.2 Language and the unconscious

Building on the observational approach, this section discusses the complex relationship between language and the unconscious within psychoanalytic theory. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900) demonstrates how slips of the tongue, parapraxes, and dream symbolism reveal unconscious desires. Through free association, subjectivity emerges as individuals articulate their desires and conflicts via language. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan further argued that subjectivity arises from language, which can be used as a tool to explore the unconscious (Lacan, 1977).

The unconscious not only influences language but is also structured by unconscious linguistic processes that underpin symptoms. Such processes carry implicit assumptions derived from customary; often unconscious, social relations embedded within culture; these uphold structures of power and law. Identity, according to Lacanian theory, is constructed around *lack*, which is the fantasy that the gap between the self and desire might be filled. Individuals seek the wholeness once imagined in the *mirror stage* (discussed later in this chapter). The *imaginary* is defined as the discourse employed to protect oneself from the gap between desire and reality (Ruti, 2010). Desire can be defined and fulfilled through the answers to this *lack* (Lacan, 1958), yet these answers are diverse, constructed versions of reality created to simulate control over the self and others (Lacan, 1977). ‘From this perspective, the hope that we might actualise the imaginary, and make it real, may preclude our ability to create actual possibilities’ (Charles, 2003, p. 689).

Ruti (2010) emphasizes the power of the unconscious in structuring our emotional and social worlds, with language serving as a conduit for both creation and destruction within the self. Although distinct psychoanalytic perspectives cannot converge into a singular narrative, the nuanced tension between integration and disintegration, whether in the formation of the *False Self* (Winnicott, 1967) or the *fragmented ideal-I* (Lacan, 1977) offers significant interpretative value. Theoretical frameworks such as these, while articulating different conceptualizations of the self, serve to enrich our understanding of the emotional landscapes of the nursery, particularly in relation to how children navigate their internal and external worlds.

Lacan's psychoanalytic writings draw heavily on anthropology and sociology, particularly the works of Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss, and Mauss (Schrans, 2018). He conceptualises the relationship between subject and Other as emerging from a collective identification principle. The collective dimension of subjectivity is deeply entwined with the structure of language, which Lacan analyses through structuralist linguistics, particularly Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language as a system of signs existing only within a collective, with speech being the intellectualised, executive side (Schrans, 2018). Within this system, 'the signs are composed of a relationship between a signifying component (sound image) and a signified component (concept), the relationship itself being arbitrary' (Muller & Richardson, 1994, p. 11).

Phonemes combine into units of meaning governed by a closed order, grammar and vocabulary (Lacan, 1977). Muller and Richardson (1994) elaborate on Lacan's structural linguistics by distinguishing two axes along which *signifiers* relate. The *axis of combination* refers to the sequential association of *signifiers* in a chain, such as temporal contiguity, whereas the *axis of selection* involves mutual exclusion, where one *signifier* replaces another, often an antonym. These axes underpin the mechanisms of *metaphor* and *metonymy*: *metaphor* operates through

substitution along the axis of selection, while *metonymy* functions via transfer along the axis of combination; for example, relationships of cause and effect or part and whole (Muller & Richardson, 1994, p. 13).

For Lacan (1977), a chain of *signifiers* is a continuous flow in which meaning is never fixed but perpetually shifts:

the meaning ‘insists’ but... none of its elements ‘consists’ in the signification of which it is at the moment capable. We are forced, then, to accept the notion of an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier. (p. 153–154)

This sliding reflects how language structures the unconscious, operating via two mechanisms: *condensation* (a *metaphor* on the axis of selection, where a single *signifier* represents multiple associative chains intersecting at one point) and *displacement* (a *metonymy* on the axis of combination, where the intensity of one idea transfers to another within a related chain of lesser intensity) (Muller & Richardson, 1994).

3.2.1 Language and the Symbolic Order

Building on the linguistic structures of the unconscious, this subsection focuses on the *Symbolic Order* in Lacanian theory and its role in identity formation. Lacan (1977) states that the unconscious is structured like a language; our unconscious thoughts, symptoms, and desires are governed by the same symbolic laws that structure discourse. Discourse transcends the individual, incorporating collective traditions, symptoms, and distortions (Muller & Richardson, 1994). In his text on the Mirror Stage, Lacan (1966) describes when the child first recognises themselves in the mirror. This stage occurs around six to eighteen months of age, forming the *I*, a sense of self as an

illusion of coherence. However, this image depends on external recognition, alienating the subject from their *true self*. Before this moment of recognition, the baby experiences their body as fragmented. After the image of themselves appears in the mirror, a whole representation of self emerges, and the child identifies with it. This external image, the *ideal-I*, becomes the foundation of the ego, a constructed identity based on an illusion of unity.

Lacan (1977) elaborates in his essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function* how the *Mirror Stage* gives rise to the ego through the formation of the *ideal-I*. This external representation is not the child's actual embodied experience but a misrecognition which becomes an alienating structure because their identity is mediated by something external. The subject will long to become the *ideal-I*, yet their real self remains fragmented. Desire becomes structured by this *lack* that we once saw in the mirror but can never fully obtain. The ego forms through identifying with the external image, leading to an unstable sense of self that requires the reaffirmation of others. Identity is shaped by 'external validation', *the gaze of the Other*. The ego is a construct of the *Imaginary Order*, shaped by images, identifications, and social interactions, which makes it fragile. The subject seeks wholeness through identifications with others, such as social roles, ideals or authority figures. The *mirror stage* marks the transition from a fragmented body to an integrated self, although this self remains illusory. This leads to the entry into the *Symbolic Order*.

In this context, Lacan's (1977) notion of the *ideal-I* helps clarify how the *true self* can be understood within his framework. Rather than a fixed or authentic core, the *true self* appears as an aspirational identity continually shaped through external recognition. The child's sense of self emerges through identification with the mirror image and through ongoing interactions with the *Other*, illustrating how desire, social validation, and symbolic structures mediate subject

formation. When applied to early childhood development, this reading complements Winnicott's (1960) emphasis on the relational conditions necessary for the emergence of the *true self* within a facilitating environment. Together, these perspectives illuminate how children in nursery contexts negotiate between their fragmented embodied experiences and socially mediated ideals. Through play, imitation, and peer interaction, they begin to test and perform emerging identities within the symbolic and relational structures of the institution, revealing how the formation of the self is shaped simultaneously by inner psychic processes and the social world that sustains them. In Lacanian theory, structures function as language, following a hierarchical, rule-based system within the *Symbolic Order* (Lacan, 1977). The symbolic is an abstract network of meaning, where words carry significance, whereas the *Imaginary Order* refers to pre-linguistic, abstract experiences that remain unarticulated. According to Lacan, the individual is a function that speaks and declares itself. When children acquire language, they are introduced to the Symbolic Third, a social institution governed by paternal prohibition. This *law of the father* (Lacan, 1958) marks the entry into symbolisation. The infant's demand for unconditional love from the Other, the maternal *omnipotence* of infancy, ends. The Oedipal crisis occurs when the child recognises their place in the symbolic system, undergoing *symbolic castration*, which refers not to a literal loss but to the child's renunciation of the illusion of complete unity with the *Other*. This marks the acceptance of limits and difference that make entry into the *symbolic order* possible. Therefore, *symbolic castration* is the sacrifice required to enter the linguistic and social order (Lacan, 1977). This process regulates desire, as the prohibition of *jouissance* (excess pleasure) structures subjectivity.

Through the *law of the father*, the child is introduced to law, social rules, language and cultural meaning (Lacan, 1958). The child is no longer central but is shaped by social codes, roles and *signifiers*. Desire functions through the mediation of the *law of the father*, which detaches the

subject from an omnipotent Other, establishing transgenerational structures that shape identity within a given culture. Each individual's libido and identity develop in response to what their culture deems acceptable. Furthermore, Lacan (1938) questioned key psychoanalytic concepts, such as the Oedipus complex, in sociohistorical terms. Benvenuto (2018) describes how Lacan recognised that shifting parental structures alter the paternal imago. As family dynamics change, so too do the rites and prohibitions that previously marked psychological and social life. As social structures and cultures constantly change, these new structures may leave gaps in what once marked our psychic and social lives. New rites are either uncertain or have yet to emerge to fill these gaps in family structure.

3.2.2 Language and socialisation

The pioneering psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein explored how speech arises from the motive to connect with others through language (Spielrein & Wharton, 2015). She was particularly interested in the intersection of feelings and regulation within conversation, noting that:

Words are actions, feeling states, carrying both links to the parent and processes of separation. The early magical properties of words allow the child to attempt to manage loss or absence in conjuring speaking as a form of action. (Harris, 2015, p. 751)

Spielrein suggested that language plays a vital role in transforming unconscious desires into conscious thought, a view that aligns with later conceptions of the Lacanian *Symbolic Order*. In her work *Destruction as Cause of Coming into Being* (1912/1995), she examines the dialectic of destruction and creation in psychological processes. Symbolic thought, which underpins language, begins as nonverbal and emotionally charged before becoming structured linguistically. She viewed unconscious thought as metaphorical and associative, with language use often

reflecting deeper unconscious structures (Spielrein & Wharton, 2015). Beyond verbal communication, words serve as psychological operators that shape and regulate unconscious processes. For new psychological structures to emerge, old ones must be dismantled (Spielrein, 1912/1995). These new structures develop through relationships with others, as learning is socially mediated. Her work anticipated Dolto's emphasis on the emotional foundations of language.

The French psychoanalyst Françoise Dolto offers a further perspective on language and socialisation (Hivernel, 2013). Unlike behaviourist models such as Skinner's (1957), which view language as a product of reinforcement and conditioning, or Piaget's (1959) cognitive-maturation approach, which treats language as reflecting cognitive growth, Dolto argued that children are active participants in language acquisition. Even before speech develops, children are receptive to the linguistic and emotional influences of their caregivers. In this preverbal phase, they engage in unconscious symbolic exchanges through affects and bodily experiences. Language functions as a mediator of emotional life. The presence or absence of a caregiver shapes these linguistic and symbolic exchanges in a manner comparable to Lacan's (1958) concept of symbolic castration.

Dolto (2009) regarded language as a key facilitator of socialisation, enabling individuals to relate to others, construct identity within a collective framework, and internalise cultural and familial narratives. Children not only learn language but absorb it as a means to structure their place in the social world. Language encompasses not only verbal communication but also nonverbal affects, such as body language, facial expressions, and gestures, alongside internal and external perceptions and unconscious communication. These elements collectively form the intrapsychic life and are integral to how children construct meaning and engage with their environment. This aligns with Lacan's (1977) *Symbolic Order* but highlights the early role of affective experience in

shaping linguistic development (Hivernel, 2013). Dolto emphasises the role of emotional experiences, separations, pleasure and social interactions in language acquisition. The child's openness to external influences enables engagement with others and the environment through language, forming the foundation of socialisation (Hall, 2009).

Dolto conceptualises development as a process of humanisation and socialisation, underscoring the child's need for the comfort of the other and learning through interaction (Benvenuto, 2018). She viewed castration as a developmental ordeal imposed by the adult through speech: when one person is signified by another, the law prohibits the form in which desire might be fulfilled, and this prohibition must allow for the symbolisation of law (Dollander & de Tychey, 2004). When the child internalises this prohibition, it socialises their individuation. Thus, castration is received at different developmental stages from the 'other' through language.

3.2.3 Language and intersubjectivity

Litowitz (2014) examines language's role in shaping *intersubjectivity*, focusing on how adults use speech to guide infants' behaviour. Through these interactions, children acquire language while incorporating interpretations of others' intentions and emotions. Language forms the foundation of *intersubjectivity* because individuals are born into a world of linguistically structured activities and shared semiotic systems. Consequently, *intersubjectivity* is present from birth.

Language shapes both individual *intersubjectivity* and interpersonal relationships. It enables individuals to navigate their inner worlds while engaging in a shared reality. Acquiring language involves more than naming objects; it requires interpretation, affects and relational dynamics. Meaning arises through joint referencing, where speakers and listeners co-construct understanding, allowing for both shared meaning and potential misinterpretation. Language is

inherently dynamic, balancing structure and flexibility, which permits creativity but also the possibility of deception. Individuals can deceive themselves as well as others. This relates to Freud's (1925) concept of negation, which simultaneously affirms and denies, allowing expression of contradictions. Language thus serves as both a bridge between individuals and a medium for self-construction (Litowitz, 2014).

Similarly, Cowley et al. explain that 'even when interaction still relies on "analogue" patterns, co-operation and conflict ensure the development of more complex semiotic capacities' (2004, p. 110). Deacon (1997) situates language within a complex social context that continually shapes linguistic experience. This complexity appears when distressed infants encounter communications imbued with parental ghosts or projective distortions (Fraiberg et al., 1975; Cramer & Palacio Espasa, 1993; Salomonsson, 2017). Language's rhythms and sounds catalogue concepts, objects, affective states and relationships (Litowitz, 2014). Psychoanalytic study treats language as multi-layered communication that can reveal conscious and unconscious structures (Salomonsson, 2017). Sociological analysis further uncovers power structures and cultural narratives embedded in language.

Skolnick and Warshaw (2013), in the introduction to *Relational Perspectives in Psychoanalysis*, discuss *relational psychoanalysis* as a contemporary approach emphasising relationships' fundamental role in shaping the psyche. Contrary to classical psychoanalysis, broadly defined by Skolnick and Warshaw (2013) as early Freudian approaches oriented toward intrapsychic drives and the uncovering of unconscious drives within an isolated mind, *relational psychoanalysis* views subjectivity as co-constructed through interpersonal interactions. The self is not fixed but continuously shaped by relationships, especially early caregiver dynamics. This approach

integrates object relations theory, self-psychology, and developmental research, shifting focus from internal conflicts to relational patterns.

Mutual recognition is central to human development within this framework. Drawing on Benjamin's (2004) concept of *thirdness*, *relational psychoanalysis* stresses the importance of being seen and acknowledged as a separate yet connected individual. This recognition is crucial for developing a stable self and for repairing relational ruptures. Thirdness introduces a mediating perspective co-created relationally. It arises when two people willingly accept the other's reality, contrasting with submission, which is passive compliance to control. It originates in the caregiver's balance of attunement and separation, paralleling Winnicott's conception of this developmental stage. Relationships can regress to complementary twoness, where individuals feel controlled by the other, but *thirdness* can be restored through recognition, dialogue and mutual repair.

By shifting from intrapsychic to intersubjective models, *relational psychoanalysis* offers a flexible understanding of psychological life, aligning with developmental psychology and neuroscience that highlight early relational experiences' profound impact. Through emotional exchanges and relational repair, it provides a nuanced account of human development.

3.2.4 Language as a Transitional Phenomena

This section follows Harris' (2013) argument that language functions as a transitional phenomenon, extending Winnicott's concept of transitional objects and spaces. Transitional objects bridge the infant's subjective *omnipotence* and recognition of external reality. Language operates similarly by emerging in the intersubjective space between child and caregiver, facilitating self-expression and gradual integration of symbolic thought (Winnicott, 1971).

Vygotsky's (1978) theory of language development introduces the Zone of Proximal Development, describing tasks a child can perform with guidance but not independently, emphasising that learning is fundamentally social and occurs through dialogues and interactions with more knowledgeable others. Harris (2013) integrates this with Winnicott's ideas, showing that language evolves dialectically through the caregiver's provision of an auxiliary ego function, supporting the child's developing self and mastery. She emphasises that symbolic activity arises only in moments of absence or disrupted continuity when the child encounters the tension between self and other.

Kristeva (1984) describes language as a dual system: the semiotic, encompassing rhythms, sounds and prosody linked to maternal presence, and the symbolic, the structured, rule-based use of words. Language's dual function enables it to act as a *transitional phenomenon*, retaining material qualities of the caregiver's presence while bridging sensory experience and abstract representation. In line with Harris' argument, Kristeva's conceptualisation of *signifying practices* further illuminates how language mediates the infant's development of self-awareness and relational understanding, showing how semiotic and symbolic dimensions operate within early caregiver-child interactions.

While Harris (2013) references Lacan, she does so to highlight a contrast rather than align with his account of the *Symbolic*. For Lacan (1966, 1977), entry into the Symbolic is structured by rules, dependent on loss and castration, and shapes desire and subjectivity through social and linguistic law. Harris (2013), in contrast, emphasises the creative, relational, and playful dimensions of symbol formation that emerge in the intersubjective space between child and

caregiver. Drawing on Winnicott (1971) and Kristeva (1984), she shows that language and symbols arise through dialogue, interaction, and engagement with absence, rather than through formalized structures. Lacan's formal perspective thus serves to illuminate the distinctiveness of Harris' argument, highlighting the importance of relational and intersubjective processes in the development of *language*, *self*, and *desire*. Building on this relational lens, Winnicott's (1971) *transitional object* and the *potential* space it inhabits can be understood as sites where children negotiate internal and external reality (Harris, 2013). Within this potential space, creativity and symbolic meaning emerge. Children negotiate sameness and difference as they refine their understanding of self and others. Language thus facilitates socialisation and serves as a medium for emotional regulation, self-containment and meaning-making.

3.3 Being socialised

The child is socialised through many previously discussed processes, beyond the *Symbolic Order*, when the child becomes a subject, through the good enough mother and the *transitional space*, as well as learning how to self-regulate and interact meaningfully. Language is a key part of becoming an individual as well as relating with others; it shapes our experiences and the external structures of the world. Psychoanalysis sees socialisation as a complex negotiation between the inner world, unconscious structures, and external social realities, a process that continues throughout life. This can be further explored by integrating a sociological perspective that takes into account the broader social structures surrounding the child and how they shape their socialisation process and influence their development.

One key concept in developing a sociological perspective is the concept of *habitus*, a concept that has a long intellectual history, developed through distinct philosophical and sociological

traditions, then further developed by Pierre Bourdieu. Sapiro (2015) notes how it evolved from the Latin verb *habere*, meaning to have, a term found in a translation of Aristotle's *Hexis* (4th century BCE), which he used to describe a stable acquired state of being. This term also refers to learned habits, character or moral dispositions that shape the individual's behaviour. It suggests that deeply ingrained tendencies in a person emerge from repeated actions and social practices. Then Thomas Aquinas (1265–1274) reintroduced this term in Christian theology to describe the development of virtues through repeated practice.

The early uses of this term in sociology and phenomenology are also found in Max Weber's work (1905), where he used the term *habitus* to describe the psychological state of a religious individual linked to ascetic practices and moral dispositions. Marcel Mauss (1934) used *habitus* to describe techniques of the body, such as walking, arguing that cultural habits are unconsciously learned and socially structured. Mauss (1934) and Durkheim (1912) use *habitus* in their work on socialisation, describing it as the internalisation of collective beliefs, moral practices, and traditions through education. Afterwards, *habitus* was used by Edmund Husserl (1936) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) in phenomenology to emphasise how past experiences shape perception and action. Max Scheler (1924) used *habitus* to describe national attitudes, arguing that these were structurally similar across different countries.

Norbert Elias (2012) also used *habitus* in his work *On the Process of Civilisation*, where he developed the idea of a national and individually learned *habitus* as internalised social control over behaviour (Elias, 2012). Finally, this concept's history takes us to its most prominent advocate, Pierre Bourdieu, whose theory of practice explores *habitus* as the link between social structures and personal embodied dispositions, shaped by power relations (Bourdieu, 1977). Although some critics argue that Bourdieu's *habitus* is too deterministic, limiting individual

agency (Sayer, 2005), while others contend it is too broad and challenging to test empirically (Swartz, 1997), these remain useful concepts for understanding how social structures shape individual dispositions. The next section focuses on Elias's and Bourdieu's work on *habitus*. Elias focuses more on the historical evolution of behaviour and the internalisation of social restraint over generations, whereas Bourdieu's approach centres on how *habitus* is shaped by forms of cultural capital, especially those reproduced through education and institutions.

3.3.1 Elias's Habitus and Symbol Emancipation

In his work on *The Symbol Theory*, Norbert Elias (2011) provides a framework which further explains the interaction of psychoanalytic and sociological ideas. Elias argues that language is acquired in the early stages of childhood: as children grow up and increasingly acquire knowledge, their individual and societal knowledge become more intertwined and harder to separate. Children must actively learn the sound patterns used by their elders, imitate them, and remember their symbolic representations. The infant has to go through a learning process to activate their potential to communicate with others. Moreover, throughout their development, children have to learn how to regulate their speech and behaviour in accordance with the shared societal code. Symbols are learned as a means of communication, and their formation is bound up with human development and our survival.

Elias (2012) argues in his work *On the Process of Civilisation* that every child is both individualised and socialised and that to understand society, one must observe human development and the process of individualisation. Self-regulation is central to *the civilising process*, as drives and affects must be modified and regulated as part of the learning process. Elias (2011) introduces the concept of *symbol emancipation* to understand the capacity to conduct

change through learning. In early human societies, actions were primarily driven by survival needs. Over time, however, humans developed symbolic thought, which allowed them to detach themselves from immediate survival pressures. Through *symbol emancipation*, human behaviour is guided by symbols. The more society develops, the less people act on impulse and the more they rely on symbolic structures such as laws, customs, and institutions to regulate their behaviour. As societies grow more complex, *symbol emancipation* fosters greater autonomy and self-control, reducing impulsive behaviour. People increasingly rely on symbolic frameworks to regulate interactions, thus shaping both individual and collective behaviour. Elias argues that the capacity to conduct modification through learned knowledge and *symbol emancipation* provides humans with an evolutionary advantage over other species. As an alternative term to libido, Elias proposes *valency* which refers to:

The relational way in which people are directed toward other people: some are already firmly connected with certain people, while others are free and open, and search for people with whom to form bonds. (Gabriel, 2017, p. 220)

Elias therefore emphasises the importance of personal interdependencies and emotional bonds which bind society together: human beings are social beings embedded in figurations which are interdependent webs and networks that are always moving, changing and developing.

Furthermore, to understand society, one must observe human development and the process of individualisation. In his work *On the Process of Civilisation*, Elias (2012) argues that every child undergoes the dual process of being individualised and socialised. Within the learning processes of becoming civilised, the self-regulation of drives and affects is crucial to be able to survive within a given social structure. Children's social development is an affective and cognitive

process in which they seek to relate to others; therefore, they must learn how to self-regulate their emotions in order to be able to relate and communicate. Symbol emancipation plays a key role in this process, as it enables individuals to internalise social norms, shaping their relational patterns.

Elias (2010) argues that an individual's psychological development results from both genetic predispositions and social interactions within a specific societal structure. Socialisation is not simply an external imposition; rather, it moulds the psyche, making self-regulation an internalised and individualised process. This argument therefore emphasises why socio-psychological development cannot be understood in isolation, and the space between individuals is crucial to understanding social structures, interpersonal relations, and individual identity. In *The Society of Individuals*, Elias (2010) defines *habitus* as the social makeup of individuals, emphasising the interconnection between personal identity and structures in society. He challenges the idea of separating individual and social dynamics, arguing that each person possesses a unique but socially embedded *habitus*: 'what might be called an unmistakable individual handwriting that grows out of the social script' (Elias, 2010, p. 164).

Neither the self-image nor the *habitus* is concrete; they can undergo constant transformation as the individual learns and is subject to specific transformation. Socialisation does not eliminate the need for warmth, spontaneity, and emotional connection; on the contrary, the desire for security, validation, and emotional bonds persists, shaping diverse ways of relating to others.

In *The Society of Individuals* Elias (2010) explains the *habitus* as layered with multiple interwoven influences shaping an individual's social identity. Some layers may be more dominant than others, depending on social, historical, and cultural factors. These layers are 'like language,

both hard and tough, but also flexible and far from immutable. It is, in fact, always in flux’ (p.187).

Through *symbol emancipation* children learn about social norms which become deeply ingrained in their *habitus*, leading to automatic behavioural responses. Socialisation thus enforces self-discipline and emotional control, shaping collective behavioural patterns. Elias (2012) also introduces the concept of national *habitus*, referring to culturally distinct ways of thinking, behaving, and relating that are passed down through intergenerational transmission. This national *habitus* evolves through historical experiences, continuously reshaping collective identities and behaviours. Elias’s work therefore provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how language, symbols, and socialisation shape individuals and societies. His theories on *symbol emancipation* and *habitus* highlight the deep integration of individual identity with social structures, illustrating how humans move from instinct-driven existence to complex, symbolic-based social life.

3.3.2 Bourdieu’s Habitus, Capital and Field

In his work *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu (1977) discusses how the concept of *habitus* is a central concept for explaining how social structures shape individual behaviours, perceptions and dispositions. It links structure and agency, showing how social hierarchies are internalised and reproduced unconsciously. The *habitus* shapes how people navigate the world based on their social class, education and experiences. *Habitus* can be defined as ‘A system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72).

It is deeply ingrained but can evolve, applies across different situations, and is shaped by social conditions, yet it shapes how individuals engage with the world. The *habitus* is not consciously learned, but it is acquired through the process of socialisation and particularly during the early years of life. Bourdieu refers to the mode of operation of the *habitus* as beneath consciousness, an individual feels that their behaviour is ‘second nature’ or ‘natural’, even though they have been socialised to act in a specific way.

The *habitus* is deeply linked with social class as individuals develop different dispositions based on the access they have to *economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 1990). Through education, family upbringing, and social circles, individuals internalise class-specific dispositions that influence their trajectories and the opportunities they will have throughout their lives. The *habitus* ensures that those who are privileged keep their social advantage while the working class remains constrained by their inherited dispositions. Interacting dynamically with other social fields, the *habitus* is not static. A field, according to Bourdieu (1990), is a social space that has its own rules, power structures and valued forms of capital. Capital is defined as multiple forms that individuals use to navigate fields (Bourdieu, 1986). Forms of capital include economic capital (wealth and financial resources), cultural capital (knowledge, education, and taste), social capital (networks and relationships), and *symbolic capital* (prestige and recognition). Moreover, an individual’s *habitus* shapes how they engage with related fields. However, capital is not a simple quantity of symbolic or material goods, defined once and for all, leaving only its unequal distribution to be measured: it is mainly a social relationship of domination that has important consequences within a specific field, because all forms of capital are based on social relationships of power.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that there are three forms of cultural capital. The first one is embodied capital, which is made up of internalised dispositions, habits, and modes of thinking. Second is the objectified capital with material possessions that represent culture, institutionalised in levels of competence and authority. Third, institutionalised capital, academic credentials and qualifications. Cultural capital is not neutral; it has symbolic value and is legitimised through class divisions which can be transformed into social and economic capital. According to Bourdieu (1990), all forms of capital interact in a field that is individually structured with a unique sense of logic that stratifies power and social positions. Individuals, as social agents, operate and compete within this structured field which is independent of their will; any modification of capital within the field adheres to the governing structure that distributes this capital and how it should be acquired.

Social fields operate like competitive games, with rules, positions and rewards. The *habitus* and field exist in a mutual relationship, where the field structures the *habitus* and the *habitus* influences the field, shaping its evolution. The *habitus* also ensures that social structures are reproduced unconsciously, while fields legitimise existing power structures. Practical sense is a key term for Bourdieu's (1990) theory in *The Logic of Practice*. It refers to how social agents navigate social life without a conscious deliberation of the economic exchange they participate in; this unconscious alignment of the *habitus* and field allows people to participate in social life without much pause for self-reflection. If a person feels discomfort or a sense of displacement, the social agent no longer has a *habitus* that aligns with the field they inhabit. Bourdieu refers to this as *hysteresis*, a feeling of being left behind by social change as the person struggles to adapt to new expectations and norms.

In *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, Bourdieu (1977) describes two types of *habitus*, the primary and secondary *habitus*. The *primary habitus* is acquired in childhood through early interactions and family upbringing. It makes up the deepest layers of an individual's disposition, which are unconsciously shaping their perceptions of the world and their aspirations. The *secondary habitus* develops later on in life, through being exposed to education, institutions and new social environments. Unlike the *primary habitus*, which is unconscious and stable, the *secondary habitus* is context-dependent and can change over time. If there is a clash between both *habitus*, internal conflict might arise, forming a *cleft habitus* due to contradictory social influences. The person might feel torn between two different social identities, giving a feeling of being out of place in both environments.

The *habitus* is therefore a key concept from relational sociology that allows us to bridge sociological and psychological perspectives to provide a comprehensive analysis of the process of socialisation. The individual's success within each independent field depends on how well their *habitus* aligns with the field's rules. The *habitus* is *embodied*, and different forms of capital legitimise social divisions by reinforcing symbolic hierarchies. Socialisation, therefore, shapes individual identity. These theories provide a suitable theoretical framework for understanding how unconscious processes of socialisation influence behaviour, identity, and social position.

Conclusions: Towards a Psychosocial Theoretical Framework

This chapter explicitly positions psychoanalytic and sociological theories as complementary lenses guiding this study. Rather than attempting to reconcile these perspectives into a single unified framework, I use them in dialogue: psychoanalytic theories illuminate unconscious processes, relational dynamics, and internal development, while sociological theories situate these

processes within social contexts. This allows the framework to actively guide the analysis of children's emotional regulation, socialisation, and identity formation in nursery settings.

Understanding how children develop emotional regulation, self-awareness, and social competence requires a transdisciplinary approach that integrates psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives. A theoretical framework is a structured system of theories that provide a foundation for research, aiming to define key concepts, relationships and assumptions. It serves as a lens through which a study is conducted, linking theoretical concepts with empirical investigation and directing the research process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In my research, a psychosocial theoretical framework integrates psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives to explore how caregivers, language, play, and social norms shape children's emotional experiences in the nursery. The framework actively demonstrates how these theories are applied, showing their analytical value rather than simply citing them descriptively. It highlights how emotions are regulated, expressed, and internalised through early relational, linguistic, and social processes. Psychoanalytic theory offers insights into how children's unconscious experiences, symbolic interactions, and *attachment* to caregivers shape their sense of self. Sociological perspectives, particularly those of Elias and Bourdieu, highlight how emotions are embedded in social structures and historical processes, shaping *habitus* and reinforcing cultural expectations. Throughout the research, the framework consistently applies these perspectives, showing how they inform the interpretation of empirical observations, rather than merely summarising theory.

A psychosocial way of thinking allows us to examine the interplay between psychological and social factors in shaping human development, identity, and behaviour. Individual experiences and mental processes cannot be understood in isolation but are deeply influenced by social relationships, cultural contexts, and historical conditions (Krause & Davids, 2018).

Ruti (2010) discusses how distinct psychoanalytic perspectives, such as those of Winnicott and Lacan, offer different but complementary insights into the emotional and psychological development of children. This illustrates the framework's method: theories are purposefully selected and applied to illuminate different facets of development rather than merged into a single lens. Rather than seeking to reconcile or harmonize these approaches into a single unified framework, Ruti argues that their simultaneous analysis provides a deeper understanding of human subjectivity. She stresses that the richness of psychoanalysis lies precisely in its diversity of perspectives, each illuminating different aspects of the human experience. By engaging with these varied viewpoints, we gain a fuller picture of the interplay between unconscious processes, social structures, and the development of emotional regulation and self-awareness. This multiplicity of theoretical lenses does not require synthesis but instead benefits from the analytical richness that each framework brings to the table, offering valuable insights into the complexities of early childhood development that would be otherwise lost if we sought to converge them.

As Bourdieu (1999) notes:

Sociology does not claim to substitute its mode of explanation for that of psychoanalysis; it is concerned only to construct differently certain givens that psychoanalysis also takes as its object. (p. 512)

This perspective integrates insights from psychology and sociology, emphasizing how external social structures (such as family, education, class, and cultural norms) interact with internal psychological dynamics (such as emotions, cognition, and identity formation) (Frosh, 2003). From a *relational psychoanalysis* perspective, socialisation is a continuous process that foments an ongoing negotiation between the unconscious, inner world and social realities (Skolnick &

Warshaw, 2013). A sociological perspective complements this by examining how broader social structures shape development and identity formation. Hence, both perspectives can be usefully combined to develop a psychosocial way of thinking (Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019). Frosh (2003) also suggests that:

What is balanced here is an appreciation of the ambiguities and ambivalence of power as it operates on, through and in the subject, and as it is operated on by the subject. Neither form of power can be reduced to the other. Rather, the subject emerges through the operations of power, but stands out over and against it too. (p. 11)

Psychoanalytic theorists have explored how early relationships and cultural structures influence subjectivity, while sociological theorists have thought about how social structures influence individuals and how these, in turn, shape them (Skolnick & Warshaw, 2013). The psychosocial approach is key in understanding issues such as trauma, marginalisation, and social change. It highlights how mental health is not just a product of individual pathology but also broader social conditions, including inequality, discrimination, and historical oppression (Krause & Davids, 2018). A psychosocial perspective encourages exploring how past relationships, cultural narratives, and social belonging shape one's psychological experiences. By bridging the gap between personal and collective experiences, the psychosocial perspective offers a more holistic understanding of human behaviour. It challenges purely individualistic explanations of mental health and development, situating them within the larger web of social, historical, and relational influences (Frosh, 2019).

The concepts of *habitus* and psychoanalytic theories of socialisation both explain how individuals internalise social norms, behaviours, and structures unconsciously. Understanding privilege,

marginalisation, and contradictory cultural identities requires a culturally aware psychoanalytic and sociological approach (Krause & Davids, 2018). Socialisation is not simply an individual process but a deeply embedded historical and structural phenomenon, shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces (Elias, 2010). Recognising these complexities allows for a more nuanced understanding of identity, social positioning, and the power dynamics that shape human interactions (Lowe, 2007).

Both Elias (2010) and Bourdieu (1977) provide valuable perspectives on socialisation, illustrating how individuals internalise social norms through language, power structures, and historical processes. The *habitus* is embodied through socialisation, and children internalise parental and social authority, shaping their sense of self and their relations (Bourdieu, 1990). Both perspectives highlight the importance of the role language has in structuring identity and behaviour. Elias (2010) argues that the internalised symbolic structures refine self-control and shape social behaviour, allowing individuals to function within a specific civilisation by transforming their raw impulses into culturally acceptable expressions. Similarly, Bourdieu (1977) describes how individuals unconsciously internalise social structures, the *habitus*, which by being internalised regulates actions and perceptions. Steinmetz (2014) notes: ‘Many of Bourdieu’s formulations during the 1980s and 1990s could be drawn directly from Freud or Lacan.’ (p. 204)

For Bourdieu (1990), language is a form of cultural capital, determining who speaks with authority in different *social fields*. Both he and Elias (2010) acknowledge how language and symbols regulate individual behaviour and subjectivity, emphasising the unconscious social structures that shape identities within specific contexts. Bourdieu’s (1990) *linguistic habitus*, where language functions as cultural capital, determines social authority and legitimacy.

Similarly, in Lacan’s (1958) idea of *the law of the father*, where the paternal function introduces

the child into the *Symbolic Order*, subjectivity is shaped by language and law, influencing how individuals understand themselves and their desires. Lacan's (1958) *law of the father* and Bourdieu's (1977) *symbolic power* explain how authority is legitimised and internalised: institutions act as figures of authority that enforce the dominant discourses that structure behaviour and *symbolic capital*, legitimising authority and power relations in social fields.

For Lacan (1958), this operates at the level of individual subjectivity. Entry to the *Symbolic Order* is marked by a fundamental loss, giving up access to desire to conform to social norms. However, when unconscious desires conflict with social expectations, individuals may experience a sense of alienation, a process that parallels Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *hysteresis*, where an individual's internalised dispositions no longer align with a changing social field. Therefore, the *habitus* can be thought about as an

ideological effect that is threatened by the Real and the Symbolic. The Imaginary is forever over-coded by the Symbolic, which pushes against integration and toward fragmentation and difference. (Steinmetz, 2014, p. 216)

Despite the differences between Bourdieu and Lacan, Steinmetz (2014) suggests:

Lacan provides a crucial missing link, a picture of a mechanism that can help to elaborate the concept of *habitus*. Just as the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic Order makes sense of the subjective dynamics underpinning Bourdieuan symbolic capital, so the Lacanian concept of the Imaginary illuminates the subject's ability to integrate disparate experiences and identifications such that identity and practice are not always disjointed. A cluster of linked Lacanian concepts, the mirror stage, the bodily ego and ideal ego, and imaginary identification, suggests a possible solution to this problem. (p. 209)

Relational psychoanalytic theories broadly align with this view, arguing that social interactions shape subjectivity as well (Skolnick & Warshaw, 2013). Language is fundamental to both individual identity and broader socialisation, shaping personal experiences and external structures (Harris, 2013). It plays a crucial role in emotional expression and regulation, transforming raw emotional states into structured communication (Bion, 1962). Dolto (1995) emphasises that children internalise emotional meaning before they can fully articulate words (Hall, 2009). Additionally, Spielrein (1912) suggests that early speech functions as both emotional regulation and action. A child calling for their caregiver when scared is not merely asking for attention but is also managing their distress through speech.

Winnicott's (1971) *transitional phenomena* also illustrate how language bridges internal emotional states and external reality. In the nursery, daily interactions help children transition from impulsive emotional reactions to socially accepted verbal expressions, reinforcing emotional regulation. *The emotional habitus* of the nursery is structured by caregivers, cultural expectations, and social institutions, shaping how emotions are experienced, expressed, and regulated over time. Children gradually internalise social norms, adapting their emotional expressions based on cultural expectations and social structures. Elias's (2012) *On the Process of Civilisation* explains how children's emotional expressions are shaped by social expectations. Civilisation, or socialisation, is a process of *emotional containment* where social structures teach individuals to regulate their *affects* through symbolic means. In nurseries, children learn that certain behaviours, such as calmness and sharing, are rewarded, while aggression and tantrums are discouraged. Over time, they internalise these norms, adapting their emotional responses accordingly. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of *habitus* suggests that socialisation ingrains emotional dispositions and reactions into children unconsciously as social structures become embodied. A child from a family that

openly discusses emotions may express feelings more freely, while a child from a more reserved environment may learn to suppress emotions. These patterns are reinforced through nursery interactions, shaping long-term emotional habits.

However, these two perspectives don't allow us to fully understand the development of individual subjectivity and unconscious processes unique to the child's inner world. As *emotional containers*, caregivers help children process overwhelming feelings and develop a stable sense of self (Ogden, 2004). Later, the child internalises this function and develops the capacity to regulate their emotions. Winnicott's (1952) concept of the *holding environment* explains how caregivers create a secure emotional space where children feel safe enough to express emotions. A nursery teacher who comforts a distressed child after separation from their parent provides this emotional holding, allowing the child to gradually adapt to new experiences.

Similarly, Bion's (1962) *container-contained* theory suggests that caregivers process and translate children's raw emotions, returning them in a more manageable form. If a child throws a tantrum, a responsive caregiver might verbalise the child's distress, helping the child understand and regulate their emotions. Dolto (1955) emphasises that even before children develop full speech, they absorb emotional meanings through caregivers' tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures. Lacan's (1966) *mirror stage* also highlights that children's self-awareness develops through the gaze of the *Other*, so that caregivers help shape a child's emotional identity by providing feedback and validation. Through consistent and responsive care, caregivers foster children's emotional security and adaptation in a social environment.

Another important area where children explore their emotions is play, testing social roles and developing self-awareness. Winnicott's (1971) concept of a *transitional space* describes play as

an area where children experiment with emotions and realities, bridging the gap between fantasy and social structures. Children can use play to construct idealised versions of themselves. When children role-play, they are shaping their emotional confidence and identity (Benjamin, 2013). In the nursery, play serves as a psychological tool for managing emotions, practising social roles, and developing a sense of self within a social environment. Play also plays a role in reinforcing social hierarchies and reproduces cultural capital; certain types of play become more favoured than others as social norms evolve.

This theoretical framework places caregivers, language, play, and social norms at the centre of children's emotional experiences in nursery settings. Caregivers act as emotional containers, providing the security needed for children to regulate emotions and build stable attachments (Bion, 1962; Winnicott, 1960). Language functions as both a symbolic structure and an emotional tool, allowing children to express, negotiate, and regulate their feelings (Spielrein, 1912; Dolto, 1995; Lacan, 1977). Play serves as a *transitional space* where children explore emotions, experiment with social roles, and process unconscious conflicts (Winnicott, 1971; Benjamin, 2013). Finally, the internalisation of social norms through socialisation ensures that children learn culturally appropriate emotional expressions and self-regulation strategies, reinforcing collective behavioural patterns (Elias, 2011, 2012, 1991; Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 1986).

By explicitly stating how and why these theories are chosen and applied, the framework ensures the reader understands the analytical intent behind combining psychoanalytic and sociological perspectives. Integrating these perspectives, this framework provides a holistic model for understanding how children navigate their emotional and social worlds in the nursery. It highlights the interplay between psychological development and social structures, illustrating how early experiences shape emotional expression, identity formation, and social competence.

Through this framework, my thesis aims to offer a deeper understanding of how early relational and symbolic processes influence children's ability to engage with and adapt to their social environments. Nurseries act as institutions that facilitate the socialisation of attending children, a process crucial to their development. Socialisation is an ongoing negotiation between unconscious structures, individual subjectivity, and broader social forces, highlighting the interplay between privilege, marginalisation, and cultural identity. Recognising these dynamics through a culturally aware psychoanalytic and sociological lens provides a more nuanced understanding of identity formation and the historical, political, and structural forces that shape human interactions.

Chapter 4: Methodology and Research Design

Introduction

This study adopts a transdisciplinary approach, integrating psychoanalytic and sociological methods to examine language, emotion, and relational dynamics in early childhood. This study specifically investigates how young children in nursery settings develop emotional, relational, and linguistic capacities, and how these processes are shaped by both unconscious dynamics and social structures. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, these psychosocial methodologies emphasise the unconscious dimensions of early interactions, the intersubjective nature of relationships, and the broader social structures that shape children's experiences in nurseries. Although different established psychosocial methods exist and have evolved as the field has grown, this study focuses on specific aspects of the merger between psychoanalytic and sociological approaches that require a carefully chosen combination of methods, as discussed below. The potential of psychosocial studies, as Frosh (2003) argues, lies in their capacity to address the complexities of lived experience that cannot be fully understood through psychological or sociological methods

alone. By combining both disciplines, psychosocial studies offer a richer, more nuanced perspective on human development, identity, and social dynamics, making it a particularly valuable approach for exploring areas such as emotional development, socialisation, and institutional practices like those in nurseries.

Frosh (2003) also discusses psychosocial methodologies, the principles of the discipline, and some of the specific contexts in which the field has evolved within the United Kingdom. He describes the various ways in which the psychosocial lens can be applied, emphasising its dynamic and flexible nature. Because it draws from both psychological and sociological perspectives, it allows for an exploration of their intersections, opening up diverse avenues for research and analysis. This approach to studying human experience is not confined to fixed methodologies or frameworks but embraces the complexity and fluidity of human life, shaped by both conscious and unconscious forces. He outlines the psychosocial methods that allow us to explore how institutional and social processes constitute subjectivities relationally:

Psychosocial studies have ingrained in them an effort to recover or construct meanings; that is, they work in a terrain mined by phenomenology as well as by critical theory and psychoanalysis, in which interpretive work is given priority. (...) This includes advocacy of a constructionist rather than representational paradigm for understanding language; that is, because experience is constantly produced in language, research becomes concerned with gathering and analysing discursive forms, talk and text. (Frosh, 2003, p.16)

By synthesising psychoanalytic and sociological methodologies, this study offers a comprehensive framework for understanding how children navigate their emotional and social worlds within the nursery. It explores the dynamic relationship between psychological

development and social structures, emphasising the role of early relational and symbolic processes in shaping identity formation, emotional expression, and social competence. Nurseries serve as key sites of socialisation where children's experiences are deeply influenced by unconscious dynamics, emotional labour, and institutional expectations. This approach enables a nuanced exploration of how power dynamics, institutional structures, and processes of emotional regulation shape children's emotional development and social interactions, and how the influence of authority figures and emotional norms inform their experiences.

4.1 Ontology and Epistemology

‘Ontology is the study of being’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). In psychoanalysis, ontology focuses on unconscious mental processes. These are understood as complex internal structures inferred from observable phenomena, most notably in child analysis through play. Psychoanalytic observation requires the observer to maintain sustained attention to the child’s emotional and relational states without direct intervention or interaction (Rustin, 2006). Although the observer’s presence may influence the observed situation, this influence itself is a topic for reflection within supervisory processes. In line with psychoanalytic methodology, this includes attention to *transference* and *countertransference*. *Transference* refers to the unconscious redirection of feelings, desires, and expectations originally experienced in early significant relationships (Freud, 1912) onto the researcher, while *countertransference* refers to the researcher’s own unconscious emotional responses to the participant (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019). In this study, such dynamics are not treated as interference but as data to be reflected upon, explored further in section 4.2.

My own orientation toward child observation draws on Rustin's (2006) conceptualisation, which builds on ideas of *emotional containment*. 'Emotional containment' refers to the capacity of a caregiver to receive, hold, and transform the infant's raw emotional states, enabling the child to process internal experiences (Bion, 1989). Observational work involves asking whether particular interactions enable or hinder development, and how *emotional containment* influences psychic experience.

Following Bion (1989), the carer acts as a container for the infant's raw, unprocessed emotional states. Through *projective identification*, the carer receives and transforms the infant's emotional expressions, enabling the child to make sense of their internal world (Ogden, 1986). This *containment* function supports the gradual development of an integrated self. However, caution is necessary to avoid overly prescriptive or moralistic judgments of what is 'good' or 'bad' for the child, requiring ongoing reflexive supervision (Rustin, 2006).

Ontologically, this research includes not only the child's psyche but also social structures and institutional forces that shape the process of becoming a social subject. Interviews with nursery staff and caregivers reveal conscious and unconscious influences that mediate how children are emotionally held, regulated, and socialised within the nursery setting.

4.2 Psychosocial Methodology

This research is grounded in a *psychosocial* mode of inquiry that interrogates the intersections of psychological life, social structures, and personal transformation. Psychosocial research moves beyond binary distinctions such as individual versus society or psyche versus structure, exploring how these domains are co-constituted. As Frosh (2003) argues, rethinking subjectivity within

social contexts requires disrupting the conventional separation between objective and subjective realms.

Drawing from phenomenology, critical theory, and psychoanalysis, psychosocial methodologies offer a transdisciplinary approach to understanding the formation of subjectivities within social, institutional, and affective environments. Although psychoanalysis holds a privileged but not exclusive position within the psychosocial field due to its extensive conceptual vocabulary for unconscious processes and subjectivity formation (Frosh, 2019), the field remains methodologically plural and critically self-reflexive. It is attentive to tensions and fragmentations arising from bridging distinct epistemological traditions.

Rather than operating as an interdisciplinary negotiation between fields, psychosocial studies present a transdisciplinary ethos that unsettles the division between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’, between the psychic and the social (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 350). This ethos continually questions its own boundaries, working within a space that is neither solely psychological nor sociological but something emergent and relational. This space holds potential for critical thought, political engagement, and renewed theoretical practices.

Psychosocial approaches draw on diverse intellectual traditions, including literary studies, postcolonial theory, anthropology, and philosophy, to challenge psychology’s methodological orthodoxy. In this research, *relational psychoanalysis* is brought into dialogue with sociological theory, creating a framework to investigate the emotional and institutional life of nurseries.

Theories of *intersubjectivity*, *affect*, symbolic meaning-making, and social reproduction of norms are thus combined to understand how children’s experiences are shaped across psychological and cultural levels.

Understanding development within the nursery context requires attention to both sociological and psychoanalytic dimensions. Children are socialised through a dense network of relationships, norms, and institutional expectations, which are not neutral. The ways children are positioned within nurseries are shaped by broader cultural assumptions about class, race, gender, and family. As Kraus and Davids (2018) note, ‘any attempt to understand cultural differences must take account of the complex relationship between external social contexts and inner emotional and psychological dispositions’ (p. 114). Cultural identity and social inequality begin to take shape from the earliest moments of institutional life.

While nurseries do not encompass the full scope of children’s socialisation, they provide a microcosm of broader societal dynamics. These constructions influence policies and practices as well as the affective and symbolic positioning of children within institutions such as nurseries, schools, and families. Sirota (2010) argues that the very design of care structures often presumes a normative image of the child and family, reinforcing social hierarchies and exclusions. By employing a psychosocial methodology, this research explores the affective, symbolic, and structural dimensions of nursery life, attending to how meaning is produced relationally and how subjectivity is shaped within institutional contexts. This orientation allows analysis of power relations, emotional economies, and unconscious dynamics that structure children’s experiences and identities.

4.2.1 Nursery Observations

Building on the psychosocial approach outlined earlier, psychoanalytic observation offers a method to explore how unconscious processes and social structures become entwined in early childhood settings. This method is particularly suited to investigating what Elfer (2012) describes

in his work of *Emotion in nursery work*... as the 'interplay of the internal world of the individual, conscious and unconscious, and the culture of social organisation' (p.5). Within the nursery context, such observations help to uncover how staff may unconsciously defend against emotional strain by internalising institutional norms and practices (Hopkins, 2006).

Rustin (2006) conceptualises infant observation, traditionally involving sustained, longitudinal observation of an infant and caregiver, as a valuable model for understanding the dynamics of young children within group care. The ontology underpinning infant observation centres on the 'states of mind and feeling which permeate and shape the relationships of babies and their caregivers, and which also give rise to experiences “in feeling” in observers and others within the infant’s environment' (Rustin, 2006, p. 6). Observation in this sense becomes a way to attend to the development of the 'psyche, emotions and mind in the relational matrix' (Rustin, 2006, p. 8), offering insight into how these processes emerge over time.

Nonetheless, psychoanalytic observation as a research method is not without critique. Fonagy and Luyten (2009) caution that it can risk reaffirming existing theoretical assumptions rather than producing new empirical knowledge. Similarly, Groarke (2008) points out that, unlike in clinical psychoanalysis, observational research may lack the same depth of transference and countertransference dynamics, which are crucial to the generation of psychoanalytic insight. Rustin (2006) challenges this view, arguing that such dynamics can and do occur within observation, provided that researchers remain reflexively engaged through supervision and critical discussion.

A broader critique concerns the reliance on inference to theorise unconscious processes that cannot be directly seen. Hinshelwood & Stamenova (2019) argue that this limitation is not unique

to psychoanalysis, noting that many scientific fields develop theories around unobservable entities, such as electrons or atoms. They propose the concept of the *associative unconscious*, defined as 'a matrix of relations in a social group, where certain ways of perceiving reality are impressed on individuals without proper conscious awareness' (p. 2). This unconscious is viewed as arising from the shared verbal and symbolic representations that underpin culture and civilisation, and it becomes accessible through discourse analysis that can reveal the 'unthought level of "knowing" that informs our perceptions, thought, and behaviour' (p. 3). This aligns with Lacanian psychoanalysis, which views language as a structuring principle shaping desire and unconscious life (Salomonsson, 2017). Language is not simply a vehicle for communication but a layered symbolic system in which conscious and unconscious meanings are encoded.

Within this framework, children come to internalise symbolic codes and social norms as part of what Elias (2012) describes as *the civilising process*. This process is neither neutral nor uniform; it is shaped by cultural context and the unequal distribution of power and privilege (Leavy, 2017). A culturally informed psychoanalytic perspective allows us to explore how marginalisation and dominant ideologies become embedded in language, influencing both relationships and the internal world of the child. As Kraus and Davids (2018) note, culture operates simultaneously on individual and collective levels, shaping conscious and unconscious processes alike. This triadic interaction forms what they call the *third position*, a conceptual space where the self, the other, and culture intersect and reshape subjectivity.

Through nursery observations grounded in this psychosocial perspective, it becomes possible to explore not only how children develop emotionally and relationally but also how broader cultural narratives and institutional structures become internalised, often unconsciously, in everyday practice.

4.2.2 Interviews

Building on the observational approach, this section discusses the role of interviews as relational spaces within psychosocial research. In this study, interviews served as spaces where meaning was co-constructed through dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. Long (2018) initially describes interviews as structured by asymmetry, with the interviewer controlling the frame. However, she reconceptualises the socioanalytic interview as a reflective, interpretive encounter that goes beyond collecting facts. This method seeks to explore unconscious group dynamics by inviting free association and emotional reflection, while the interviewer remains attuned to their own responses and reactions as meaningful data.

Unlike traditional structured interviews that prioritise factual accuracy, socioanalytic interviews are rooted in the co-production of meaning (Long, 2018). The interviewer engages deeply with the participant's narrative, attending to emotional tone, symbolic language and unconscious defences (Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019). The researcher's own subjectivity in this model is treated as an instrument of knowledge, rather than as bias to be eliminated (Frosh, 2003).

Participants speak from personal experience, yet they also represent the broader organisational and cultural systems in which they are embedded. Their narratives reflect shared tensions, defences and affects within these systems (Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019)

This research conducted interviews with parents and nursery staff to explore different perspectives on the emotional and relational culture of the nursery. Long (2018) discusses that 'the interview must (i) discover the uniqueness of that part of the organisation represented in the interviewee, and (ii) discover the ways in which that part is interrelated to other parts' (p. 45).

This aligns with the idea that individuals unconsciously disclose aspects of their social and

institutional environments, often without being aware of it. Long (2018) draws on Winnicott's (1961) idea that the identity of the baby cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation, but only concerning caregivers, such as the mother and father, highlighting that meaning and subjectivity emerge through relational contexts. Similarly, in organisations, roles and identities only fully emerge in relation to one another (Long, 2018). Elias (2011) and Bourdieu (1990) further conceptualise these interdependencies as *figurations*: shifting networks of relational positionings shaped by institutional structures and emotional economies.

Long (2018) also emphasises that interviews must uncover both the distinctiveness of the participant's role and its embeddedness within the wider system. Individuals within organisations are shaped by a relational matrix that unfolds across overlapping systems: the task system, the social system, the political structure, and the technical-procedural dimensions. Importantly, emotional systems cut across these, assigning implicit affective roles such as 'the nurturer', 'the rebel' or 'the avoidant', which may be unconsciously reproduced across interviews (Long, 2018, p. 46). This approach prioritises *intersubjectivity* and affective nuance. As Frosh and Baraitser (2008) suggest, psychosocial approaches allow for 'a principled focus on how knowledge emerges from interactional systems, and how the accounts participants produce of their experiences require careful analytic exploration and nuanced interpretation' (p. 18). Narratives are thus seen not as transparent truths but as emotionally charged, symbolically saturated accounts reflecting underlying psychic and institutional processes (Midgley & Holmes, 2018).

Psychoanalytic listening involves attending not only to what is said, but also to silences, hesitations, deflections and contradictions. Countertransference, the researcher's own affective responses, can serve as data when reflected upon reflexively (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019). These responses, such as feelings of boredom, frustration,

curiosity or tenderness, may echo the institutional atmosphere or the relational role the participant occupies. They can also illuminate how organisational dynamics are internalised and reproduced. As Bourdieu (1990) and Elias (2010) suggest, such dynamics are embedded within *habitus* and emerge as embodied patterns of interaction. The researcher must maintain a balance between emotional involvement and analytic clarity, using reflexivity to navigate personal countertransference and avoid over-interpretation (Frosh, 2003).

Within this balance, Long (2018) suggests that 'genuine curiosity leads to learning and supports the interviewee's own curiosity' (p. 48). Moreover, 'emotional responsiveness does not merely capture participant projections; rather, it is an intersubjective consideration, where the emotions expressed by the participant interact with those brought forth in the interviewer' (Midgley & Holmes, 2018, p. 58). The interviewer attends not only to verbal content but also to bodily affect, imagery and narrative inconsistency. These can signal unconscious conflict or repression. A central concept here is *scenic understanding* (Lorenzer, 1986), which refers to the emotionally and symbolically rich context in which meaning emerges. Scenic phenomena often involve metaphor, imagery or somatic cues that express unspoken tensions within organisational life. This resonates with Bion's (1962) 'Theory of Thinking', which sees the psyche as a container for unprocessed emotional states shaped through relational interaction. Arnaud (2012) extends this to institutional analysis, exploring how shared fantasies and unspoken rules shape the affective atmosphere of organisations.

The interview can also be viewed as a *potential space* (Winnicott, 1971; Long, 2018): a jointly created relational setting where unconscious dynamics can become thinkable. In this space, deeper emotional narratives may surface and be reflected upon. Such insights are especially valuable in settings like nurseries, where emotional labour, regulation and institutional defence

are highly operative. Socioanalytic interviews therefore offer a rich means of accessing unconscious dimensions of institutional life. They help trace how subjectivity, emotion and power intersect within relational systems, providing insight into the symbolic architecture of care.

4.2.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity, understood as the researcher's critical self-awareness, is a core methodological approach in psychosocial studies (Frosh, 2003, 2019; Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). It involves recognising that the researcher's positionality and subjectivity inevitably shape knowledge production. Psychoanalysis offers a useful framework here, through concepts such as transference, countertransference and unconscious dynamics (Ogden, 1997). Researchers, like analysts, become emotionally and symbolically entangled with their participants, which requires sustained reflexive attention.

As Frosh (2003) argues, reflexivity is often intimately tied to the researcher's own personal and intellectual investments:

Not only does our work matter to us in terms of what it might achieve instrumentally (advancement, renown, perhaps more abstractly "knowledge"), but it is also commonly reflexive work. If, for example, I write about masculinity I am writing about myself. (p. 26)

These investments mean that arguments can be shaped as much by affective and ideological context as by empirical evidence. Frosh also warns that academic spaces sometimes discourage reflexivity, mistaking defensiveness for rigour and limiting spaces for vulnerability or complexity.

Reflexivity in psychosocial research draws attention to the intersection of subjective and social dimensions of knowledge. Rather than treating knowledge as fixed and objective, it becomes understood as co-constructed and contingent upon the researcher's positioning (Frosh, 2003, 2019). This aligns with the broader psychosocial emphasis on meaning as relational and historically situated. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) observe that such reflexivity requires attending to the emotional, symbolic and unconscious elements that accompany research encounters, recognising that knowledge emerges not only from what is consciously said but also from what is silenced or defended against.

Reflexivity is also closely tied to research ethics, by foregrounding power dynamics between researcher and participant (Frosh, 2019). By acknowledging subjectivity, the researcher can remain attuned to the risks of imposing reductive framings and instead keep participants' agency in view. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) describe how this process requires examining the intersection between personal biography and discourse, helping the researcher to deepen their understanding of social formations and to preserve a focus on human agency, both conscious and unconscious.

In this research, reflexivity was strengthened through several strategies. These included keeping a reflective diary to document field notes and emotional responses, regular supervision, and discussions with peers, which provided alternative perspectives on emerging interpretations (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). These practices supported what Guba and Lincoln (1989) term progressive subjectivity, recognising that interpretations shift over the research process as the researcher learns and changes.

Nonetheless, reflexivity has limitations. Frosh (2003) cautions against over-identification, where the researcher's self-narrative risks overshadowing the voices of participants. Another challenge

is that unconscious dynamics, by definition, cannot be fully known or controlled. Interpretations of transference and countertransference remain necessarily speculative and partial. Despite these challenges, reflexivity remains central to psychosocial research, as it keeps analysis open to emotional complexity and to the often-hidden workings of power and culture.

Ultimately, reflexivity was not treated as an optional stage but as a sustained, critical stance woven throughout research design, data collection, and analysis. This orientation allowed the research to remain sensitive to the interplay between personal, institutional and cultural dynamics, and to keep asking how knowledge itself is shaped in relation to these contexts.

4.3 Research Design

This section outlines the research design employed for data collection and analysis, alongside the ethical considerations and principles of trustworthiness underpinning this research. It discusses the research setting, participants, and issues of reliability and validity. The initial phase of the study was longitudinal, involving sustained observations of children and staff within the nursery over a period, until a sufficient number of observations per child was reached. The aim was to explore how participants interact, the emotional quality of their relationships, and the institutional dynamics at play, using a psychoanalytic and socioanalytic observational lens. This approach recognises that organisational life is shaped not only by explicit routines but also by unconscious emotional and relational structures.

The interview phase was cross-sectional, involving single-point interviews with parents and staff. Data collection was guided by a socioanalytic framework, combining psychoanalytic observation with theme-centred interviews to examine both conscious and unconscious organisational processes. Observation was used to explore children's interactions and emotional expression

within the nursery environment. Nursery observations allow for understanding the emotional life and growth that ‘underpins all other levels of development, intellectual, social, moral. levels that are also present and available for our attention as long as we can bear to give it’ (Miller, 2016, p.182).

Interviews with staff and parents complemented observational data. These followed a semi-structured format, allowing themes to emerge while also attending to unconscious processes and institutional narratives. Reflexivity was central throughout the research process, ensuring that the researcher remained critically aware of emotional responses, including countertransference, which refers to the unconscious emotional reactions and projections the researcher experiences in response to participants, as well as potential bias (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). The research setting was treated as a *potential space* (Winnicott, 1971; Long, 2018), understood as a psychological space between individuals where creativity, play, and emotional exploration can unfold. This space is co-constructed through the relational dynamics of researcher and participants, allowing unconscious themes to emerge without being overly shaped by the researcher’s projections.

My research followed Elfer’s (2012) guidance in *Psychoanalytic Observation Methods...* on psychoanalytic observation in nursery settings. Four children, aged three to four, were observed over the course of one term. Participants were selected through volunteer sampling, ensuring that ethical considerations such as informed consent and emotional safety were prioritised. Parental consent was obtained first, followed by developmentally appropriate assent from the children. The children’s consent was supported by clearly explaining at the start of each observation that the researcher was present solely to observe and understand the nursery environment. Children were invited to ask questions and explicitly asked whether it was okay for the researcher to be present. This approach allowed children to participate voluntarily and reinforced that their comfort and

willingness were respected throughout the observation sessions (Elfer, 2012). Ongoing assent was maintained by continuously monitoring children's verbal and non-verbal cues during observations. If a child displayed hesitation, disengagement, distress, or expressed a wish to stop, the researcher immediately paused or discontinued the observation for that child.

Staff participation was determined in collaboration with nursery leadership, ensuring institutional alignment and transparency.

4.3.1 Data Collection

Melhuish's (2004) overview of early childhood education emphasises that the quality and characteristics of care settings matter significantly, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. His research highlights that childcare is not a unitary experience and that socially mixed groups are especially beneficial in enhancing social skills and motivation. For this reason, a nursery reflecting these criteria was identified and invited to participate in this study.

Following ethical approval from the University of Essex's Board of Ethics, the researcher contacted several nurseries in London with demographically diverse populations. Once a nursery expressed interest, a letter of invitation (Appendix 2), a recruitment poster (Appendix 3) and participant information sheet (Appendix 4) were sent to the nursery manager, who then shared these materials with parents whose children met the research criteria. Parents who expressed interest were invited to discuss the project further with nursery management. After confirming their understanding, they signed both the participant information sheet and consent form (Appendix 5). Following parental consent, the lead teacher and the researcher approached the children individually. The researcher introduced themselves and explained their role using

developmentally appropriate language. Once understanding was confirmed, verbal assent was requested from each child, accompanied by a thumbs-up gesture as non-verbal confirmation.

Observations were conducted over the Spring and Summer terms of 2023, twice weekly, following a schedule coordinated with nursery staff to minimise disruption. Each child was observed six times on different weekdays, allowing variation in mood and relational dynamics. Each observation lasted sixty minutes and occurred at a consistent time assigned by the nursery manager. In line with psychoanalytic principles, reflective sessions with the researcher's analyst were held throughout the fieldwork period. These sessions focused on exploring emerging countertransference reactions and provided *containment* for the emotional demands of observation (Rustin, 2006). Additionally, regular supervisory meetings supported the interpretive process and offered further insight into unfolding dynamics.

After the observation phase, individual semi-structured interviews (Appendix 6) were conducted with selected nursery staff. These explored how staff made sense of children's development and the broader institutional life of the nursery. Participants were chosen in consultation with management, who recommended staff most directly involved with the observed children. Prior to each interview, the researcher reviewed the project with participants and obtained signed consent forms. Semi-structured interviews (Appendix 7) were also conducted with primary caregivers of the observed children. These offered important perspectives on how nursery life extended into the home and how caregivers perceived their child's development and institutional experience. The interview format followed a thematic guide developed by the researcher, allowing space for open-ended reflection.

Together, the interviews and observations contributed to a deeper understanding of the nursery's *habitus*, a concept developed by Bourdieu (1990) to describe the ingrained habits, dispositions, and cultural norms that shape individuals' perceptions and behaviours within a social setting.

While informal conversations with staff and parents were not systematically recorded, they were included in the researcher's reflective diary and contributed to broader reflexive engagement with the research site. Particular attention was given to moments when language, gesture, or emotional resonance lingered beyond the encounter, what seemed to 'stick.' These moments often revealed idealised fantasies about the 'good' or 'normal' child, anxieties around professional roles and institutional expectations, or unspoken relational tensions between staff and parents or among staff themselves.

Thematic and psychoanalytic analysis of interviews aimed to trace these affective resonances, interpreting them as part of a wider associative unconscious. The concept of the *associative unconscious* suggests that individuals are embedded in a network of relationships where certain perceptions of reality are subtly shaped and internalised without their explicit awareness. This unconscious is understood as a shared, relational dimension of the mind, in which feelings, assumptions, and meanings circulate across individuals and social groups without direct recognition.

This associative unconscious is sometimes seen as a product of the verbal representation humans have used to create civilisation. In the form of discourse analysis, it is possible to discern the way language instils assumptions into the individual mind without awareness. There is an unthought level of 'knowing' that informs our perceptions, thought, and behaviour. It is literally embedded in the syntax. (Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019, p. 2)

This view aligns with Lacanian theory, which understands the unconscious as structured like a language. Over time, habitual use of language embeds unconscious assumptions that shape perception and reproduce social hierarchies. These linguistic and symbolic patterns become part of the individual's *habitus*, reflecting the interplay between unconscious processes and cultural norms, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Recurring patterns across participants helped illuminate how particular values, anxieties, and defences became embedded in the symbolic and affective life of the nursery.

4.3.2 Data Analysis

Demographic data were collected and anonymised, with an emphasis on collective themes rather than individual accounts. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The first phase involved familiarisation with the data through transcription and repeated readings, enabling the researcher to immerse fully and generate initial notes. The second phase involved systematic hand-coding, identifying meaningful data segments, making analytical notes on key moments, and clustering relevant vignettes. These codes were then grouped in the third phase to form broader patterns, constructing a thematic map visualising recurrent themes and their significance across the dataset. During the fourth phase, themes were reviewed and refined by cross-checking coded extracts against the whole dataset, supported by supervisory panel feedback to enhance reflexivity and ensure analytical thoroughness. The fifth phase consisted of clearly defining and naming themes to encapsulate their essence and align with research aims. Finally, in the sixth phase, themes were exemplified with vivid extracts integrated into the finding's chapters, accompanied by secondary psychoanalytic and critical theoretical analysis focusing on intersubjective and affective processes such as silences, omissions, and unconscious dynamics.

To enhance reflexivity, emerging themes were presented in supervision and reviewed by a panel, whose feedback guided theme restructuring and analysis refinement. During theme-centred interviews, attention was paid to affective resonance and researcher countertransference (Hollway & Froggett, 2012). Emotional responses informed the construction of scenic compositions that preserved tone and relational dynamics (Midgley & Holmes, 2018). Interviews were recorded (with consent) and transcribed; post-interview reflections documented lingering or emotionally charged aspects (Long, 2018). These reflections contributed to understanding the associative unconscious of the organisational system. Thematic analysis identified recurring symbols, metaphors, and resistances, adopting Long's (2018) *jigsaw puzzle* metaphor to treat interviews as pieces revealing unconscious group dynamics.

In the final stage, themes were defined and exemplified using vivid extracts from the data. These were integrated into the finding's chapters (see Chapters 5–8) to support the interpretive process. After finalising the thematic framework, data underwent a secondary analysis informed by psychoanalytic and critical theories. This psychoanalytic lens highlighted intersubjective and affective processes, drawing attention to meaningful omissions, silences, and fragmented speech (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009), with gaps and disjointed syntax marking unconscious meaning.

Reflexivity was maintained throughout to avoid over-identification with participants or imposition of preconceived models (Frosh, 2019). Interpretive assumptions, emotional reactions, and positionality were continually interrogated. Contradictions and inconsistencies in narratives were explored rather than smoothed over, acknowledging that knowledge emerges from co-constructed intersubjective encounters (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). A reflective research diary captured field notes, affective responses, and emergent insights (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

Synthesising these materials facilitated systemic insights into the organisational unconscious,

revealing institutional anxieties, relational configurations, and social defences. Findings were presented to retain emotional complexity while making unconscious dynamics accessible for reflection and interpretation.

4.3.3 Trustworthiness of Findings

Multiple procedures were implemented following Shenton's (2004) criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was supported through triangulation across methods, including observation, interviews, and reflexive commentary, as well as through sustained engagement in the research setting. The validity of the methodological approach is reinforced by prior research (Elfer, 2012b; Frosh, 2003, 2019, 2018; Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Miller, 2011; Rustin, 2006; Rogers, 2011; Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019). The researcher's familiarity with the nursery setting, combined with regular supervision and reflexive engagement, contributed to a deeper understanding of emotional, symbolic, and institutional dynamics under study. Supervision and panel discussions supported interpretation and raised issues of transference and countertransference that may have influenced data collection and analysis. The researcher maintained a reflective commentary to monitor what Guba and Lincoln (1989) describe as progressive subjectivity, the evolving interpretation of data and the shifting positioning of the researcher throughout the research.

Dependability was addressed through a detailed and transparent account of the study's design, implementation, and analytic process. This documentation provides a clear audit trail, enabling future researchers to trace methodological decisions and assess their coherence. Confirmability was supported by the researcher's explicit acknowledgement of assumptions, positionality, and

the limitations of the chosen methodology. Reflexive practices, such as maintaining field notes, supervision records, and analytic memos, further ensured findings were grounded in data rather than shaped by personal bias. While ‘objectivity’ is neither possible nor desirable in psychosocial research, these procedures ensure findings remain analytically rigorous and reflexively grounded, offering insight into institutional, emotional, and symbolic structures shaping children’s experiences in the nursery.

4.3.4 Ethics

This study required ethical approval. An application was submitted to the University of Essex’s Ethics Committee and authorisation was granted (see Appendix 1). All data collection, storage, and consent procedures were conducted according to university ethical guidelines.

Due to the sensitive nature of research involving children, explicit informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parents or guardians and nursery staff. Children were also given age-appropriate explanations of the project, and their assent was sought verbally and through non-verbal gestures. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point. Consent forms stated participants could request withdrawal of their data up to four weeks after data collection.

Following data collection, interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Data were anonymised to protect participant identities and securely stored according to university guidelines. All data will be securely destroyed at the study’s end. Confidentiality was guaranteed except in cases where safeguarding concerns were identified. As communicated to participants, confidentiality could be breached if there was indication of harm to the participant or others, in line with safeguarding protocols. While this study posed minimal risk, involving children and

emotionally sensitive material required careful ethical consideration. The welfare of children and participants was prioritised throughout. Should any situation arise suggesting harm or intervention, the researcher was prepared to consult their academic supervisor and refer the matter to the appropriate safeguarding authority. These safeguards ensured ethical integrity was maintained throughout the research process.

Conclusions: Establishing a Psychosocial Methodological Framework

This chapter has outlined the methodological framework underpinning this research, firmly rooted in a psychosocial approach that integrates psychological and social dimensions to investigate the relational and emotional life within nursery settings. By embracing a transdisciplinary ethos, the study moves beyond traditional binaries, enabling a nuanced examination of how subjectivities, institutional structures, and unconscious dynamics intersect to shape children's experiences.

The research design combined longitudinal psychoanalytic and socioanalytic observations with cross-sectional semi-structured interviews of nursery staff and parents, generating a rich and multifaceted data set. Reflexivity and critical self-awareness were central throughout, ensuring that the researcher's positionality and emotional responses informed, rather than biased, the analysis. Through detailed thematic and psychoanalytic interpretation, the study sought to illuminate the symbolic and affective processes underlying nursery interactions, capturing both conscious narratives and the associative unconscious of institutional life.

Given the sensitive nature of research involving young children, ethical considerations were rigorously addressed, prioritising informed consent, assent, confidentiality, and participant welfare. Trustworthiness was enhanced by methodological triangulation, sustained engagement, supervisory support, and transparent documentation of the research process.

Together, these methodological decisions and ethical commitments provide a robust foundation for the chapters that follow, enabling an in-depth exploration of the emotional, symbolic, and structural dimensions that shape nursery life and child development.

Chapter 5: Echoes Within: A Reflexive Entry into the Nursery's Emotional Landscape

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study, developed through a psychoanalytic and reflexive exploration of the nursery setting. These insights emerged from sustained observations and in-depth interviews with staff and caregivers. The analysis focuses on the intersubjective spaces co-created between the children, their parents, the nursery staff and myself. It attends to both spoken narratives and unconscious emotional currents. The research took place in a nursery in the Southeast of England, part of a public Children's Centre. The nursery is spacious and accommodates children with and without special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). It is divided into two age groups: from birth to two years, and from two to five years. During the early phase of observations, the outdoor garden was being refurbished and a new playground installed, which became a shared space for children during designated times. These structural features formed part of the sensory and spatial fabric of the setting, shaping how children moved, played, and interacted.

Throughout the research process, I encountered emotional intensities, institutional resistances, and moments of profound contact. These experiences informed the themes developed in the following chapters. Reflexivity was central to my interpretive approach. I maintained a research diary to record emotional reactions, bodily sensations, and internal dialogues. This practice enabled me to trace moments when I felt moved, frustrated, stirred, or unsettled by the setting and its people. At

times, I found myself drawn into the emotional life of a child, sensing vulnerability or resilience that resonated with my own history. These experiences were explored in depth with my analyst, assisting me in discerning what belonged to me and what may have been activated by the field.

Conversely, I also experienced feelings of absence or disconnection, especially in staff interactions that seemed emotionally defended. These responses reflected an *institutional habitus* of professional detachment that may have limited the emotional availability of staff. This theme is explored further in Chapter 7. Such moments of misattunement were more than personal reactions; they constituted critical data, revealing how unconscious organisational patterns and emotional economies take shape. I also experienced exhaustion and loneliness in the nursery space, which may have mirrored how some children felt when their emotional needs went unmet. These affective responses invited reflection on the roles, routines, and relational rhythms that sustain a defensive *institutional habitus*.

Over two terms, I conducted observations and interviewed the children's primary caregivers and selected staff. Each encounter became a form of *transitional space*. I draw on Winnicott's (1967) concept of symbolic and relational environments that hold emotional experience and allow for transformation. In this context, language functioned both as a conduit for connection and as a mode of defence. It opened pathways to emotional truth while also concealing tensions embedded in institutional discourse. At the heart of my interpretive method is Lorenzer's (1986) concept of *scenic understanding*, which argues that meaning is not solely conveyed through narrative but also emerges through emotionally saturated scenes. These scenes are marked by gesture, atmosphere, rhythm, or silence. Rather than treating data as isolated statements or behaviours, *scenic understanding* requires the researcher to attune to symbolic and embodied modes of communication that often carry unconscious significance. As Hollway and Froggett (2012) note,

scenic composition allows such moments to retain their emotional depth while becoming analytically legible.

I approached the nursery not only as a site of care and education but as a psychological and relational landscape. Here, meaning unfolds in scenes that are mundane, affectively charged, and sometimes unspeakable. The findings that follow present a textured account of relational life in the nursery, viewed through both the perspectives of others and the prism of my own embodied and emotional engagement. These narrative threads, fragile and resilient, speak to survival, power, language, and connection. They reflect the ongoing negotiation between internal and external realities and reveal the tension between the desire for understanding and the necessity of remaining open to what cannot be easily spoken or known.

5.1 Parental Entry Into the Habitus

The findings begin at the threshold of parental involvement, where institutional invitation meets personal hesitation. I explored how parents entered the nursery's emotional and symbolic field, not only through formal consent but through patterns of speech, silence, and withdrawal that revealed the deeper psychological and social coordinates of their engagement. The unfolding of the research was shaped not only by who was present but also by who chose not to speak. This section begins by tracing the affective and symbolic contours of parental engagement, where silences, refusals, and permissions became meaningful entry points into the nursery's relational and institutional life.

During the process of selection, participation was entirely voluntary. The children who took part were those who were spoken about the most by everyone in the nursery, even without prompting. Another girl who was originally going to participate was also in the centre of the discourse of the

nursery, but her mother withdrew as she did not want to be interviewed. She said she did not want to talk about personal things for research. This was echoed in two other cases: parents who initially were interested declined to participate once they realised the research involved interviews.

Significantly, they were still happy for their children to be observed, suggesting a distinction between the child as an observable object and the parent's subjectivity being brought into the frame. As the poster and participant information sheets had clearly stated that interviews were part of the study, I was left wondering why this realisation seemed to arise only at the point of signing consent forms. What emerged in the moment of formal commitment? It raises questions about what is kept out of language in parent–researcher relationships, particularly when the research invites not just factual sharing but emotional and relational introspection. This echoes Hollway and Jefferson's (2008) reflections on the defended subject, where parents' refusals to speak may be understood not as disengagement but as defensive manoeuvres to protect against exposure, judgment, or reactivating emotional pain. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) further explore how psychic omissions, what is not said, can inform us as much as speech, often signalling unresolved grief, trauma, or social shame. In some cases, silence or withdrawal may mark the edges of what is symbolic within the parent's narrative of care, especially in institutional or research settings where they may feel scrutinised.

Such refusals could also reflect broader cultural and social anxieties about being scrutinised by professionals. Working-class parents, in particular, might feel apprehensive about engaging with researchers due to concerns about judgment or negative perceptions. Simpson et al. (2019) found that practitioners in early education settings sometimes harbour parent-blame attitudes, which can lead to negative engagements with parents, especially those from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds. Such dynamics can create a sense of vulnerability among parents, making them hesitant to participate in research activities where they might feel evaluated or marginalised.

Gillies (2005) and Vincent and Ball (2007) highlight how working-class parents are often positioned differently concerning early years education through the subtle mechanisms of institutional discourse and expectation, the *habitus*. Gillies (2005) argues that while middle-class parenting practices are often framed as supportive and aligned with educational success, working-class parental involvement is frequently interpreted through a deficit lens, seen as lacking, inadequate, or disorganised. Similarly, Vincent and Ball (2007) note that early educational settings tend to see particular forms of engagement as more valuable than others, such as confident verbal communication or visible involvement in school life. This highly valued capital tends to align with middle-class cultural capital. As a result, working-class parents can find themselves marginalised or misrecognised, their contributions undervalued, and their parenting styles misunderstood. These frameworks of expectation, often unspoken, can shape how parents engage with educational institutions and may contribute to ambivalence or withdrawal when asked to participate in research. In this sense, what appears as disinterest or refusal may instead be a reflection of the *institutional habitus* that privileges certain voices while silencing others. The refusal of the interview becomes a meaningful act, not an absence but a protective boundary.

I also find it compelling that all the main carers who responded and agreed to be interviewed were mothers. No fathers responded, nor did they express interest in participating, a dynamic that was anticipated by the nursery's management, who commented that 'no dads would want to do that sort of thing anyway, it might be really difficult if you need them to participate.' This assumption, while casually stated, reflects persistent gendered expectations in the social organisation of care. Research by Dermott (2008) shows that while many fathers articulate a strong emotional

connection to their children, their involvement is often framed in terms of closeness and bonding rather than the practical and reflexive care work traditionally associated with motherhood.

Dermott argues that fathers' accounts tend to emphasise presence and play over responsibility, suggesting that emotional investment does not necessarily translate into the kind of institutional visibility mothers are expected to uphold.

Miller (2011) similarly notes that even when fathers are involved, mothers continue to occupy the role of the default emotional and organisational managers of children's lives. Miller documents how first-time fathers often fall back into traditional gender roles, despite initial intentions of being equally involved, with mothers bearing the brunt of the invisible emotional and cognitive work of caregiving. This includes being responsible for children's physical needs and for monitoring their emotional states, managing professional relationships like those with nursery staff, and engaging with research or institutional demands such as this study. The mothers' engagement in this study reflects not just availability or willingness but the internalised sense of responsibility to represent and speak on behalf of their children in spaces of institutional scrutiny.

Fathering is culturally de-emphasised or rendered peripheral in early years spaces. The absence of fathers, then, is not just a gap in the data but a reflection of the gendered structuring of care, in which emotional labour is feminised and often unrecognised. It highlights how institutional expectations align with societal scripts that position mothers as the primary carers who are emotionally accountable, publicly engaged, and narratively responsible. The result is a field shaped not only by who is present but also by who remains silent or unseen and how such silences are socially and psychically organised.

The maternal narratives I encountered during the research were often laden with ambivalence, pride, worry, and defence. These are emotional registers that fathers might also carry, but which are less often made available in the research encounter. This can be related to the gendered *habitus* of parenting (Bourdieu, 1996), where maternal reflexivity is expected and solicited, while paternal emotional involvement remains largely unspoken or externalised. The resulting field of parental engagement is shaped not only by who is present but also by who remains absent, whose silences reverberate through the conversations that do take place. Muhtadi's mother, for instance, provided a vivid illustration of this dynamic. She reflected on her deep emotional trust in the nursery, saying, 'I trust the place, I trust the people, I have no complaints, I like the staff. Why would I take him somewhere else?' This scene captures the sense of security that Muhtadi's mother felt with the nursery, a security built on her emotional trust in the nursery's staff and environment. Her decision was rooted not only in the practical considerations of childcare but in an emotional trust that the nursery provided a balanced space for Muhtadi's development, reflecting her internalisation of the institutional norms that framed the nursery as a trusted, developmental space.

In a similar vein, Rapha's mother reflected on her emotional transition as a parent, particularly when she was first asked to leave him at the nursery. She explained,

I was really concerned about him being the only baby and just what would happen and how everything would be. I asked lots of questions about hygiene. How do you clean everything? What are your cleaning procedures? How are you doing this with the COVID situation?

Her concerns about cleanliness and safety were not just about practical matters but also about her emotional readiness to entrust her son to the nursery's care. Her anxieties were tied to the institutional norms around safety and cleanliness, norms she needed to internalise in order to feel secure in her decision. These concerns about the *institutional habitus* speak to a broader context of parental emotional labour, where parents are not just dealing with their children's emotional needs but also navigating their emotional vulnerability within an institution that they may or may not fully trust.

In speaking with the children's mothers, I often encountered a delicate interplay between openness and restraint. Their narratives were shaped by love and care, as well as their own experiences of being positioned within systems, both familial and institutional, that often made competing demands. Some spoke with ease, while others paused, redirected, or left certain things unsaid. These omissions, I came to understand, were not absences of care or interest but expressions of emotional boundary, perhaps even of protective silence. I felt the pull of countertransference acutely in these moments: the wish to know more, to make coherent stories out of fragmentation. Yet this desire often revealed more about my anxieties as a researcher than about the parents themselves. Like their children, the mothers navigated complex terrains of class, cultural, and gendered expectations, where engagement with the nursery and with me was both relational and strategic. Their silences, hesitations, and warmth all became part of the intersubjective fabric of the research.

5.2 Ambivalence, Institutional Defence, and the Relational Habitus of the Nursery

Moving from parental narratives to the affective landscape of the nursery itself, the following section traces how the setting was experienced from within. My own bodily and emotional

responses to the space, with its rhythms, ruptures, and refusals, offered insight into the institution's relational architecture and the subtle ways its defences and dynamics came into view. The physical space of the nursery made me feel a sense of tranquillity, and I felt a boundless sense of curiosity for all the different areas of play and enrichment. However, as the day went by, there were times when I felt there was chaos everywhere, which I found suffocating and overwhelming. The spaces where structured activities were being held were always contained and calm; even if there was some excitement, there was an underlying sense of peace and security. In contrast, when free play and less structured activities were being held, a sense of chaos and suffocation arose.

All interactions with parents and staff were part of an intersubjective space, rich with symbolic meaning, silences, and affective undercurrents. I documented both formal interviews and informal exchanges through written notes, as audio-visual recordings were not permitted outside interviews. Early in the research, the nursery manager clarified that I could include our conversations in the study, provided I only took notes. My proposal for a staff focus group was declined in favour of individual interviews. A drawing-based focus group with the children was also rejected; instead, the manager suggested one-on-one sessions. These took place in the centre of the nursery, amidst daily activity and with minimal support, making it difficult for the children to engage meaningfully. As a result, the data was not usable for the study. Nevertheless, these rejections and redirections subtly shaped the emotional tone of my access, leaving me with a lingering sense of being both invited and held at a distance.

While on the surface allowing me to come to the nursery for my study seemed cooperative, I experienced it as a moment of ambivalence, a gesture of conditional access that subtly kept me at a distance. A gesture that offered access but withheld intimacy or full transparency. This evoked a

subtle sense of rejection in me, emotionally ambiguous, as though I had the space as a guest but was not welcomed as a collaborator. This guardedness led me to reflect on the possibility that her non-permanent status within the nursery, serving in an interim managerial role, may have contributed to a feeling of positional insecurity, making full participation too exposing or destabilising. Within such organisational contexts, *emotional containment* and disclosure become politically and affectively charged (Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000).

Throughout the fieldwork, I encountered several misattunements with the nursery manager. There were times when I was not informed that observations would not be going ahead, or when staff were unaware, they had been scheduled for interviews. One particularly symbolic moment occurred during a fire drill I had not been told about. I had been left waiting outside in the lobby for over half an hour when the alarm suddenly rang out, and I was ushered to stand apart in the rain while the children and staff assembled in orderly lines:

After waiting outside the nursery doors for nearly half an hour before someone remembered to let me in, I stood with the receptionist, who asked about my research. I answered, but felt peripheral. She glanced repeatedly at the clock, then sighed, ‘I don’t know why she asked you to come at this time...’ I asked why, and she said there was a fire drill. Almost as if on cue, the alarm sounded. She smiled sympathetically and guided me through the process while explaining my situation to the staff around us.

After the drill ended, I was told the interview I had come for would no longer take place, as the manager had scheduled a staff training at the same time. This moment of being forgotten at the door, left waiting, then suddenly thrown into a fire drill, felt disorganising in ways I only fully processed later. At the time, I felt peripheral, tolerated, and somehow out of place, but not yet

rejected. It was only in the hours and days that followed that I began to understand this event as a scene, in Lorenzer's (1986) terms: a condensed symbolic situation, carrying latent meanings about authority, inclusion, and misattunement. In *scenic understanding*, what matters is not only what happened but how it felt and what it stirred in the intersubjective field. The affective charge of this encounter was not about logistical miscommunication alone but about the subtle enactment of institutional exclusion, a moment that echoed a breakdown in *containment* and holding (Winnicott, 1971). This scene crystallised something about the institution's relational style. *Containment* appeared structured but was unreliable when tested. In this way, the vignette functioned as a window into the nursery's unconscious organisation, what Clarke and Hoggett (2009) might call its emotional economy.

What followed was unexpected. Several staff members approached me after the drill, expressing frustration and shared recognition. Leonora, rolling her eyes, muttered, 'You see how it is.' This small exchange functioned as a moment of identification. I was, in that moment, symbolically absorbed into the staff's own narratives of marginalisation. The emotional resonance of the event opened up new insight into the affective economy of the nursery (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). My feelings of rejection and misrecognition mirrored those that emerged later in staff interviews and observations, highlighting the relational structure of institutional defences, deflections, omissions, and inconsistencies that both shielded and exposed deeper anxieties within the setting.

These moments reflect what Hinshelwood (2001) describes as organisational defences against anxiety. These are unconscious mechanisms deployed at the collective level to avoid emotional overwhelm or exposure. They may take the form of strategic disorganisation, ambiguity, or withdrawal, all of which act to protect the institution from the demands of intimacy, reflexivity, or change. The manager's ambivalence was not merely an individual characteristic but rather

indicative of the broader relational dynamics within the nursery. This interplay between institutional behaviours, defensive mechanisms, and structural sedimentation can be explained by Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1977, 1990) and Elias's (2010) theory of social interdependencies. In the context of the nursery, a *habitus* of professional detachment and guardedness had formed, one that shaped relational styles and responses to perceived intrusions, such as research. These forms of disengagement or emotional distancing are not arbitrary. They are deeply embedded social patterns, maintained through relational repetition and reinforced by institutional memory.

Elias (2012) helps to extend this further by conceptualising institutions as *interdependent figurations*, where emotional relations evolve through the dynamics of group tensions, status negotiations, and social constraints. In this view, the manager's ambivalence can be seen as part of the nursery's emotional choreography, a performance of institutional identity that sought to manage exposure and maintain authority. My presence as a researcher, particularly one interested in unconscious life and emotional meaning, may have threatened this balance, prompting subtle defensive responses that both reflected and reproduced the nursery's existing *habitus*. Thus, this encounter becomes more than a footnote in fieldwork. It became an affective scene, a crystallisation of how institutional defences, status insecurity, and emotional regulation intersect. It illustrated how the researcher becomes part of the relational field and how reflexive awareness of these dynamics can reveal not only interpersonal tensions but also the emotional architecture of the organisation itself.

5.3 Carriers of the Everyday - Introducing the Staff as Emotional Anchors in the Nursery

While institutional defences often shaped the broader relational field of the nursery, it was through the staff's daily presence and gestures that these dynamics became most palpable. The following section introduces the core practitioners who, despite being positioned within a system marked by constraint and ambivalence, acted as emotional anchors in the nursery's everyday life. The staff members who participated in this study, Whitney, Marie, Leonora, and Lisa, occupy central and deeply affective roles within the everyday life of the nursery. In many ways, they form part of its emotional scaffolding. Their interactions with children and one another shaped the daily rhythms of containment, rupture, and repair, reflecting the ongoing negotiation between care, exhaustion, and institutional survival that underpins emotional labour in early years settings (Elfer, 2012a; Hinshelwood, 2001). Drawing on Hochschild's (1983) foundational work, these practitioners engage in intense affective work to meet children's emotional needs, as well as to perform and manage their emotional expressions within the bounds of what the nursery implicitly considers 'appropriate.' Across interviews and observations, a portrait emerged of staff navigating the tension between institutional demands for regulation and personal commitments to presence, often without adequate systemic support.

Whitney, a Black British practitioner, has worked in the nursery for the entirety of her career and is the most institutionally embedded of the group. Quiet but central, she is often sought out by children for reassurance. Her presence in the room felt grounding, watchful, and attentive, yet reserved. One example of this is shown in Muhtadi's observation, where he seems unable to connect with the group when participating in a musical activity but tries to stay due to the attraction of the soft tubes being used as musical material. However, he seems unable to contain himself when a child suddenly starts crying inside the circle:

Muhtadi keeps looking back at the crying child while walking around and playing with his own shadow. Muhtadi walks off again, using the tube as a walking stick into the climbing net in a corner of the playground slide and runs into Whitney, who tells him he cannot take the tube out of the musical corner and takes it from him gently. He does not look at her and leans back into the net while looking at his empty hand, sadly.

The staff member's interaction with Muhtadi, specifically the withdrawal of the tube, serves as an anchor to reality for him. His sadness upon having the tube taken away reflects his emotional *attachment* to objects as emotional anchors in the absence of stronger emotional ties to the group. The staff's firm but neutral approach highlights their role in reorienting his attention and subtly asserting institutional control. This interaction reflects how staff act as emotional anchors, guiding children back to appropriate emotional regulation through their authority and consistency.

Whitney's approach centred on quiet observation and facilitation, gently encouraging children to express their feelings through activity rather than direct conversation. Despite this attunement to children, she expressed visible discomfort discussing emotions, especially in reference to staff dynamics. During our interview, she dismissed her colleagues' emotional concerns as something she 'resists,' saying she prefers not to engage as 'no need to add it to your stress.' This suggests a personal defence and a reflection of an institutional culture that values emotional quietness over articulation, a form of defensive functioning rooted in the *habitus* of the nursery (Bourdieu, 1990; Hinshelwood, 2001). Initially, I felt a sense of rejection from Whitney; she responded to my questions with cool detachment, but this softened over time. Her stance, I came to see, mirrored the relational codes of the nursery, where *emotional containment* was not just a practice but an embodied norm.

Marie, a White British staff leader, is a highly visible figure of care and authority. Both children and staff instinctively turned to her in moments of distress, particularly when Lisa, the co-leader, was absent. Marie often carried the structured, calm pole of leadership. Her name constantly echoed through the nursery, called out by children needing comfort, intervention, or recognition. Despite this, she expressed a profound sense of insufficiency, repeating how ‘difficult’ their job was, elaborating that: ‘Sometimes it takes so much time to take care of them, we really, let’s say... neglect, not neglect, but yeah, feel that I don’t spend enough time with all the children or not the time I should spend.’ This articulation captured the ambivalence of leadership in emotionally defensive institutions: she was both the container and the container-without-a-container. Her emotional exhaustion went beyond personal burnout, reflecting a systemic lack of reflective support. As Hinshelwood (2001) notes, institutions that fail to provide space for emotional processing risk saturating their members with unprocessed anxiety. Marie’s frustration with ‘weak management’ was emblematic of this gap. In a structure that demands *containment* without providing it, her emotional labour became unsustainable. However, she could remain in her role and bear institutional ambivalence by also naming the goodness within the team:

I think we're good at picking up on their emotions. I know it's free flow and making sure they're all happy because I'm usually when I go out, I'm trying to scan to see who's doing what... It's a bit like going around the place being, you know, making sure they're all okay.

Marie highlights the emotional responsibility that staff, including her, take on in the nursery. She describes her awareness of children's emotional states and how she manages this emotional charge as part of her daily routine. Marie acts as a container for the children’s emotions, scanning the

room and providing support, which is a crucial aspect of the staff's emotional anchoring role in the nursery environment.

Lisa, a White Spanish co-leader, brought a different energy to the setting. She was emotionally open, playful, and deeply reflective about the challenges the nursery faced. Children gravitated toward her for her warmth and clarity, and staff relied on her grounding presence. I often felt contained by Lisa. Her ability to hold ambivalence without retreating or idealising made the space feel safer, more breathable. Her capacity to name institutional contradictions, such as the instability of management and the impact of limited resources, reflected a form of emotional truth-telling (Hinshelwood, 2001). As she recounts:

The head teacher that we have now, she's interviewing for now, so even if she's here, she's not here every day and it's like uh he's not the same as having someone that you know is going to be there and yeah, so yeah, I suppose when we have a manager, yeah.

This highlights the unstable and temporary nature of the current management situation. Lisa appeared to function as a transitional figure in the Winnicottian sense, providing a steady, containing presence that enabled children to think, feel, and play within a relationally held environment (Winnicott, 1971). She encouraged emotional independence in children, as shown in her reflection:

I remember mom a few times I said, mom, she's a big girl she needs to work because she kept bringing her just grabbing her and walking inside or she was about to leave and still carrying her and I said she's a big girl you shouldn't because they're very attached.

This demonstrates her role in promoting autonomy while understanding the child's emotional attachment. However, despite her emotional availability, Lisa expressed that 'they do what they can,' revealing the structural limits of caregiving within the nursery. This tension aligns with Winnicott's (1971) concept of the *good enough mother*, a caregiver who provides emotional *containment* within the constraints of institutional structures. Lisa's role as a transitional figure is thus shaped by both her emotional support and the institutional boundaries that limit her ability to fully meet the children's needs.

Leonora, a Black British staff member, exemplified a relationally rich and emotionally responsive approach. Long before we spoke, I felt her attunement; she seemed to keep me in mind, watching me navigate the space with a gentle curiosity. This mirrored her approach to children; she followed their imaginative play, engaged in their narratives, and respected their emotional textures:

When I go home, I could say, yes, I achieved this today. These kids love this. They really enjoyed this activity. And I get feedback from my colleagues. She said, 'This is really good.' It's no competition. She could see my passion and what I want the children to learn from it.

This highlights Leonora's role as an emotional anchor in the nursery, where she actively engages with children in a way that is both passionate and intentional. Her reflections show how staff members act as carriers of the everyday emotional atmosphere in the nursery, offering children the emotional support and structure needed to feel secure and confident. The feedback she receives from her colleagues affirms her role in the emotional environment, reinforcing her sense

of accomplishment and connection with the children. However, Leonora was also the most openly critical of the nursery's lack of emotional support:

Yeah, I'm passionate about children. I think, you know, sometimes when I challenge management, you know, they know what I'm saying. But I'm not sure where their head is at, so to speak. But I know what their expectation is. And I do a lot of research as well. I'm glad I went to uni, because it gives me a lot of deeper research and understanding of why I'm doing my job.

She had repeatedly requested supervision and reflective space, requests that were dismissed or pathologised by management. Outside the interview, she shared with me that this had led to her being perceived as 'difficult,' a label she suspected was assigned to silence her critiques.

Hinshelwood's (1993) notion of institutional role positioning is instructive here: Leonora's positioning as the troublemaker went beyond her actions alone; it was part of the system's unconscious need to manage anxiety by locating it in particular individuals. Her experience stood in stark contrast to her actual role in the children's lives, where she provided precisely the kind of relational *containment* the institution itself failed to offer.

These four portraits illuminate the nursery as more than a site of early years education. It is a complex psychosocial field, structured by unconscious processes, emotional economies, and institutional defences. Drawing on Elias's (2012) concept of *figuration*, we can understand the nursery as a web of interdependent roles and affects, where individuals are shaped by their relational positions and by the institutional pressures that accompany them. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of *habitus* is also helpful in understanding how professional norms around care, silence, and regulation become embodied dispositions, shaping how staff members relate to children as

well as to one another and themselves. The emotional labour performed by the staff was not just a feature of their daily practice but a survival strategy, a way of sustaining relational life within a setting that offered little in the way of emotional reciprocity. In some instances, this labour supported moments of genuine *containment* and attunement. In others, it served to protect the institution from the very anxieties it demanded staff manage alone. These tensions lie at the heart of what this chapter seeks to explore: how care is structured, how it breaks down, and how it is held, sometimes just barely, within the psychological architecture of early years institutions.

5.4 Coming Into View - Introducing the Children as Subjects

Following the exploration of the institutional dynamics and the emotional labour carried out by staff, this section introduces the children not merely as participants but as central figures within the intersubjective life of the nursery. These children emerged as emotionally charged presences, often marking the fault lines of the *institutional habitus*. Their stories are presented not as isolated case studies but as relational figures who animated and were animated by the symbolic, emotional, and structural life of the nursery. The four children who participated in this study were Amy, Caroline, Rapha, and Muhtadi. Their profiles arose relationally through the emotional textures of institutional life. All of them seemed to be part of the central discourse of the nursery. They were all spoken about frequently and with notable affect by nursery staff, often without prompting. These spontaneous remembrances were revealing. They marked certain children as symbolically charged within the field, drawing attention to the children and what they came to represent for the adults around them. They were not simply observed but experienced as figures that elicited strong countertransference responses and who, in their visibility, exposed the psycho-social undercurrents of the nursery's social order.

Their presence often revealed more about the staff's identifications, anxieties, and projections than about the children per se, positioning them as transference mirrors for unconscious conflict, institutional fantasy, and emotional ambivalence. They occupied what Winnicott (1967) called *transitional space*, a psychological field between internal object worlds and the realities of institutional life. In this sense, the nursery became a dense matrix of transferences, where language, play, silence, and gesture all acted as conduits for unconscious communication, which will be discussed in the following chapters. The children were not just within the setting; they were also shaping and being shaped by its emotional landscape. Their ways of being, including what they said and what remained unsaid, formed part of their *habitus*, the embodied, affective dispositions that reproduced institutional norms but also left space for rupture, ambiguity, and resistance (Bourdieu, 1977).

I will now turn to their complex narratives. Amy's story within the nursery is marked by emotional complexity where language and silence interact powerfully. Amy, a Black British girl born in 2019, is the daughter of a single mother who teaches at the adjacent primary school. Her father's absence became a recurrent and unresolved point of discussion among staff, giving rise to a series of inconsistent and emotionally charged narratives. Some suggested he had died, others claimed he was incarcerated, or abusive and now abroad. None of these were confirmed by the mother, who herself refused to speak directly about him. This narrative fragmentation, rather than simply revealing gaps in knowledge, functioned as a symbolic rupture within the institutional discourse. It became an absence overloaded with speculative meaning.

As Frosh and Baraitser (2008) suggest, the unspeakable often marks points of psychic rupture, where language is withheld and affect finds other channels of expression: rumour, projection, silence. Within the nursery's social field, this rupture around Amy's paternal absence was

managed through displacement, with her story circulating as an opaque symbol of absence. The paternal absence became less a fact and more of a ghost, circulating as a kind of institutional echo, a shared uncertainty that unsettled staff and generated a collective discomfort (Fraiberg et al., 1975). This absence became a significant emotional and symbolic load in the nursery, making Amy both hyper-visible and unknowable. She existed in a state of emotional tension, where the lack of concrete information about her father magnified her presence within the staff's discourse while simultaneously distancing her from a fully known identity. In many ways, Amy's story mirrored the institution's struggle with the emotional realities of its participants, particularly around themes of loss and the difficulty of symbolising pain within an institutional context.

This tension was reflected in Amy herself, who seemed to inhabit this uncertainty in her daily interactions. She moved through the setting with a blend of emotional openness and guardedness, engaging with others in moments of song or playful gestures, yet pulling back without warning when the interaction demanded more than she was prepared to give. Language, in Amy's case, often functioned as both a bridge and a barrier: a medium through which she was spoken about, but also a space where meaning frequently faltered. In her silences, too, there was density, a refusal of symbolisation that demanded emotional rather than discursive listening. As Bourdieu (1990) reminds us, what is excluded from discourse is not neutral. It often indexes what the field itself cannot fully assimilate. The institutional narrative around Amy, her father's absence, the staff's discomfort, and the resulting emotional and social tension becomes a mirror of the nursery's ambivalence towards loss and the limits of its care.

Amy's somatic expressivity, which bypassed words in favour of humming, singing, and rhythmic movement, exemplified how affective, non-verbal communication can transcend traditional *Symbolic Order* (Kristeva, 1982). Amy's body, in this sense, became a transitional surface, a site

where emotional tensions and institutional uncertainties were projected. It was through these expressions, or their absence, that Amy negotiated the space between the visible and the unseen, between the known and the unknown, actively shaping her own engagement with the institutional and emotional landscape around her. Her behaviour in the nursery, often oscillating between engagement and withdrawal, encapsulated the ambiguity that permeated the institution itself. In this way, Amy's presence became emblematic of the struggle between institutional control and the irreducible complexity of the child's emotional world. Marie observed that Amy could be somewhat reserved but displayed moments of emotional depth in group settings. She noted:

Amy tends to hold back at first, but when she does engage, it's with such thoughtfulness. She's not overly expressive like some of the other children, but she really listens to what's happening around her and takes it in. It's like she's processing things before she reacts.

This observation highlights how Amy's methodical engagement with her surroundings was not simply a matter of behavioural inhibition. It pointed to a deeper process of emotional regulation. Her hesitance to participate immediately in group activities, coupled with the thoughtfulness she displayed when she did engage, suggested a complexity of emotional life that both aligned with and resisted the institutional norms of the nursery. Unlike more visibly expressive children, Amy's internalised processing posed a challenge for staff trying to access and interpret her emotional world. The suggestion that she was 'processing' rather than reacting aligned with Winnicott's (1971) concept of the *transitional space*, which highlights the child's active engagement with the environment to explore, play, and symbolise experience, rather than being solely emotionally contained by a caregiver. Amy, however, inhabited a paradox. She was both contained by the nursery's emotional infrastructure and actively negotiating the limits of expression imposed by language. This dynamic revealed a broader institutional struggle between

the desire to regulate emotional life and the irreducibility of the child's affective logic. Amy's limited verbal expressiveness complicated staff attempts at *containment* and categorisation. Her silence became not an absence of communication, but a challenge to institutional control. It made visible the gaps and limits of care, where ambiguity and uncertainty were not failures but core components of emotional reality in early years contexts.

Muhtadi, an Arab boy born in 2019, lives with his parents and older sister. His father works in IT, and his mother is employed at the nursery reception. This role positioned her in close proximity during the pandemic, when the nursery became a rare site of continuity for the family. Both Muhtadi and his sister attended the setting side by side until she transitioned earlier that year. Staff frequently interpreted this shift as having left him more withdrawn. There was a common belief that her departure had unsettled a delicate emotional balance, disrupting the secure base he had relied upon. Lisa described Muhtadi's early struggles with emotional regulation and separation: 'He's very shy at first, but once he gets into it, he'll open up. He's very gentle, though. He doesn't like to be forced into anything, but I think he's starting to get used to it.' This perception aligns with his mother's concerns about his slow, cautious adjustment to increasing independence.

Yet Muhtadi occupied a uniquely ambiguous space within the institutional structure, due in part to his mother's physical presence and visibility in the building. Her spatial proximity blurred the lines between caregiver and practitioner, heightening Muhtadi's relational and emotional complexity. The linguistic environment further shaped his experience. Arabic was spoken at home, while English dominated the social and pedagogical discourse of the nursery. This bilingual positioning carried both symbolic and social significance. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) *Theory of Linguistic Capital*, we can understand language not only as a medium of

communication but also as a currency of belonging. Muhtadi's silence in English, occasionally interpreted as shyness or detachment, may instead reflect the unseen labour of emotional and cultural translation. In early observations, I experienced Muhtadi as emotionally opaque. He appeared self-contained, often compliant but not fully engaged, presenting a polished surface to adult attention. Yet, over time these surfaces cracked, and then a clumsy reach, a sudden burst of laughter, or a lingering gaze would emerge, revealing affective needs that had no immediate linguistic home.

His attentiveness was striking. He hovered at the periphery of play, seemingly scanning the emotional tone of the room before deciding whether to enter. This watchfulness evoked a powerful identification in me. Our exchanges were shaped less by speech and more by gaze, posture, and mutual attunement. In these moments, we entered what Winnicott (1971) might describe as a potential space, where emotional connection is not dependent on articulation but emerges through gesture and shared rhythms. Muhtadi's quiet presence invited a slower kind of relational engagement, one that privileged subtlety over immediacy. His position in the nursery reflected what *relational psychoanalysis* might call a shared intersubjective field (Benjamin, 1990), where identity and meaning are co-created through interaction. In this framework, Muhtadi does not simply exist within the nursery, but is shaped by, and in turn shapes, the relational dynamics that constitute it. This positioning was particularly significant in a context governed by norms around emotional expressiveness, verbal fluency, and visible compliance. Within such a framework, Muhtadi's hesitancy and silence can be read not as deficits but as affective strategies. These were adaptations to a space that demanded coherence, even where ambiguity might have been more authentic. His quietness, far from empty, was charged with emotional meaning. It resisted the institutional demand for conformity. His presence, therefore, serves as a reminder that

belonging is not always loud or verbal. It may reside in the subtle, interstitial spaces of glance, movement, and affective resonance.

Caroline, a girl of South African and Hungarian heritage, born in 2018, lives with her mother, a cleaner, and her older half-brother. She sees her father at weekends. Her life stretched across cultural, familial, and linguistic borders. This multiplicity was reflected in her emotional registers, shifting from observant and self-contained to animated and playful, particularly with peers. Staff often praised her as ‘very smart’ while also describing her as ‘clingy’ or ‘over-attached.’ These readings, while offered with care, masked the emotional labour involved in navigating multiple affiliations: home and nursery, mother and father, English and other mother tongues. Caroline’s behaviours and emotional responses were frequently framed by staff in these binary terms, reflecting how *institutional habitus* can flatten complex emotional realities into fixed categories. Her shifts between independence and *attachment* were often interpreted through a lens that prized self-sufficiency, thereby missing the relational negotiations she was continuously making.

The language used to describe her reveals how emotional labour was often translated into behavioural descriptors, neglecting the deeper relational contexts in which those behaviours emerged. Her play and affective shifts occasionally revealed moments of disorganised aggression. These outbursts seemed sudden and often followed sustained periods of emotional *containment*. Although brief, such moments were sometimes dismissed by staff as ‘tantrums’ or ‘attention-seeking.’ Yet from a relational psychoanalytic perspective, they might be understood as signs of a disrupted intersubjective field (Benjamin, 1990; Harris, 2007). Caroline’s aggression did not appear reactive in a behavioural sense but communicative in a relational one, a bid for recognition, particularly in moments when her behaviour was overlooked or flattened into singular narratives. Her emotional volatility may be interpreted as a response to misrecognition.

She was often treated as mature and self-sufficient while internally struggling to manage conflicting affective demands.

According to Benjamin (1995), aggression in such contexts is not necessarily destructive but can be understood as a claim for mutuality, a demand to be seen and emotionally met. Caroline's capacity to shift between roles of being a helper, disruptor, storyteller, revealed a subject navigating external transitions and testing the boundaries of emotional recognition within a setting that prioritised calm regulation over expressive intensity. In this light, her aggression appears less a behavioural failure and more an attempt to disrupt the asymmetry of care that had rendered her complexity invisible. In my own responses to Caroline, I felt persistently drawn in and unsettled. I became increasingly attuned to the psychosocial textures of her in-betweenness. I asked myself whether I was being pulled into the split spaces of her cultural and relational world. Caroline's linguistic agility was striking. Her play was sometimes vivid and joyful, sometimes melancholic or charged with anger. It became a space where autobiography and imagination blurred.

Winnicott's (1971) concept of the transitional object is particularly illuminating here. Her play functioned as a psychic buffer, a tool for negotiating tensions between home, nursery, and the imaginative third space of play. While the nursery as an institution relied on emotional regulation and normative social conduct, Caroline's play emerged as a space of resistance and negotiation. It became a form of expression that could not be easily translated into the language of regulation. Her emotional and linguistic positioning was shaped by the intersecting demands of class, gender, and migration (Bourdieu, 1977). These social coordinates structured her subjectivity, yet staff narratives frequently flattened this complexity into more manageable tropes such as 'resilience' or 'maturity', concealing the affective dissonance of her 'in-betweenness'. One staff member,

Leonora, commented on Caroline's boundary-testing behaviour: 'She knows right from wrong. She likes to break the boundaries or the rules. And she knows right from wrong. And everybody knows her. Mom knows she knows right from wrong.'

Leonora's repetition is telling. It reflects an institutional ambivalence: an acknowledgement of Caroline's capacity for moral discernment alongside a subtle discomfort with her refusal to remain within set boundaries. Her actions can be reinterpreted not simply as rebelliousness but as negotiations for a place within the nursery's emotional structure. Caroline's play and interactions speak to a desire to be seen in her full complexity. She did not want to be recognised merely as a compliant child, but as a person who tests and pushes against the structures of the nursery in ways that reflect her broader emotional and cultural positioning.

Rapha, a British Canadian boy born in 2019, is the son of a healthcare keyworker mother and a father who works a high-risk job. Both returned to work early during the pandemic. He has been in nursery since infancy and was often framed as a challenging and independent boy, a contradictory designation that mirrored the split projections staff held toward him. He was expected to cope, yet he was also marked as the child most likely to disrupt. These characterisations exemplify what Bourdieu (1977) describes as *doxic logic*: socially dominant norms are presented as natural, especially those around early separation, autonomy, and emotional resilience. Staff frequently praised Rapha's ability to stay the whole day in the nursery, yet this functional subjectivity felt emotionally hollow. His independence seemed less like a developmental milestone and more like a defensive structure (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000), a way to navigate the affective absence brought on by early, prolonged separations.

My responses reflected this tension. I admired his composure but also felt a creeping unease. Over time, I began to notice fractures in his way of getting by, his tendency to destroy toys when alone, his intense gaze at staff during moments of high energy, and his persistent hovering just outside group play, trying to draw attention to himself. These behaviours felt like bidirectional communications of unmet emotional needs. According to Bion's (1962) container-contained model, such expressions may reflect affective states that have not yet been metabolised by an attuned adult. Lisa observed Rapha's occasional struggles with impulse control and emotional regulation: 'Sometimes, Rapha can be a bit disruptive. He gets frustrated easily, but he's learning to express his needs in other ways now. He's not as physical about it. It's been great seeing him grow.'

Lisa's perception of Rapha acknowledges his emotional growth and the developmental journey he has undergone in the nursery setting, reflecting both his challenges and his progress in emotional regulation. However, he continued to be singled out as a difficult and disruptive child by the staff during their interviews. His disruptions were not acts of defiance but pleas for *containment*. When staff responded punitively or with exasperation, I was struck by how little space there was for tender repair. In my personal psychoanalysis, I came to see that Rapha evoked a strong countertransference in me, an urge to soften, to witness, to offer a form of attunement that was rarely afforded him in the daily rhythm of the nursery. This positioned him not as problematic, but as a childbearing the emotional contradictions of the setting, its idealisation of autonomy, its fear of dependence, and its reliance on children to regulate the very emotional climates they inhabit. As Hinshelwood (2001) notes, institutions often allocate emotional roles unconsciously; some children become the regulated ones, others the difficult ones, depending on what the system needs defended against. Rapha's experience illuminates these processes. He became the

projective container for both staff frustration and my desire to repair. His presence demanded not just recognition but a re-examination of the emotional costs of institutional ideals.

Across these children's lives, language emerged not as a transparent medium but as a *transitional space*, a site of emotional navigation, cultural negotiation, and psychological defence. Each instance reveals how language operates within and against the *social habitus*: it can reproduce institutional norms, but it can also fracture them, exposing the fault lines of identity, care, and recognition. The nursery, then, was a field dense with emotional, symbolic, and social meanings, a structured *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977) that naturalised certain values while obscuring their affective cost. It functioned as a social institution that prided itself on care yet often reproduced inequalities through its assumptions about what constitutes 'normal' development. The children's presence disrupted this smooth surface. Their movements, silences, and fantasies became acts of resistance and creativity within a space that demanded adaptation.

The children's behaviours, whether Amy's retreat, Caroline's shifting emotional registers, Rapha's surface ease, or Muhtadi's silent attunement, were moments within shared scenic fields. Each interaction felt like stepping into a scene that exceeded words, where affect was transmitted rather than narrated. My emotional responses of feeling unsettled, intrigued, excluded, or pulled in became part of the data, not outside it. As Lorenzer (1986) argued, scenes are shaped by the mutual inscription of affect between participants, including the researcher. These children were not just objects of observation but co-producers of meaning, inviting me into *transitional spaces* where unconscious themes of absence, recognition, and *containment* played out. As a researcher, I was not outside this dynamic. My intellectual, emotional, and unconscious investments were caught up in the very field I was studying. I found myself implicated in the narratives I traced, drawn into transference loops that echoed those of the staff and children. These children did not

simply illustrate theory; they lived it, embodied it, and challenged it. In their presence, I was not a detached observer but a participant in a shared process of meaning-making, one that unfolded, faltered, and reformed in the unstable, affective space between language, body, and institution.

Conclusions: Tracing Emotional Undercurrents in the Nursery Figuration

This chapter has mapped the emotional and institutional landscape of the nursery through a reflexive and psychoanalytic lens. Rather than treating the setting as a neutral backdrop, it has been explored as a site of intersubjective intensities, structured by unconscious dynamics, embodied histories, and systemic pressures. At the centre of this analysis were the four children: Amy, Caroline, Rapha, and Muhtadi, whose symbolic significance within the nursery emerged not solely from observation but through their affective visibility in staff discourse and relational life. Their presence functioned as a conducting channel through which the emotional culture and institutional defences of the nursery were made legible (Hollway, 2006; Frosh, 2019).

The emotional life of the nursery did not unfold in linear narratives but in scenes, fleeting, embodied, and often difficult to name. Drawing on Lorenzer's (1986) *scenic understanding*, I approached these moments not only as descriptive events but as symbolic condensations of the institution's psychological structure. From fire drills to passing glances, from miscommunications to shared laughter, each carried emotional truths that could not be captured by observation alone. *Scenic understanding* offered a way to hold these truths, recognising that knowledge in psychosocial research is not only produced through what is said but also through what is felt, withheld, and enacted in the intersubjective space between researcher and field.

The staff members reflected the multifaceted and often ambivalent nature of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Elfer, 2012a). Their ways of coping, relating, and resisting revealed how

institutional habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) is reproduced through policy and practice, as well as through bodily dispositions, discursive limits, and affective norms. For example, Whitney's emotional restraint mirrored the nursery's broader tendency to minimise feeling in favour of order and calm, a defensive institutional culture described by Hinshelwood (1993, 2001) as one that restricts reflection to manage collective anxiety. In contrast, Leonora's desire for supervision and her emotional expressivity became interpreted as deviant, illustrating how individuals are unconsciously positioned within institutions in ways that reflect systemic needs for equilibrium (Hinshelwood, 2002). Parents, too, found themselves positioned within this emotional economy. They were asked to participate, but only on institutional terms. Those who agreed to be interviewed did so with generosity, but also with caution. Their words reflected complex negotiations with a system that both invited and constrained their involvement.

These relational configurations resonate with Elias's (2012) concept of *figuration*, the idea that institutions are dynamic interdependencies shaped by ongoing negotiations of power, emotion, and identity. Each practitioner did not simply perform a role but was caught within a web of relational and historical tensions that made certain affective positions possible while foreclosing others. Lisa's role as a containing and reflective figure, for instance, shows how some staff manage to inhabit a *transitional space* (Winnicott, 1971), enabling both emotional engagement and critical perspective. Her ability to hold ambiguity without collapse suggests that reflective *containment*, though rare, is possible within defensive systems, especially when individuals resist splitting and instead tolerate psychological complexity (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

The children's narratives and silences revealed tensions in how emotional needs are recognised, managed, or avoided. Their capacity to evoke strong feelings of protectiveness, confusion, or rejection echoed Bion's (1962) theory of *containment* and unprocessed affect, highlighting the

role of the observer not as neutral but as embedded within the emotional field (Hinshelwood, 2001). This study took up the challenge posed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) to attend to the psychosocial interplay between researcher and participant, recognising that meaning is co-constructed within the dynamic interplay of unconscious fantasy, language, and social structure.

This chapter has also considered the nursery as a site of symbolic and linguistic struggle, where language operates both as a medium of meaning and a vehicle of defence (Kristeva, 1982; Bourdieu, 1991). In line with the idea of language as *transitional space* (Winnicott, 1971; Harris, 2013), the interviews with staff and parents offered moments of co-created reflection, though these were often fraught, partial, and shaped by silences. What was unsaid proved just as meaningful as what was spoken, revealing the limits of institutional discourse to accommodate emotional truth (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Midgley & Holmes, 2018).

Finally, my own experience as a researcher, marked by moments of emotional rupture, attunement, and misrecognition, became part of the research. Reflexive engagement with countertransference (Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000; Hinshelwood & Stamenova, 2019) and the use of a research diary to track affective responses, echoed the psychoanalytic commitment to listening for the unconscious. These experiences were not distractions from the data but integral to understanding how the emotional architecture of the nursery was being felt, resisted, and reproduced.

This chapter has attempted to introduce the context and its participants, and to trace their echoes across institutional layers, attuning to the ways feelings travel. These feelings were unspoken, refracted, and transferred between people and roles. Through a psychoanalytic and reflexive lens, the nursery appears not as a static environment but as a moving emotional landscape, animated by

desire, anxiety, care, and defence. It is in this atmosphere that children grow, staff work, and parents try to stay connected. And it is within this field that I, too, found myself pulled in, sometimes attuned, sometimes in rupture, continually rethinking what it means to observe, to listen, and to be implicated. As the study progresses into thematic analysis, the findings will shift from these individualised accounts to broader patterns that emerged across relationships and roles. The following chapters will explore the *habitus* of the nursery, institutional defences, and *transitional spaces* as they take shape in everyday life. These themes offer further insight into how psychosocial dynamics inform early years care. The echoes of emotional life are not merely analytic categories. They are lived, embodied, and inscribed within the institutional discourse of care.

Chapter 6: Figurations of Childhood - the Civilising Habitus in the Nursery

Introduction

The preceding chapter outlined the emotional and psychological terrain of the nursery through the lens of transference and institutional life. In tracing the subtle dynamics of exclusion, *containment*, and relational presence, I positioned myself as a subject within the field, implicated in its rhythms, silences, and disavowed tensions. Building on this, the following chapter moves more explicitly into the themes of institutional discourse and its role in shaping the socialisation of children through normative ideals. The chapter will explore three interconnected themes: first, the construction of the ‘*Good Child*’ through emotional regulation; second, gendered scripts of emotion and behaviour; and finally, parental phantasies and developmental desires. Drawing on Elias (2012) and Bourdieu (1977), I conceptualise the nursery as a site of *civilising processes* and

habitus formation, where emotional, behavioural, and social expectations are sedimented into the texture of everyday interaction.

The nursery, as both a physical and psychosocial space, is more than a site of early learning or routine care. It is a dynamic and emotionally complex social field in which children, staff, and parents are continuously shaped by, and contribute to, a web of expectations, projections, and affective meanings.

Building on the theoretical framework, what emerged through sustained observation and interviews in this setting was the extent to which normative ideas about childhood, particularly notions of appropriate behaviour, affect, and sociability, are culturally and historically embedded. These ideas circulate through language, but also through bodily cues, silences, spatial arrangements, and affective atmospheres. The nursery operates as a site of early socialisation, where children are gradually initiated into broader social expectations. As Elias (2012) suggests in his work *On the Process of Civilisation*, such socialisation involves a subtle disciplining and self-regulation of bodies, emotions, and expressions. The affective norms that governed daily life in the nursery, such as self-regulation, group participation, and the ability to navigate transitions without disruption, were internalised through repeated relational scenes.

These emotionally saturated encounters function as what Lorenzer (1986) calls *scenic understandings*: embodied and symbolic moments that transmit social meaning at an unconscious level. The nursery also reflects what Bourdieu (1990) describes as a *habitus*, a structured and structuring system of dispositions that shape how individuals perceive, act, and feel. These patterns unfold largely outside conscious awareness. The *habitus*, however, remains fluid. It is continuously enacted and negotiated within the relational field of the nursery, where meanings are

made collectively and often affectively. Subjectivity and structure meet in this space. Children are positioned culturally and symbolically, interpreted through adult anxieties, norms, and expectations. Their behaviours and affective processes are filtered through the setting's values. For example, certain forms of play or speech invite praise. Others, particularly those that disrupt the prevailing rhythm of the day or challenge expectations of order, trigger redirection or concern.

Lacan's (1966) notion that subjectivity is structured through language becomes helpful here. The gaps in speech, what remains unspoken or misrecognised, often reveal more than words. These moments made visible the discomfort held within the institution around certain emotional intensities. Throughout the research process, I noticed how these norms entered my reactions. I sometimes experienced relief when children conformed to expected institutional rhythms and discomfort when they resisted. These feelings, while initially dismissed, later became important data. They offered insight into the affective economy of the nursery, what Clarke and Hoggett (2009) describe as the institutional circulation of feeling. Rustin's (2011) psychoanalytic observation method encourages attention to these subtle dynamics. Specifically, this method draws on reflexive awareness of emotional responses within observational research, helping to illuminate unconscious institutional dynamics. My countertransference, when recognised and reflected upon, gave form to aspects of the nursery's unconscious life.

These processes took place within what Winnicott (1971) refers to as a potential space, a transitional realm where symbol, gesture, and emotion circulate between the self and the other. In the nursery, language was often used to hold, manage, or displace anxiety. It functioned as a transitional object for both children and adults, particularly during moments of separation, frustration, or uncertainty. Sometimes, this allowed for play and creativity. At other times, the pressure of normative expectations foreclosed this potential, reinforcing compliance over

expression. A child's emotional expressions, displayed through withdrawal, assertion, silence, or fantasy, went beyond simply mirroring their inner feelings. These were relational events influenced by the cultural, social, and institutional frameworks that surrounded them. Their behaviours and the responses they elicited pointed to the deeper symbolic function of the nursery. Elias's (2012) concept of *figuration* helps us see these dynamics in terms of interdependencies. The child's position is never isolated. It is entangled with adult fantasies, institutional routines, and broader cultural scripts.

The themes explored in this chapter trace the emotional and symbolic terrain through which this *habitus* was enacted. In the section titled *The 'Good Child' and Emotional Regulation*, I explore how institutional ideas of appropriate childhood behaviour were constructed and reinforced through both discourse and relational interaction. In the second section, *Gendered Scripts of Emotion and Behaviour*, I examine how these ideals were shaped by gender, producing different expectations for boys and girls. The final section, *Parental Phantasies and Developmental Desires*, shifts focus to the parental gaze, examining how the nursery becomes a screen onto which caregivers project fantasies of transformation, regulation, and future success. These subthemes are analysed through a psychosocial framework that integrates psychoanalytic theory, sociological analysis, and reflexive methodology.

Drawing on fieldnotes, staff and parent interviews, and observational vignettes, the material is approached through Lorenzer's method of scenic composition. These are not treated as isolated accounts but as emotionally textured moments that illuminate the nursery's symbolic life. Together, the themes form a multi-layered analysis of how childhood is affectively and socially organised within the institution, where developmental norms, emotional ideals, and parental projections intersect to produce particular figurations of the child. What emerges from this

exploration is a picture of the nursery as not just a site of early education, but a deeply affective space where children's subjectivities are performed, resisted, and reshaped, through complex interactions between institutional structures, gendered emotional norms, and adult desires. In this dynamic field, developmental growth is not a simple process of maturation, but a continuous negotiation of belonging, conformity, and self-expression.

6.1 The 'Good Child' and Emotional Regulation

The nursery functions not only as an educational space but also as an emotional environment where children are socialised to internalise specific behavioural and emotional codes (Bourdieu, 1990). This process involves more than learning to behave according to external expectations; it requires embodying the emotional dispositions that underpin those expectations. The emotional habits cultivated in such settings emerge through institutional practices and relational dynamics that shape the socialisation of children (Hinshelwood, 2013). This section explores how emotional regulation constitutes a central component in the construction of the 'good child', an ideal that emerged implicitly through fieldwork observations. Emotional regulation here is understood as both a performance and internalisation of the nursery's behavioural norms, aligning with Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *habitus*.

The 'good child' is not a fixed or universal figure but one shaped through relational encounters and the emotional rhythms of the nursery. Bourdieu's (1990) notion of *habitus*, the deeply ingrained dispositions acquired through socialisation, offers a useful framework for understanding how children absorb the nursery's specific emotional codes. Qualities such as calmness, patience, and compliance are reinforced through repeated practices including praise, reprimands, and subtle cues from caregivers and peers. These interactions do not merely instruct children on acceptable

behaviour but actively shape the emotional dispositions that guide their future actions. As Bourdieu (1977) explains, such dispositions are acquired less through direct teaching and more through sustained exposure to the social field's expectations and practices.

Drawing on Elias's (2012) analysis in his work *On the Process of Civilisation*, emotional regulation in the nursery can be seen as part of a wider cultural project of suppressing certain affective expressions, such as anger or frustration, while encouraging others like patience and composure. Elias argued that managing emotions in this way is central to integrating individuals into social structures. Nurseries, as institutional environments, play a crucial role in shaping these emotional norms. Within this context, emotional regulation becomes both a developmental milestone and a strategy for navigating social order, teaching children which emotional expressions are socially acceptable, and which are discouraged (Elfer, 2015). As Frosh (2003) and Elfer (2015) highlight, emotional regulation in early years settings involves not only containing emotion but also shaping it to align with institutional norms, thereby creating a space where emotional expression is carefully managed.

This internalisation of emotional norms is deeply relational rather than purely individual. Children's emotional responses within the nursery reflect the interaction between the institution's *cultural habitus* and the dispositions reproduced through daily practice (Bourdieu, 1990). These dispositions, developed through social interaction with caregivers and peers, come to guide children's emotional responses and behaviour in ways consistent with institutional expectations. The 'good child', therefore, emerges as both a social construct embedded in everyday practice and a dynamic expression of the interplay between institutional values and the child's evolving sense of self.

The following vignettes, drawn from parent and staff reflections, illustrate how these emotional expectations are woven into the nursery's fabric. They reveal how children negotiate their internal emotional worlds alongside external social rhythms. In his work *On the Process of Civilisation*, Elias (2012) emphasises that the *civilising process* shapes children's emotional lives by teaching them to regulate behaviour according to socially sanctioned norms. In this light, the nursery is not simply an educational institution but a site of emotional socialisation, where children learn to modulate feelings in response to both familial and institutional demands (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). The dual process of conforming to *institutional habitus* while managing internal emotions is thus central to understanding the construction of the 'good child'.

Muhtadi's emotional regulation is a striking example of how these norms are instilled in children at a very young age. Muhtadi's mother offers a clear example of these processes at work:

So, he is very soft anyway. He is calm, he listens, they used to tell me that if a child used to come and take his stuff, he would just be quiet, doesn't do anything. But recently, he is able to say no, I don't like that, it is my turn, give it back ... and of course... He knows how to be patient, he knows how to go to the bathroom, so he knows that. He knows also number two or number one, and to wash his hands and all of that.

Muhtadi's shift from passivity to assertiveness, for example by stating 'it's my turn', demonstrates a developmental progression in which he learns not only to regulate behaviour but also to negotiate social interactions within the nursery's expectations for emotional control. This assertion of self is itself a form of emotional regulation that the nursery encourages and reinforces through praise. His mastery of personal care routines also signals his integration into the institutional rhythms, where self-regulation is a marker of maturity and readiness for subsequent

developmental stages. This trajectory exemplifies Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *habitus*, with the child internalising the emotional and behavioural dispositions valued by the institution.

Rapha's mother also reflects on how the nursery environment shapes emotional regulation:

Well, I think it has been good. It's been really good for him to be social and with kids and with learning from other adults and stuff like that. And emotionally, like, I do feel like there's been stages where his tantrums have been pretty bad. But I don't know, I wouldn't say that that's attributed to any kids here or anything. But it could be that he's acting out or he's modelling something he's seen at the nursery.

Here, Rapha's emotional outbursts are framed as part of normal developmental challenges, yet his mother recognises the nursery's influence on his behaviour. The possibility that Rapha is 'acting out' or modelling emotional behaviours observed in the nursery underscores the social nature of emotional learning. Corsaro (1988, 1993) highlights how children acquire and *creatively reproduce* emotional behaviours by observing and interacting with peers and adults, not only absorbing social norms but also creatively reproducing and transforming emotional expressions. Rapha's tantrums can therefore be seen as attempts to navigate the nursery's emotional scripts, where demonstrating emotional control is a socially mediated learning process. His outbursts reveal not only frustration but also the ongoing socialisation of emotion within group expectations.

Amy's mother reflects on her daughter's developmental journey, which highlights the role of the nursery in supporting emotional and physical growth:

Yeah, so, first, it was because I was going back to work, that was one thing, but at the same time, I was like, I wanted her to socialise because when she started going to the nursery, she was only 11 months old. So, she ... in a way it helped. She was crawling. So then by the time she turned one, she was walking, and I think that was because, you know, she was one of the only children at the time crawling around the room, in the baby room. So, the other children have seen the other children ... walking around, I think helps motivate, you know, motivate her as well to walk around to start walking basically.

Amy's development illustrates how the nursery functions as a *transitional space*, where milestones such as walking are not simply individual achievements but socially mediated experiences. Her ability to walk was influenced not only by physical readiness but also by observing peers. The nursery's emotionally charged environment thus provides opportunities for children to engage in developmental tasks through both structured activities and informal peer interactions. This resonates with Deacon's (1997) argument regarding the peer group's central role in emotional and cognitive development, where learning occurs through both direct instruction and relational-symbolic processes in shared social spaces.

Caroline's mother offers insight into the nursery as a site for emotional self-regulation and social confidence:

I think, to play with other children more ... Caroline is there with me for a few minutes, but then she goes, she makes friends very easily, even when we go to the park. She goes that place though, so I think that's a good thing with her ... she talks and things like that to other people, of course children and things like that.

Caroline's ease in making friends and engaging socially, both within the nursery and outside of it, highlights the emotional benefits of early childhood education. The nursery provides a space for Caroline to develop social and emotional competencies, which extend beyond the institutional setting. Her mother's account suggests that Caroline's ability to engage confidently with others is rooted in her early experiences of socialising and playing with peers at the nursery. This also resonates with Lisa's comments on the importance of social interaction in early years education,

I think quite positively because the simple fact of interacting with other children, that's really good. I think it's one of the really positive impacts on children, because some of them, I mean, some of the children that don't attend nursery, when they arrive to school, teachers can feel that lack of social interaction. They don't know how to approach other children, and here, because we have a big room, it's quite easy for them to interact with different children.

Lisa's remarks highlight how the nursery environment helps children internalise social norms and scripts, preparing them emotionally for future social contexts. This preparation is not solely cognitive but deeply emotional, as children learn to navigate their feelings alongside others' expectations in a structured yet supportive setting.

Emotional regulation in the nursery is therefore not just an individual process but is also shaped by relational dynamics and the emotional scripts embedded in the environment. The institutional expectation of self-regulation, while promoting emotional maturity, can sometimes mask deeper emotional tensions. This is evident in the subtle emotional cues that children give, often hidden behind social scripts of compliance and calmness. For example, Amy's behaviour during quiet reading time illustrates this dynamic:

Amy resumes reading out loud, unbothered by what is happening around her. She does this for a while, reading out loud then going quiet in intervals.

Amy's oscillation between verbal and silent states demonstrates the internalised expectations of emotional regulation in the nursery. Her ability to modulate her emotional expression and behaviour according to the rhythm of the nursery's routines reflects her emotional learning. However, this modulation of emotional responses may also involve emotional suppression, a process that reflects what Kristeva (1982) describes as the semiotic realm, where emotions are expressed through bodily gestures, rhythm, and tone long before they are articulated in words. Amy's actions serve as a subtle, embodied negotiation of the expectations placed on her within the nursery, where the performance of calmness and composure is not just an emotional regulation but a cultural expectation.

The process of emotional regulation is not only linked to the individual child but is also deeply relational. The way staff members interact with children, the feedback they provide, and the emotional cues they give all contribute to shaping the emotional dynamics of the nursery. As Marie reflects:

I think it's good for their development, like their social skills and personal, social and emotional development. I think for that it is very, very important for them, like being with other children as well, because we might have our children like Rapha, he's the only member in his family, so being with other children, I think, learning things, learning from each other, yeah ...

Marie's insight highlights how the nursery acts as a *transitional space* where children develop not only academic skills but also crucial emotional and social competencies. For children like Rapha,

who may not have siblings, the nursery offers vital opportunities to learn emotional boundaries and self-regulation in a relational context. Emotional growth is thus fostered not only through instruction but also through embodied, relational experiences with peers and adults.

However, this developmental process is complex and often fraught with tension. The ‘good child’ ideal typically rests on emotional *containment*, with children expected to conform to pre-established emotional roles that serve institutional aims. While those who embody the ‘good child’ succeed in regulating emotions quietly, children who express intense feelings may be perceived as needing more time to adjust or, in some cases, as challenging to the institution’s order. This tension between emotional regulation and expression is a central feature of early childhood education, reflecting broader themes of institutional control, socialisation, and emotional labour.

Ultimately, the ‘good child’ is not simply a passive recipient of institutional norms but an active participant in shaping and negotiating those norms. The emotional regulation that children learn within the nursery is both a reflection of their growing emotional awareness and an embodiment of the institutional expectations they are asked to internalise. This process of emotional learning is not merely developmental but deeply relational and social, shaped by the interactions, expectations, and emotional scripts that govern the nursery environment. It is through these interactions that children learn not only to regulate their emotions but also to navigate the complex emotional terrain of institutional life.

6.2 Gendered Scripts of Emotion and Behaviour

Building on the observational approach introduced earlier, this section discusses how gendered emotional and behavioural scripts operate within the nursery setting. Within the nursery’s social

landscape, expectations around emotional expression and behaviour did not operate in a gender-neutral vacuum. Rather, they were deeply structured by gendered scripts that shaped how children were perceived, responded to, and guided through their emotional and social development. Gendered expectations in the nursery were rarely stated explicitly. They were inscribed in quotidian interactions, embedded in play, reinforced in praise, and mirrored in adult narratives. Yet these same expectations shaped how children's emotional lives were read, responded to, and symbolically positioned. Rather than being external to the relational and institutional rhythms of the setting, gender was produced and reinforced through everyday moments: how children's play was scaffolded, how their frustrations were interpreted, and in the language used to describe their personalities. This gendering did not emerge solely from parental beliefs or cultural norms brought into the nursery. It crystallised through micro-processes of daily life, praise, discipline, role-play, and affiliation that structured belonging.

Drawing on Hollway (2006), Benjamin (2013), and Chodorow (1978), I conceptualise gendered subjectivities as co-constructed in relational space. Recognition and misrecognition alike become the scaffolding for the emotional positions children can inhabit. From a relational psychoanalytic and feminist perspective, these scripts are not simply learned roles but operate at the level of affect, becoming internalised as part of the child's developing sense of self. Jessica Benjamin's (1995, 2017) writing on *intersubjectivity* shows how girls are often positioned to maintain connection through self-regulation, whereas boys are guided toward separation and mastery. These are not equal developmental options. They imply very different kinds of psychological compromise. The feminine becomes aligned with *containment* and care. The masculine is tethered to agency and control. But both subject positions emerge within structures that obscure the psychological costs of these accommodations.

Throughout the fieldwork, I became increasingly aware of how emotional tones were subtly gendered. Girls were often described as ‘emotionally aware,’ ‘nurturing,’ or, more pejoratively, ‘manipulative.’ Boys, by contrast, were ‘active,’ ‘challenging,’ or ‘independent.’ These descriptions were rarely neutral. They circulated through staff meetings, daily conversations, and informal reflections, helping to form a shared affective economy. Following Bourdieu (1990), these terms were not isolated labels but expressions of the *institutional habitus*, the set of ingrained institutional norms and practices, which made certain behaviours seem natural or desirable. The gendered asymmetries I encountered echoed the insights of Chodorow (1978), Mitchell (1974), and Benjamin (1998), who argue that early emotional life is shaped along gendered pathways. Girls are more often drawn into relationality, encouraged to tune into others’ needs, and to manage their own feelings through compliance. Boys, conversely, are invited to separate, to master frustration, and to assert themselves, sometimes aggressively.

Within the nursery, these trajectories were supported not only by discourse but through bodily routines and emotional practices that made certain responses more permissible than others. As Hinshelwood (2013) suggests, institutions often develop unconscious routines that reduce psychological anxiety by categorising children into emotionally legible types. Gender served both as an organising framework and a symbolic function. Kristeva (1982) and Irigaray (1985) remind us that gender is not only lived and relational but also inscribed within the *Symbolic Order*. The feminine becomes a vessel for others’ anxieties, a space where unmet needs are deposited and cared for. The masculine, conversely, is imagined as coherent, active, and defended. These symbolic positions were not abstract. They played out through the most mundane nursery scenes, moments of play, of refusal, of shared attention, and shaped what forms of care and *containment* could be offered to children.

Amy's repeated engagement in caregiving play offers a vivid example of how these expectations became lived scripts. In one observation, Amy grabbed a butterfly and a ladybug figure and staged a dramatic confrontation:

Amy grabs the ladybug and starts pouring dirt over it again. After some time, she takes it out and makes noises as she makes it walk. She grabs a butterfly figure and makes both figures go into an intense battle full of noises and cries.

Rather than soothing or nurturing the figures, Amy enacted a scene of intensity and conflict. This symbolic act disrupted the nursery's affective economy, where femininity is associated with calmness, care, and compliance. Her scene suggested an alternative grammar of affect, one in which aggression could coexist with nurture, if only briefly. On another day, 'Amy grabs her backpack and puts it on Mark, strapping it in by the front clasp. They walk around, holding hands and she says, come on, my baby, we are going to leave the nursery.' The mimicry of adult routines, performed through acts of relational *containment*, reflected her internalisation of caretaking roles. She was becoming legible within the institution as a 'good girl', a figure of control, responsibility, and interpersonal harmony. Yet this legibility, as Benjamin (2013) argues, comes at a cost when children are prematurely placed in positions of responsibility, displacing their own need for care.

Amy often sought out a younger child, hugging him and referring to him as 'my baby' while enacting caregiving scenarios. Staff read this as affectionate and developmentally mature. Yet the ease with which this behaviour was absorbed into a narrative of femininity reveals how quickly girls are pulled into domestic and caring roles. According to Mitchell (1974), such behaviours can be understood not just as developmental stages but as part of the reproduction of *mothering*,

creating socially sanctioned pathways that align femininity with service and emotional attunement.

Amy's caring behaviour did not always feel playful. At times, she appeared tense or frustrated when the younger child resisted her attention. These moments were overlooked or reframed as minor inconsistencies in an otherwise 'helpful' child. But as Benjamin (2013) cautions, when children are prematurely placed in roles of emotional responsibility, they may relinquish their own need for recognition in order to maintain connection. Her play with Mark extended these themes. These scenes mimicked the rhythms of staff and parent routines; an echo of adult authority performed through relational care. Furthermore, they suggest a self-structured through roles, an identity forged in relation to others' expectations of nurture and relational responsibility. As Kristeva (1982) notes, subjectivity is always formed in relation to the projections and demands of others. Amy's subjectivity was overdetermined by a cultural fantasy of the caring girl, and as part of the *habitus* of the nursery.

In contrast, Rapha's expressive and directive tendencies were read as unruly. Rapha offered a gendered counterpoint. In one observation:

Rapha is on top of a container, using it as a ladder, but a staff member is carrying him down. He kicks in the air, smiling. He runs off to flip another container and go on top of it, the staff asks him to stop. He walks away and starts doing circles. When the staff walks away, he goes and starts picking leaves off of the willow tree. He stays like this for a while, collecting the leaves until he has a big bunch and he scatters them into the air. He runs to grab the container and Leonora calls him, 'Rapha, please do not.' Rapha giggles

and let's go of the container and goes back to the log he was standing on to continue plucking the leaves out.

His exuberance, movement, and sensory exploration were not framed as symbolic play but instead treated as a disruption. His mother later reflected:

He used to run and then just fall on like, and I'd be like, are you okay? And it was like, he'd get up and then just do it again ... like sliding, they go on their knees, or you know... He just, it was something he could just keep doing.

These repetitive actions, rich in embodied meaning, were part of Rapha's emotional language. Yet, within the nursery, they risked being read through a behavioural lens. As Spielrein (1912) reminds us, when the drive to symbolise is denied symbolic space, it risks becoming destructive or misunderstood. Rapha's symbolic acts were abundant, as his mother elaborated, 'He's definitely grown a love for superheroes ... he likes playing a game called bad guys. And we play pirates and captains and whatever.' But these fantasies were rarely scaffolded or engaged with by staff. Instead, he was often redirected.

His mother recognised the wider context:

He has, he will kind of, you know, stand his foot and go, no! Oh, my goodness me, where does this come from? But yeah, I do know, obviously, it comes with the territory of being four and pushing boundaries ... it's also just challenging behaviour and just seeing what you can get away with.

Her framing oscillated between empathy and control, shaped by the normative expectations of both age and gender. In this sense, Rapha was caught in a double bind. He was expected to

contain emotions that had no symbolic outlet and discouraged from expressing them through the very play that could render them meaningful. Marie, reflecting on Rapha's experience, put it more starkly:

I think sometimes children like Rapha... that's bigger than what the nursery could actually do, you know. But I think on its own, the containment he gets is enough for the setting, yeah. But I think his behaviour comes from something that's, yeah, home.

Even Whitney, another staff member, framed Rapha's development through the lens of future-readiness:

I think he's grown up. He's bored of the ... maybe the activities in the room. That's what I think because he's done it all before. And he wants more challenging things. And I think that him going to school is good because school is more challenging.

While not unsympathetic, their comment reveals how behavioural complexity in boys can be reinterpreted as restlessness or readiness, bypassing the emotional undercurrents entirely. Their words echo what Hinshelwood & Stamenova (2019) describe as a form of institutional defence through attribution, where emotional difficulty is located elsewhere, in the home, outside the nursery's responsibility. It also reflects an unspoken limit to *containment*. Rapha, as a boy whose emotional world expressed itself in action rather than words, fell outside the nursery's affective repertoire.

Muhtadi's story illustrates a different gendered pattern. His mother described him as 'very soft anyways. He is calm, he listens. They used to tell me that if a child used to come and take his stuff, he would just be quiet, doesn't do anything.' Her reflection echoed the way boys like

Muhtadi are often celebrated when their behaviour aligns with institutional ease, characterized by being non-disruptive, compliant, and self-regulating. Yet she also noticed a shift, ‘Recently he is able to say, “No, I don’t like that, it is my turn, give it back.”’ This developmental shift toward assertiveness was marked with pride, yet its framing still rested on calmness and appropriateness. ‘He knows how to be patient, he knows how to go to the bathroom ... and to wash his hands and all of that.’ These bodily routines became markers of his success in navigating the expectations of the nursery: cleanliness, compliance, and emotional control.

In observing Muhtadi, these dynamics played out through moments of gentle deference and tentative assertion. During one scene,

Muhtadi looks at them in silence then offers the shell to them. They take the shell, and they all run inside but quickly step out again. When they step outside Muhtadi has the shell again, a little girl stops him by the door and tells him to put his shell away in his shelf. Muhtadi nods and goes to put his shell away.

The moment is subtle but telling. His quiet offering of the shell to the others and his immediate compliance when told to put it away suggest a relational positioning structured through obedience and *containment*. His actions were socially appropriate, but they also signalled how gendered scripts were negotiated through small acts of yielding and acquiescence. Following Bourdieu (1990), such moments are not isolated. They sediment as embodied practices, shaping Muhtadi’s *habitus* as a boy who is emotionally legible because he remains within bounds.

Yet even within this quiet *containment*, moments of frustration emerged. His mother explained:

Recently, in the last month or so, when he wants something and he doesn't get it, he will be upset, and it takes some time to calm him down. I will try all the different ways, but I think I am missing something ... It is not screaming, but he will be crying, and he is very like [pouting] 'hm ... I want it!' But he doesn't say what he wants, and I tell him, 'Tell me what do you want, to understand you need to talk to me.' And he just does not want to listen.

Her reflection reveals a moment of emotional impasse, where the demand for verbalisation fails to reach its mark, and where emotional *containment* falters. Drawing on Benjamin (2017), this might be seen as a moment of misrecognition. The child's affect becomes unreadable not because it is absent, but because it does not conform to a form of expression that the institution, and even the parent, knows how to interpret. The pressure to 'say what you want' reflects an internalised imperative to convert affect into symbol, yet for Muhtadi, this demand risks eclipsing the emotion itself.

In the classroom, Muhtadi often complied with staff requests quickly and quietly. In one moment, he was asked to put a toy away and did so without protest. In another, he abandoned a toy mid-play and shifted to another activity, only to retreat again. These moments of withdrawal reflected a negotiation of his own emotional space. He seemed caught between the pull toward engagement and the pressure to remain within acceptable bounds.

Caroline's emotional expressivity, by contrast, drew frequent attention, though not always in affirming ways. Her mother described her as 'very caring,' but also reflected on her strong emotional reactions:

She can get upset quite easily... not easily, but when she doesn't get what she wants. She looks at me and says, 'I don't like you,' and walks off. But I say, 'That's fine, I'm not your friend, I'm your mummy.'

These exchanges reveal a gendered dynamic of emotional testing and limit-setting. The mother's response, while pragmatic, also reinscribes a boundary: the mother is a figure of authority, not mutuality. This echoes Chodorow's (1978) understanding of the mother-daughter dyad, where girls come to know themselves through identification, but are also asked to moderate that intensity.

Caroline's emotional expressivity was mirrored in play. In one observation:

She stands behind the other girls in the playdough area, watching them silently, then suddenly she grabs the playdough and starts making shapes, throwing it in the air. When one girl comments on her actions, Caroline says, 'I can't make a ladybug.'

Caroline said this, referring to the shape the girl was just praised for completing. The scene offers a moment of ambivalence, assertive action followed by self-doubt. Caroline's throwing of the playdough could be read as a refusal of normative femininity, an affective burst that disrupts the expectations of quiet, contained play. Yet her declaration that she cannot make a ladybug repositions her within the field of failure and feminine inadequacy. As Lorenzer (1986) might argue, these scenic enactments are more than play; they are rehearsals of emotional scripts, where gendered belonging and exclusion are negotiated in embodied form.

In another moment, 'She grabs the lipstick again and shows it to the staff member, who responds with a quick, distracted comment before returning to her task.' This bid for recognition, repeating

the gesture of display, is met with a muted response. The lipstick, a gendered object, becomes a vehicle through which Caroline seeks affirmation, but the institution offers only partial acknowledgment. The distracted staff response does not overtly deny her expression, but neither does it validate it. This emotional ambiguity can be explained by Benjamin's (1995) concern that children, especially girls, often attune themselves to others in a way that anticipates their needs, and when recognition does not come, they internalise the misattunement as a fault of their own. These domestic scripts became deeply internalised. Lorenzer's (1986) theory of *scenic understanding* helps make sense of this: the repeated enactment of play scenes becomes a way of knowing the self, one that is not consciously chosen but affectively inhabited.

Caroline's play in the house corner was not simply imaginative. It was a form of cultural inscription, a re-enactment of gendered care that was both familiar and unexamined. Moreover, the emotional conversations with girls like Caroline were often expansive. Staff would sit with her, talk through her feelings, and try to name emotions. Boys, by contrast, were more often redirected through commands: 'Calm down,' 'Use your words,' 'Stop that.' These brief interventions implied that boys needed fewer opportunities to symbolise their feelings verbally and more management through space or activity. The opportunity to verbalise was limited.

As a researcher, I noticed these patterns shaping my own responses. I felt more comfortable with girls who could verbalise their feelings or offer care to others. With boys who disrupted or resisted, I often felt uncertain or hesitant. These affective responses were not solely mine. They were part of the emotional grammar of the nursery.

Clarke and Hoggett (2009) describe how institutions circulate emotions in patterned ways, creating shared economies of feeling that structure who receives attention, comfort, and space.

The children who straddled these gendered binaries, assertive girls and sensitive boys, were both celebrated and constrained. They were legible but unstable, visible but difficult to hold. The nursery tended to reward the emotionally regulated, the compliant, the self-soothing. It made less space for ambivalence, contradiction, or affective ambiguity. As Benjamin (2013) argues, genuine recognition involves a willingness to hold the other in their full subjectivity. But this requires time, openness, and the capacity to tolerate emotional disruption, resources often scarce in institutional life.

As I moved through the affective fabric of the nursery, it became increasingly clear to me that gender was not simply something children brought with them, nor something imposed from outside. It was lived and felt in the rhythms of the setting, in the pauses before a child spoke, in the tone of a staff member's praise, in the quiet shifts between activities. Gendered emotional scripts did not arrive fully formed; they crystallised through moments of affiliation and refusal, through play and withdrawal, through how a child's feeling was seen or ignored. These scripts structured the symbolic field in which children became recognisable, legible, and held, or not.

In observing and listening, I found myself repeatedly drawn into the institutional logics that underpinned these interactions. Calmness in girls was praised as maturity. Assertiveness in boys was tolerated until it tipped into excess. Children who complied with these gendered affective codes, who regulated their own emotions, or those of others, were seen as developing well. Those who resisted, or who fell between, often became difficult to hold in mind. It was not simply what children did that mattered, but how their actions resonated within the nursery's *emotional landscape*. As Benjamin (2013) reminds us, mutual recognition is not guaranteed. It requires a willingness to be changed by the other. In the institutional setting, where time is short and emotion is often managed rather than metabolised, that mutuality was often strained.

Harris (2007) makes a similar point when discussing the role of institutions in shaping emotional experiences. In a space such as the nursery, gendered emotional scripts do not only reflect personal traits or innate behaviours; they are embedded within a set of relational exchanges and institutional expectations. The ways children's feelings are perceived, validated, or rejected by adults and peers alike are tightly interwoven with broader cultural and societal scripts, ones which often surpass individual intent or desire. Harris's notion of *soft assembly* is particularly helpful here, suggesting that gender, like emotion, is continuously constructed in relation to others within specific institutional fields. This relational matrix is central to understanding the dynamics at play and the psychic cost of emotional regulation within institutions.

What struck me most, however, was the emotional labour carried not only by staff but by the children themselves. Amy's enactments of caregiving, Rapha's exuberant refusals, Muhtadi's quiet negotiations, and Caroline's emotionally saturated drawings all spoke to the ways children inhabited and stretched the gendered scripts available to them. These were not static performances but dynamic relational acts, attempts to secure place, meaning, and recognition within the nursery's social architecture. In Bourdieu's (1990) terms, their gestures were expressions of a deeply embodied *habitus*: the product of repeated interactions, sedimented over time, which shaped how emotion could be expressed, received, and made sense of. But *habitus* does not operate in isolation. It is always in tension with the field. In this nursery, the field was saturated with developmental expectations, emotional norms, and symbolic meanings that were themselves shaped by gendered, classed, and culturally shaped forces. The nursery, like any institution, operates not only through what it says but through what it leaves unsaid. Gendered feeling rules circulated beneath the surface, structuring what kinds of emotion could be spoken, what kinds must be suppressed, and what kinds could only be played out symbolically.

In tracing these dynamics, I have argued that gendered scripts of emotion and behaviour are not secondary to development. They are central to how children come to know themselves in relation to others. These scripts shape what forms of care are possible, what expressions are intelligible, and how children are positioned within the symbolic and affective structures of the nursery. The child who conforms to institutional gendered norms is often praised when she regulates her feelings or those of others. Conversely, those who resist these expectations or fall between are frequently marginalised or pathologised. Boys who express vulnerability are often misunderstood. Girls who manage others' emotions can lose access to their own. These dynamics are not merely developmental. They are psychosocial. They emerge at the intersection of relational need, institutional *habitus*, and cultural fantasy. They reflect what Kristeva (1982) called the symbolic scaffolding of the subject, and what Bourdieu (1990) referred to as embodied structures of practice.

This uneven availability of transitional space raises broader questions about who gets to experiment, who gets to symbolise, and who is recognised as emotionally developing in a 'healthy' way. The institutional field, shaped by social class, race, gender, and developmental ideology, filters emotional life through particular logics of intelligibility. Dahlberg and Moss (2005) argue that dominant early childhood discourses often produce normative images of the child, one of them being the '*good child*', an idealised figure who embodies a particular form of behaviour shaped by prevailing societal and institutional norms. These constructed ideals prioritise certain forms of emotional expression and behaviour, rewarding emotional legibility while marginalising children whose experiences or ways of being do not conform to these norms. Such frameworks risk oversimplifying the complexity and diversity of children's emotional lives and development. These images emerge from a confluence of cultural scripts, institutional

rhythms, and gendered expectations, all of which favour certain kinds of emotional responses and suppress others.

However, as I observed, these constructed ideals are fraught with limitations. Gendered emotional scripts filter emotional expression through particular logics of intelligibility, privileging certain emotional responses while making others difficult to recognise or contain. Harris (2007) adds further complexity by highlighting how emotional expectations are not only formed through personal interaction but are embedded within broader institutional practices that favour particular expressions of gendered behaviour. These behaviours are often aligned with an idealised view of development, one that does not fully account for the complexity of children's lived experiences. This relational matrix shapes not only how children are recognised within the nursery but also who gets to experiment with emotional expression and who is denied the space to do so. The field, as Harris suggests, becomes a space where certain emotional scripts are reproduced and reinforced, while others are constrained or suppressed, all under the guise of promoting *healthy* emotional development. The result is a narrow, institutional vision of what constitutes the '*good child*', which limits the emotional complexity and depth of children's relational worlds.

The implications of these idealised constructions of the '*good child*' are significant. When developmental 'health' is equated with emotional conformity, practitioners may inadvertently pathologise difference, overlooking the creative and transformative potential within children's less legible forms of expression. This not only restricts opportunities for emotional experimentation and growth but also reinforces existing social hierarchies by privileging those whose modes of being align with dominant developmental ideals. A more reflexive approach to early years practice would require questioning how these ideals are produced and whose emotional realities they serve to legitimise.

The findings in this chapter point to the psychic consequences of these arrangements. Girls who carry others' emotions are celebrated but rarely asked what they themselves feel. Boys who act out are contained but not always heard. Gender here is not simply a variable; it is a structuring principle of emotional life, shaping how children become knowable to others and to themselves. As Benjamin (1998) and Hollway (2006) have argued, gendered subjectivity is not a fixed identity but a relational and affective position, shaped by recognition, misrecognition, and the institutional defences that seek to manage anxiety rather than sit with it. What remains with me is not the clarity of these categories, but their porousness. Children exceeded the scripts made available to them. They shifted between care and defiance, regulation and chaos, silence and song. Their emotional lives refused containment, even as the institution gently, and sometimes not so gently, tried to hold them within familiar frames. This is where the most meaningful work happened: in the rupture, the misfit, the moment that could not be easily classified.

6.3 Parental Phantasies and Developmental Desires

This section shifts focus from observation of the nursery environment to the complex desires and projections parents hold regarding their children's development and emotional growth. The nursery was not only a space where children were socialised into the emotional and behavioural norms of institutional life, but also a setting onto which parents projected hopes, fears, and fantasies, often implicitly, about who their children were and who they might become. While previous sections explored how these developmental ideals shaped the symbolic and emotional positions children inhabited within the nursery, this theme turns more directly to the parental gaze. What emerged across interviews and informal conversations was a shared desire for

transformation: for emotional regulation, social fluidity, and symbolic coherence. This was rarely articulated in explicit developmental terms. Rather, it came in fragments and hopes that a child would ‘open up,’ ‘learn to listen,’ ‘be less shy,’ or ‘get ready for school.’ These desires were often presented as pragmatic or observational. Yet beneath them, I came to sense more complex currents: unconscious phantasies about dependency, recognition, and social legibility.

Fraiberg et al.’s (1975) notion of the ‘ghosts in the nursery’ provides a useful starting point. In their psychoanalytic framing, parental responses to children are often haunted by unresolved losses and unmet needs from the past, emotional residues that surface not as memory but as projection. The nursery, in this context, becomes a kind of psychic container, a place where fantasies of correction and healing are displaced onto the child. These are not fantasies in the pejorative sense, but rather structuring narratives shaped by cultural, historical, and relational contingencies. As Dolto (1955) and Hollway and Jefferson (2013) have argued, the child often becomes a vehicle through which adults negotiate their own psychic tensions between control and freedom, dependency and autonomy, visibility and invisibility. These phantasies intersect with institutional logics in often ambivalent ways. Echoing Dahlberg and Moss (2005), the desire for children to fit the institutional mould of the ‘*good child*’, one who adheres to emotional norms and developmental expectations, further illustrates how these projections not only shape individual identity but also reinforce broader societal and institutional ideals of what constitutes ‘proper’ emotional growth

Following Bourdieu (1977), the nursery can be viewed as a site for the production of *symbolic capital*, where children are subtly prepared for the dispositions and practices of school readiness. The desire for children to become ‘emotionally mature,’ ‘independent,’ or ‘socially confident’ was rarely challenged. Yet what counted as maturity or confidence was shaped by unspoken

assumptions about normality, acceptability, and cultural belonging. Moss (2016) critiques this in terms of neoliberal developmentalism: the assumption that emotional progress can be linear, measurable, and universally desired. Within the nursery, this played out in quiet but powerful ways. Children who complied with adult expectations, or who began to show signs of emotional regulation, were seen as having ‘improved.’ Those who resisted, regressed, or expressed ambivalence were more difficult to understand.

Across the interviews, parents described the nursery in hopeful terms: as a site of expansion, support, and growth. However, within these accounts were more ambivalent undercurrents, traces of anxiety, disappointment, and contradiction. Muhtadi’s mother’s narrative encapsulates many of the dynamics at play: an investment in institutional transformation, a complex negotiation of cultural identity, and a desire for her child to embody both emotional resilience and social fluency. The analysis that follows traces how these fantasies become woven into the institutional rhythms of the nursery, shaping children’s affective trajectories and the ways they are held or misheld within the symbolic and emotional architecture of early years education. Muhtadi’s mother reflected with pride and relief on the arc of her son’s development:

Well, he started like, a very young boy. No talking, very, very shy. And slowly, slowly, he could say two or three words, do toilet. Well, actually we have not had any complaints from teachers. And, well, I noticed in the three to four, room he can actually say things, like words coming out. That was something they used to tell me that makes me really excited.

Her words carried the cadence of achievement, where language acquisition, toilet training, and teacher approval became *signifiers* of emotional growth. But the affective charge of this statement

was less about developmental milestones in isolation and more about their symbolic weight. In Muhtadi's apparent transformation, the nursery emerged not only as a site of education but as an emotional apparatus for soothing parental anxieties, a space where fears of regression or inadequacy could be recast as narratives of progress.

This same sense of narrative momentum appeared in Rapha's mother's account. 'He didn't really have any interest in trying to walk ... but it was literally within two days of coming to nursery when my husband went back to work in May, he started walking.' The sudden leap into mobility, attributed to his proximity to older children, was framed not just as developmental coincidence but as evidence of institutional efficacy. The nursery became a space where the child's potential could be unlocked through immersion and modelling. The fantasy of rapid emergence into a new stage of being was echoed in other narratives too. Progress was imagined less as a gradual unfolding and more as a kind of symbolic rebirth: from dependency to competence, from opacity to legibility.

Yet these fantasies of transformation often came with ambivalence. Muhtadi's mother acknowledged the cultural tension at play: 'Our culture is different than the culture here, so sometimes it is like we do not do that, you can do it at nursery, but not at home.' The nursery, then, is cast as both resource and rupture, a place where desired attributes can be cultivated, but also one that pulls the child toward a different cultural horizon. What appears on the surface as optimism is underpinned by a quieter negotiation of belonging, of what it means to raise a child between worlds.

Amy's mother also described a shift:

When she started going to the nursery, she was only 11 months old ... in a way it helped. She was crawling, and by the time she turned one, she was walking. And I think that was because she was one of the only children crawling around the baby room. Seeing the other children walking helped motivate her.

Again, the nursery is positioned as a site of symbolic contagion, where proximity to more advanced peers incites growth. However, alongside these stories of expansion came quieter notes of worry. In a later interview, she shared, ‘She can write her name, but when she gets to reception, they’ll expect them to write the alphabet. If she can only form the letters in her name, how do I know she’s ready to do the others?’ Beneath the language of progress is an anxious expectation, a quiet anxiety about school readiness and normative benchmarks. Here, the fantasy of transformation begins to fray, revealing its underside: the fear that change might not be fast enough, that improvement might falter.

For many mothers, the desire for transformation was entangled with questions of emotional *containment*. Rapha’s mother described him as having grown ‘more social’ and emotionally expressive yet also noted that he ‘pushes boundaries.’ Amy’s mother, meanwhile, reflected on how her daughter, once shy, had become a ‘social butterfly,’ but also worried about academic performance. These layered accounts suggested that emotional expression and behavioural manageability were not separate concerns but intimately linked. To be emotionally mature, in the fantasy, was to be socially fluid, cognitively ready, and easily integrated. What was sought was not simply expression, but a kind of emotional legibility.

Caroline’s mother offered a strikingly layered portrait:

Even when she's upset, she finds ways to express it. One day she came back with a very dark picture, using all black and dark colours. I asked her why, and she said it's because the weather was bad that day.

This symbolic act of emotional expression was read as insight and sensitivity. Yet in other moments, staff spoke of Caroline as 'manipulative' or 'too clever,' suggesting an undercurrent of mistrust. Caroline's creativity, her willingness to narrate feeling through art, was sometimes positioned as a form of emotional excess, a trait to be managed rather than understood. Her desire to please, to create things 'for mommy,' or to ask staff if her card 'is good enough for the chicks,' revealed not just affective attunement but a search for recognition. That recognition, however, was shaped by the phantasies projected onto her: mature, self-sufficient, emotionally articulate.

Across these narratives, the fantasy of the 'transformed child' intersected with structural and cultural expectations. The nursery was expected to prepare children for school, for social belonging, and for emotional regulation, but these goals were saturated with adult projections. As Bourdieu (1977) reminds us, what seems like neutral developmental progress is often the inculcation of a *dominant habitus*. Children were not only becoming themselves but becoming saturated within a specific institutional logic. These projections, however, were not merely passive; they also shaped how the children's emotional expressions were met with both approval and suspicion, reflecting a deep tension between the institutional desire for conformity and the child's need for authentic self-expression. As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest, the idealised 'good child' often becomes the embodiment of institutional expectations, not only in their actions but in the affective and emotional scripts they are expected to follow. Within that process, much was left unspoken: the gaps between fantasy and reality, the psychic cost of regulation, and the complexity of the child's own experience.

Reflecting on these narratives, it becomes evident that the fantasy of the ‘transformed child’ is not a neutral aspiration but one steeped in adult projections, shaped by cultural and institutional norms. The nursery, as a site of emotional and social preparation, was a place where children were not only moulded to fit developmental ideals but also caught in the tension between institutional expectations and their own authentic emotional expressions. As Bourdieu (1977) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005) suggest, what appears to be neutral developmental growth is often the reinforcement of a dominant habitus, one that shapes how children are expected to behave and feel. In this process, much remains unsaid: the psychological cost of adhering to institutional norms, the gap between fantasy and reality, and the child’s own desire for authentic self-expression. Ultimately, these dynamics highlight not just the institutional logic at play, but the emotional and relational work required to navigate and make sense of a world that frequently positions children between conformity and authenticity.

Conclusions: Scripts, Fantasies, and the Emotional Life of the Child

This chapter has traced how the nursery operates as a complex psychosocial space where early childhood subjectivities are not simply shaped but actively negotiated and contested within institutional, cultural and unconscious dynamics. Rather than approaching development as a linear or solely individual process, the analysis presented here has framed the child’s emergence as relational and symbolically mediated, formed through intersecting discourses of emotional intelligibility, gendered expectations and parental desire. Drawing together the three interlinked themes of emotional regulation and the figure of the ‘good child’, gendered scripts of emotion and behaviour and parental phantasies of transformation, this chapter has situated the nursery as a site of *civilising pressures* as described by Elias (2012), *habitus* formation in Bourdieu’s (1977) sense and intersubjective negotiation as elaborated by Benjamin (1995; 2017).

Within this context, the child appears not as a passive recipient of care or instruction but as a relational figure through whom broader institutional and psychological logics are rehearsed. The figure of the ‘good child’ emerged as an institutional and moral ideal deeply embedded in the routines and rhythms of nursery life. Emotional regulation was understood not only as a developmental milestone but also as a sign of maturity and acceptability. Children who could self-soothe, move smoothly between activities and express themselves in legible, verbalised ways were praised, often without reflection on what such regulation might cost psychically. As Bourdieu (1990) reminds us, the dispositions that constitute *habitus* are acquired not through explicit teaching but through repeated and embodied participation in social fields. In the nursery, these dispositions were as much affective as behavioural: learning to calm down, use words and share nicely became both developmental accomplishments and alignments with an institutional economy of feeling, following Clarke and Hoggett (2009).

Yet this emotional economy was far from neutral. The capacity for regulation was not evenly distributed, nor was it always recognised equally. Children who displayed strong emotion, anger, distress or exuberance were often gently redirected or subtly marginalised, their affect perceived as disruptive to institutional flow. Drawing on Elias (2012), this quiet suppression of affect can be understood within a longer historical process where emotional restraint becomes central to self-regulation. Such restraint was internalised unevenly, shaped by each child’s symbolic positioning within the nursery. Gender was a significant part of this positioning. Gendered scripts permeated the relational fabric of the nursery, influencing how children’s emotional expressions were read and valued. Girls were more frequently praised for care, verbal articulation and quiet emotional labour. Boys were given more space to test limits or act out but were also more readily redirected when their affect became excessive.

These patterns resonate with longstanding psychoanalytic accounts of gendered subject formation. Chodorow (1978) and Mitchell (1974) have described how early identifications unfold differently for girls and boys, with girls often socialised towards relational continuity and boys towards mastery and separation. Benjamin (1995; 2017) reframes this not as biological inevitability but as relational accommodation to adult expectations and unconscious fantasy. What became visible in the nursery were not rigid gender roles but affective asymmetries: girls who held the weight of others' emotions, boys whose bids for recognition were misread as defiance. These positions were scaffolded by institutional routines, the language of praise and staff responses. Lorenzer's (1986) notion of *scenic understanding* clarifies how such meanings are transmitted not through explicit language but through embodied, affective moments that accumulate into relational knowledge. In these scenes, gender was inscribed rather than merely performed, defining which forms of emotional life were encouraged, contained or pathologised.

Alongside institutional patterns, the nursery was powerfully shaped by parental investments, often implicit yet deeply felt. Parents described the nursery as a space of growth and care, but also of repair, aspiration and correction. These hopes can be read as unconscious phantasies, what Fraiberg et al. (1975) described as ghosts in the nursery, shaping how the child is perceived and what is expected of them. Desires for the child to be more confident, less shy or ready for school carried moral and affective weight. Dolto's (1955) work on children's symbolic thought shows how these phantasies are transmitted atmospherically rather than explicitly. In this light, developmental progress becomes a site of psychic negotiation, shaped by the parent's need for reassurance and adequacy. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) note that developmental narratives are rarely neutral, often working to stabilise identity and manage anxiety. Sometimes parental phantasies aligned neatly with institutional aims, but when they diverged, for instance when

parents emphasised academic skills over emotional readiness, tensions surfaced. These tensions were rarely spoken directly, appearing instead in silences or subtle misattunements. Frosh and Baraitser (2008) remind us that what remains unspoken often reveals most about institutional unconscious life, including the limits of what can be symbolised or contained.

Throughout this research, my own subjectivity was implicated. Drawing on Rustin's (2011) psychoanalytic method of observation, I attended to my affective responses, noticing when I felt relief at compliance or discomfort at emotional turbulence. These moments became data, showing how the affective economy of the nursery shaped not only the children but also the observer. As a researcher, I was part of the institution's symbolic life, simultaneously analysing and participating in its emotional logics.

Taken together, these findings show the nursery as a site of *civilising regulation*, *symbolic formation* and *affective labour*. It is not merely a place where children develop, but a field where they become legible through adult fantasy, institutional practice and cultural scripts. Becoming emotionally regulated or socially competent is not a neutral trajectory but one structured by *institutional habitus*, affective economies and the *Symbolic Order*. The nursery functions as a Winnicottian *transitional space*, offering children the opportunity to explore and negotiate relational dynamics. However, this potential is often *foreclosed* by normative expectations. When children's emotional expressions align with institutional and parental desires, they are praised and supported. But when they exceed or resist these expectations, they may face redirection or even be burdened with roles they are not yet ready for. Ultimately, childhood emerges not as a pre-social essence, but as a complex and negotiated *figuration*, produced within a matrix of adult phantasies, institutional logic, and the child's own efforts to find symbolic meaning.

These findings extend the psychosocial framework outlined in Chapters 2 and 3 by demonstrating how emotional life in early years settings is not merely developmental but socially and symbolically produced. The interplay between fantasy, habitus and affect reveals how early education participates in the wider social production of subjectivity, how institutions subtly reproduce hierarchies of feeling, gender and value under the guise of developmental normalcy. In this sense, the nursery mirrors and reproduces the social order, even as it offers spaces of potential transformation. The implications reach beyond early childhood education, inviting reflection on how institutions shape the emotional subject more broadly. Attending to these dynamics opens possibilities for practice that is more reflexive, ethically attuned, and responsive to the unconscious dimensions of care. Theoretically, this research contributes to an understanding of the child as a psychosocial subject whose formation is inseparable from the discursive and affective structures that surround them. Practically, it invites a re-examination of early years pedagogy and policy, urging greater attentiveness to the unconscious and emotional dimensions of care that often remain unacknowledged. A more reflexive approach could open spaces for children and practitioners to inhabit emotional life with greater freedom, complexity and recognition.

The next chapter moves from the child to the psychological life of staff and the institution. If children carry the symbolic weight of adult desire, staff bear the emotional residue of care. The chapter that follows explores how emotional labour is managed, defended against and sometimes split within the institution, revealing the unconscious architecture that supports and at times undermines the work of early years care.

Chapter 7: Emotional Labour and Institutional Defences

Introduction

Shifting the analytic gaze from children's affective formations to the adults who sustain them, this chapter examines the institutional and unconscious processes through which emotional labour is organised, distributed and defended. Rather than viewing emotional labour as simply an individual skill or disposition, the analysis here situates it within a wider institutional economy of feeling, shaped by cultural narratives, power relations and unconscious dynamics.

Drawing on Hochschild's (1983) seminal concept of emotional labour, I consider how early years practitioners are expected not only to perform care but to regulate and modulate their own feelings in line with institutional norms. This regulation is rarely neutral. As Clarke and Hoggett (2009) argue, affect circulates unevenly within organisations, attaching to particular bodies, roles and discourses in ways that reflect deeper hierarchies. The nursery, as an affective field, is structured by unwritten codes that dictate which feelings are permissible, when they may be expressed and in what form. Phrases such as 'use your words' or 'take a deep breath' are presented to children as benign guidance, yet they signal a broader institutional anxiety about emotional disruption and the need to maintain order. These scripts serve to individualise responsibility for regulation, framing self-control as both developmental progress and moral virtue.

Staff are also subject to parallel pressures. The expectation to remain calm, patient and endlessly resilient becomes part of their professional identity, yet this demand is rarely acknowledged.

Emotional labour is often naturalised, framed as vocational dedication rather than as psychic work that carries significant cost. As Elfer, Goldschmied, and Selleck (2012) note, practitioners absorb

and process intense emotional states, frequently without structured spaces for reflection or supervision. This creates a vulnerability to emotional exhaustion and role strain, compounded by institutional silence around these challenges.

The analytic lens of *containment* further illuminates these dynamics. Bion (1962) describes *containment* as the process by which another's emotional state is held, metabolised and returned in a more tolerable form. This requires the container to be sufficiently supported and integrated. In the nursery, however, *containment* was often fragile. When institutional resources for reflection were limited, emotional intensity tended to be redirected or moralised rather than engaged with reflectively. Menzies Lyth's (1988) study of nursing systems highlights how organisations under sustained emotional pressure may develop unconscious defences such as routinisation, depersonalisation and splitting to manage anxiety. In the nursery, similar patterns appeared. Certain staff members became informal containers for distress, others withdrew into task-focused roles, and some emotional topics were avoided altogether.

These institutional defences did more than protect staff. They shaped how children's emotional expressions were read and responded to. Those whose feelings aligned with daily rhythms were perceived as resilient or well-behaved. Others, whose affective needs exceeded what could be easily contained, risked being labelled as demanding or disruptive. These positions were not only about observable behaviour. They emerged from affective economies in which feelings were unevenly distributed, projected and sometimes scapegoated. Over time, these patterns hardened into fixed relational positions, limiting flexibility and responsiveness.

Alongside the work with children, staff also described the largely unspoken task of containing parental affect. Encounters with parents' anxieties around separation, developmental milestones

or behaviour were frequent yet rarely acknowledged within formal institutional structures. As Hinshelwood (2001) argues, what remains unspoken in institutional life often reveals its unconscious logic. In the nursery, this silence around the emotional demands of parents left staff to manage them privately, further intensifying the hidden labour of care.

Throughout this chapter, I draw reflexively on my own countertransference responses as part of the analytic process. Feelings of relief when children complied, discomfort at staff avoidance or irritation during parental complaints were not distractions but data. They signalled the affective patterns of the nursery and my own participation within them. Following Frosh (2019) and Rustin (2011), I treat reflexivity not merely as methodological transparency but as a way of tuning into the unconscious structures that shape what can be thought, felt or known.

The three sub-themes that follow trace how these dynamics unfold. The first, *Feeling Rules and the Management of Emotion*, explores how affect is shaped and redirected in staff-child relationships. The second, *Institutional Defence, Splitting and Role Lock*, examines how unconscious mechanisms help staff navigate emotional strain by redistributing burden. The third, *Silences, Omissions and the Unconscious*, considers the psychological implications of what remains unspoken, including absence, misrecognition and deferred care. Together, these analyses reveal the nursery as not only a site of care but a defended psychosocial system, where emotional labour is unevenly held, displaced or foreclosed. This organisation of feeling profoundly shapes how children are known, how staff relate to one another and how care itself is distributed, recognised or left invisible.

7.1 Feeling Rules and the Management of Emotion

This section opens the analytic focus of the chapter by tracing how emotional life within the nursery is shaped by what Hochschild (1983) terms *feeling rules*, unspoken yet powerful norms that govern what can be felt, shown, and responded to. These rules are not understood as explicit directives, but as tacit, relational expectations that organise the expression and management of emotion in institutional space. In the nursery, these rules are woven into the fabric of daily practice: the rhythms of transition, the tonal modulation of staff speech, the subtle reinforcement of composure and compliance. They define which emotions are recognised and contained, which are redirected or silenced, and how affect circulates across staff, children, and parents. The regulation of feeling in this context is not confined to behaviour management but constitutes a broader *Symbolic Order* through which emotional expression is made legible or rendered excessive.

Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *habitus* provides a useful lens to understand how these feeling rules become internalised, showing how children learn, often unconsciously, to embody the emotional dispositions the setting values. Yet the emotional dynamics are not merely individual. They are profoundly shaped by the institution's power structures, including the constraints of time, routine, and staff roles. Children are taught not only how to regulate emotions to avoid reprimand but how to align themselves with the rhythms of institutional life, where emotional coherence is key to relational success.

Bion's (1962) concept of *containment* further illuminates the psychological labour required of staff, who are tasked with absorbing the anxieties, frustrations, and excitements of the children, often without corresponding spaces for their emotional processing. In this way, emotional *containment* is not simply about managing the emotional states of children but also involves staff managing the institution's emotional needs. Where *containment* is absent, emotional labour

becomes precarious, unevenly distributed, and silently absorbed into the setting's functioning. Lorenzer's (1986) theory of *scenic understanding* helps reveal how emotional meaning is transmitted not only through language but through rhythm, gaze, and spatial choreography. This subtheme offers an entry into the affective infrastructure of the nursery, foregrounding the subtle disciplining of emotion as both a pedagogical and psychological process, mediated by institutional priorities and adult anxieties. These theoretical frames are not applied at a distance but emerge from my ongoing effort to make sense of the affective undercurrents observed and felt within the setting. The lens is both analytic and relational, shaped by the position I inhabited in the nursery's emotional field.

The scenes explored here, both observational and interview-based, reveal how emotional regulation is negotiated through relational dynamics. Some children respond with visible adaptation, aligning their affect with what is rewarded. Others resist or displace emotional tension through symbolic play, silence, or disruption. Staff, in turn, develop ways to manage the strain of this work, often withdrawing, deferring, or muting their emotional responses. As the following vignettes show, the work of feeling is relationally shared, but not evenly held. The emotional order is maintained through a complex choreography of regulation, internalisation, and displacement, in which both staff and children participate, often absorbing strain in ways that are affectively demanding and often unseen.

Children gradually absorb the nursery's implicit feeling codes through repeated, emotionally charged interactions. The phrase 'use your words', frequently invoked by staff, signalled more than a preference for verbal expression. It became a behavioural shorthand for emotional acceptability, an invitation to regulate internally rather than express bodily or vocally. One staff member, using an almost sing-song voice, responded to a distressed child: 'That's not very nice,

let's try again with kind hands.' The child paused, folded their arms, and turned away. The moment passed without further inquiry. The emotional message was clear: affect must be palatable, shaped to align with the rhythms of the setting. These rhythms of tidying up, of transitioning, of preparing for group time, were marked by tonal shifts in adult voices, the softening or tightening of gaze, the strategic use of proximity and distance. Affective coherence was maintained not through overt discipline but through repeated, relational correction.

Bourdieu's *habitus* resonates here, not only in the body techniques of sitting still or waiting one's turn, but in the emotional adjustments required to remain in step. Children learned to manage feelings not simply to avoid reprimand, but to maintain relational closeness. Praise and warmth followed compliance; irritation or detachment followed disruption.

Yet staff too were bound by the same affective scripts. The pressure to maintain emotional availability without acknowledgement of strain often resulted in quiet forms of withdrawal.

Whitney reflected,

Sometimes, I'll leave the room a bit. You know, but as time goes on, you get stronger. You get stronger (...) But if something's bothering me, I don't voice out. Normally when we have meetings, we talk about the children. So we voice out about things that's bothering us, and stuff like that. But right now this season, we just get on with it.

Her account, while grounded in routine, reveals deeper psychological strategies shaped by institutional norms. Her words spoke of endurance rather than reflection, of survival over emotional presence. The absence of institutional *containment* pushed emotional management into private space, into silence, into the body. Elfer et al. (2012) note that when systemic holding is

unavailable, staff are left to carry emotional weight as individuals. Whitney's retreat was not failure; it was adaptation.

Marie offered a different, quieter tension: 'Some days I go home and think, oh my God, I could have done this, this, and this today. But we don't get time to do it.' Her self-critique, wrapped in the language of inadequacy, revealed the internalisation of institutional demand. The gap between emotional intention and material constraint became a source of guilt, itself unspoken during working hours. Clarke and Hoggett's (2009) concept of *affective economies* is relevant here. Institutions do not simply hold feelings; they distribute them. They determine whose emotions are made visible, whose are deferred, and who is positioned as the container. Emotional labour becomes stratified, implicitly racial, gendered, and hierarchical. Children, ever sensitive to adult affect, responded accordingly. They learned that regulation was relational: certain moods gained access, others invited distance.

One boy, Muhtadi, offered a particularly poignant case. During one interaction, 'he approached the exit and attempted to move the box blocking the door. A staff member redirected him gently but firmly. He paused, looked down, and then returned to the group.' The moment seemed mundane, but his affect told another story. 'His eyes remained wide, his smile tense.' There was no tantrum, no protest, just a quiet submission. Yet his compliance felt hollow, as though affect had been edited out in order to preserve institutional equilibrium. Lorenzer's (1986) concept of *scenic understanding* helps make sense of these exchanges. Meaning was not spoken; it was embodied. Children learned that certain affects disturbed the flow. In response, they developed emotional tactics: small silences, strategic smiles, controlled withdrawal. The nursery's emotional grammar rewarded these adaptations, yet the psychological and relational costs often went unacknowledged.

Another scene captured the subtle but forceful inscription of feeling rules into the rhythms of daily life. Muhtadi, engaged in a puzzle with other children,

suddenly paused. His brows furrowed as he silently dismantled the puzzle and returned the pieces to the staff in a neat pile. The adults appeared surprised but said nothing. He then pushed his chair away from the table and began scooting around the room, distanced from both activity and attention.

This behaviour, though easily read as withdrawal, also carried the weight of quiet defiance and can be made sense of as a gestural communication. It evades direct articulation yet conveys a saturated emotional message. The disruption of order, taking apart a completed task, signalled not just boredom or restlessness, but perhaps a refusal of the performative compliance that puzzles and structured play required. His movement away from the group became an embodied way of marking emotional discord, a physical punctuation in a setting that often demanded emotional smoothness.

Where Muhtadi's dissent was silent and embodied, Rapha's emerged through vocal play and disruption, drawing sharper adult response. During a lunch session, he began repeating the word 'poop' under his breath, gradually increasing the volume until a staff member turned sharply and reprimanded him. 'You're a big boy, Rapha,' she said, 'you need to set an example.' In that moment, the institutional affective expectations were clearly articulated. Rapha's outburst, instead of being seen as a communication of discomfort or overstimulation, was framed as a behavioural failure. Marie later remarked, 'Sometimes, children like Rapha, I think their behaviour is bigger than what the nursery can actually do.' Her words gestured toward the emotional limits of

institutional care but also suggested a reallocation of responsibility. Rapha's intensity became a problem to be managed rather than a message to be received.

Such scenes resonate with Bion's (1962) theory of *containment*. When the adult is unable, or institutionally unsupported, to metabolise the child's affect and return it in a modified, manageable form, the child remains saturated with unprocessed emotion. This failure was not individual. It was systemic. The absence of reflective space for staff meant that children like Rapha became affective mirrors, reflecting the tensions they absorbed. As Long (2016) argues, institutions under emotional strain often lose their reflective function and resort instead to routinised responses that prioritise regulation over understanding.

This has important implications for professional practice. When reflective spaces are lacking, the capacity for emotional containment within the institution is weakened, leaving practitioners more likely to respond through regulation rather than attunement. Establishing structures for collective reflection and supervision is therefore crucial, not only as a form of staff support but as a practice of emotional thinking that enables practitioners to metabolise the affective demands of their work (Bion, 1962). Such spaces allow children's communications to be recognised as meaningful expressions rather than mere behavioural disruptions, fostering a more ethically and emotionally responsive pedagogy.

Caroline offered a more complex example of emotional fluency that, at first glance, reflected successful adaptation to the institutional rhythm. She was often described as helpful, articulate, and self-regulating. Yet within these performances of competence lay signs of relational strain. In

one interaction, observed during a free-play session at the water basin, Caroline played with her close friend Greta when another child splashed them deliberately with a syringe.

One of the children who was already playing grabs a syringe and splashes them both when the staff is not looking, pretending not to have done so. Caroline looks at Greta and says, 'Let's tell an adult!' They run over together and speak at once to the staff member about being splashed. The staff appears overwhelmed but responds with a smile, saying, 'Oh no! That's not very nice. We need to respect each other and get along nicely.' Caroline yells, 'It was on purpose. He splashed me!' The lead staff member overhears and replies with visible irritation, 'Well, if you're in the water tank, you might expect to get wet.' Caroline rolls her eyes, walks away angrily, and throws a plastic whale into the basin. The staff member who remains seated calls them over again to play with the syringes.

The emotional charge in this scene was understated but palpable. Caroline's attempt to restore justice through adult recognition was undermined by the staff's shifting tone. Initially acknowledged, her distress was later reframed as an overreaction. The correction from the lead staff member, laced with irritation and dismissal, sent a powerful affective message. The feeling was disproportionate, and the institution's rhythm took precedence. What Bion (1962) described as *containment*, the process of receiving and metabolising emotion, broke down. Caroline's emotional communication was not absorbed and transformed but minimised and deflected. Her frustration was not understood but redirected. The performative aspects of *affect regulation* were affirmed. The internal cost was overlooked.

Later, Caroline was observed being asked to care for a younger child with motor difficulties, a request made casually during a busy morning transition:

Marie turns to Caroline and says, ‘Talk to Ali while I get his bowl, ok? You need to make sure his head is up. If he throws it back, go like this on the table.’ She demonstrates a soft bang. ‘Ali, please look here!’ Caroline nods and crouches beside Ali, who is strapped into a wooden brace to support his posture. She begins speaking softly to him, asking what he wants in his bowl. Another girl briefly joins, holding Ali’s other hand, but leaves when he doesn’t engage. Ali’s head suddenly drops back. Caroline jumps up and runs to Marie. I feel a jolt of anxiety, but Ali corrects his posture almost immediately. When Marie returns, Caroline insists on putting colour in the water. ‘He’ll love it.’ Marie hesitates, unsure, but agrees to a small amount of purple dye. Caroline looks delighted. ‘Marie,’ she calls out again, ‘what about this toy?’ She continues retrieving small objects to place in the water, gauging Ali’s reaction closely and narrating to children passing by, ‘I’m helping Ali.’

This scene is emblematic of how children become active participants in the nursery’s affective economy. Caroline is not simply playing but performing emotional labour. Her composure and relational acuity are quietly leveraged to compensate for gaps in adult *containment*. Hochschild’s (1983) formulation of *emotional labour* helps us see this redistribution. Caroline is tasked with not only emotionally supporting Ali but also helping to sustain the coherence of the environment. Bion’s (1962) theory of *Containment* can be applied here, Caroline becomes a container for others’ affect, yet there is no reciprocal holding of her own emotional experience. The scene reveals an asymmetry, as Benjamin (2017) puts it.

Caroline’s helpfulness is idealised, yet her anxiety, her desire for recognition, and her emotional burden are subtly ignored. In Clarke and Hoggett’s (2009) terms, the affective burdens of the institution are unevenly distributed and often quietly carried by those least equipped to name them. This redistribution of emotional responsibility was framed as a gesture of trust. But its

implications were more troubling. Caroline's maturity became a resource for the staff, her composure a solution to systemic strain. As Elfer (2012a) and Hinshelwood (2013) caution, emotionally capable children are often recruited into institutional dynamics of care, especially when adult *containment* is stretched. Caroline's performance of helpfulness blurred the line between recognition and instrumentalization. As Benjamin (2017) argues, when relational asymmetries are not acknowledged, the other's subjectivity is not recognised. Although Caroline's actions were seen as a form of self-expression, they overall served to maintain institutional coherence.

Staff comments reflected a similar ambivalence. 'She's too clever for her own good,' one said. 'She knows how to get what she wants,' another added. These remarks, framed half in admiration and half in suspicion, revealed the discomfort generated by Caroline's relational acuity. Her emotional literacy, developed in response to the setting's feeling rules, became a site of both praise and mistrust. The more she aligned with the institutional ideal, the less tangible her unmet needs became. Her helpfulness became her mask.

Her mother's reflections captured the outcome of this internalisation:

Caroline tells me everything about her day, including when she's upset. She says, 'I didn't get a turn on the bike today,' and I tell her, 'It's okay, you can try again tomorrow.' It's good that she can express herself like that. She's learned to talk about her feelings, and I don't have to ask her like I did with my son. She's much more open, and I think that's from being in the nursery.

The articulation of feeling was equated with emotional health, but Caroline's need for affirmation, the gap between expression and response, were left unexamined. Caroline had learned the

language of emotional acceptability, but the question of whether she felt heard remained open. Winnicott's (1971) concept of the *false self* can be used as a conceptual frame for the tension between outer coherence and inner complexity. Caroline appeared emotionally fluent, yet the constancy of this fluency hinted at a deeper loss. It was the loss of the freedom to be messy, ambivalent, or emotionally unheld.

Amy's emotional expression followed a different trajectory. Her scenes were marked not by verbal clarity but by symbolic intensity. In one episode, she was observed playing in the garden with plastic figurines:

Amy grabs the ladybug and starts pouring dirt over it again. After some time she takes it out and makes noises as she makes it walk. She grabs a butterfly figure and makes both figures go into an intense battle full of noises and cries.

This moment, rich with symbolic aggression and release, exemplified what Winnicott (1971) called the *transitional space*: a liminal zone where emotion is explored through symbol, where reality and fantasy can intermingle safely. Amy's enactment of conflict, expressed through dirt, battle cries, and imaginative struggle, suggested a process of affective integration. The staff allowed the scene to unfold but did not join her in it. The intensity remained unspoken, managed through silence. This tolerance without attunement reflected a key dynamic. Children could symbolise emotion, but the setting offered limited scaffolding for its elaboration.

In another observation, Amy was seen playing once again with Mark, a small boy from the baby room. 'She walks around with her jacket on her head. She sees Mark and calls him by his name repeatedly, pulling his hand, saying to him as he giggles at her, Come on!' This absurd, playful moment, steeped in surrealism, invited relational engagement. It was met with brief laughter, then

redirection. Kristeva's (1982) concept of the *semiotic* is useful here. Amy's play breached the boundaries of linear sense-making. It was a gesture that pushed against the *Symbolic Order* of the nursery, momentarily inviting chaos. Yet even this chaos had limits. The feeling rules of the setting allowed for certain expressions of intensity, imaginative, aesthetic, transient, but resisted those that lingered, or were demanding or unsettling. Amy's fantasy was tolerated so long as it could be swiftly folded back into the institutional flow. Her mother, reflecting on Amy's progress, echoed the language of *containment*:

I think the nursery has done a really good job at making Amy more emotionally aware, and I can see it at home. I know they do a lot of work with her to calm down when she gets upset. At home, if she's frustrated, she might get angry and throw things, but now I've noticed she takes a deep breath before reacting. She's learned this at nursery because I never taught her to do that before. I guess it's their way of teaching her how to be calm, not to let her emotions get out of control.

The pride in this transformation was clear, but so too was the displacement. The regulation of emotion became a sign of institutional success, of internalisation. Yet what was lost in the shift from external to internal control? Amy's body still carried the intensity; her play still staged the conflicts. But now her disruptions were quieted, redirected, and reframed. The emotional labour had not disappeared. It had been displaced.

One lunchtime scene captured this dynamic:

Rapha sat waiting for food, pulling faces and whispering 'poop, poop, poop.' Leonora turned and scolded, 'Rapha, watch your mouth. He is a baby. He is learning from you!' Another child asked why Rapha was not a baby. 'He's a big boy. He needs to set an

example,’ Leonora replied. Rapha resumed making rhythmic mouth sounds, then asked for milk. He was ignored. He asked again, louder. Marie, exasperated, asked, ‘Rapha, why are you like this?’ As staff began to argue among themselves, Rapha stuffed food into his mouth and started throwing it. Whitney reminded him, ‘You’re supposed to show him how to behave.’

Rapha’s behaviour was framed as disruptive, yet it mirrored the staff’s own dysregulation. The institutional script demanded self-regulation from children even when emotional *containment* among adults had fractured. Bion’s (1962) model of *containment* helps frame Rapha’s escalating actions as unmet bids for recognition. His behaviour was not irrational. It was relational. In another scene, Rapha’s emotional withdrawal took a quieter form:

He stares at the plate that is near him, examines the food and pushes it away. The staff offer him apple, and he smiles and takes it, but he looks really sleepy. He starts biting on the apple slices slowly and he keeps falling asleep. He keeps looking at the door when he opens his eyes. Lisa bangs on the garden door as they have closed it and he jumps to look at her. When she is let in, she asks Rapha, ‘Why do you not eat the fruit salad? You like all the fruits here.’ He stares at her and keeps chewing his apple.

In this moment, his sluggish affect drew gentle questioning, but no interpretive holding. His gaze and bodily posture, eyes drifting, head falling, suggested a dissociation from the setting. This can be understood through Kristeva’s (1982) concept of *abjection*, which illuminates how certain emotions or bodily expressions are rendered ‘unacceptable’ or excluded from the *Symbolic Order*. Rapha’s uncontained affect enacts the *abject*: it signals what the institution cannot integrate or fully acknowledge within its normative frameworks. Staff responses, aligned with the *institutional*

habitus, focused on regulating behaviour rather than exploring its meaning, making some expressions visible and legible while others remained unspeakable. The emotional tension in these interactions reveals how the nursery, like any institution, negotiates what can be safely symbolised and what must be displaced. Staff perspectives oscillated between admiration and unease: Rapha was described as bright, observant, and articulate, but also mischievous and disruptive. Comments like Marie's: 'I think sometimes children like Rapha ... that's bigger than what the nursery could actually do.' These comments, while protective, also signal a process of institutional splitting (Hinshelwood, 2001), in which difficult affects are projected beyond the bounds of institutional responsibility. In this way, *abjection* helps explain why Rapha's affective expressions, though meaningful, are both containing and excluded, highlighting the subtle interplay between individual emotion and institutional limits.

Rapha's affective positioning often contrasted with the institutional rhythm. Unlike Caroline or Amy, whose emotional expression tended to be framed as mature or helpful, Rapha's communications were more frequently met with redirection or rebuke. One notable instance occurred when Rapha, during a transition from the play area to the snack table, began to hum loudly, disrupting the calm of the group. His voice, though not aggressive, filled the room with a piercing energy. A staff member, attempting to maintain order, swiftly approached and gently but firmly instructed, 'Rapha, we need to use our inside voices now.' His humming ceased, but the energy of the room shifted. The staff member's response, while measured, reinforced the feeling rule that certain expressions, particularly those not aligned with the routine, were disruptive. Rapha, like many other children, had learned that emotional expression must adhere to the institutional rhythm or risk reprimand. His humming, an innocent burst of personal expression, was subtly silenced.

This moment underscores the nuanced power dynamics at play. Rapha's natural affect was framed as a disturbance, not as an opportunity for emotional exploration or release. In contrast to the more controlled and composed emotional expressions encouraged in children like Caroline and Amy, Rapha's unregulated affect was deemed problematic. Bion's (1962) concept of *containment* is relevant here: the emotional space that could have been held for Rapha's energy was instead shut down, not absorbed, leaving him without a reflective container for his feelings. The emotional cost for Rapha was not just in the reprimand but in the broader unspoken message: certain feelings, like excitement, exuberance, or frustration, were less valid than others.

In the interview, Rapha's mother remarked:

He's a handful sometimes, but he's so full of energy and life. At nursery, they try to keep him calm, but I think they just don't know what to do with him. At home, we let him be loud sometimes, and he's usually very creative, building things with blocks or pretending to be different animals. But I do think he has a hard time with the structure of the nursery, especially when they expect him to sit still for too long. He can get upset, and then he just acts out. He's not a bad kid; he just needs room to move and express himself.

This comment echoes a sentiment shared by many parents who observe their children's behaviour in the nursery. While Rapha's mother acknowledges the staff's efforts to control his energy, her statement highlights the tension between the child's natural emotional expression and the institution's need for order and compliance. This tension is often subtle but has significant emotional ramifications for children like Rapha, who experience their feelings as inconvenient or excessive. The institutional demand for stillness, quiet, and self-regulation can silence the more unruly expressions of childhood affect, such as exuberance, anger, or frustration. Through its

implicit emotional scenes, the *scenic understanding* (Lorenzer, 1986) of the nursery setting offers a lens through which we can see how these feeling rules are encoded, not just in verbal instruction, but in the subtle cues of environment, staff behaviour, and daily rhythms.

Rapha's behaviour, though often framed as a problem to be solved, also contains emotional signals that, if attended to, might reveal deeper needs for expression and *containment*. His constant movement, loud vocalisations, and occasional outbursts could be read not only as disruptions but as embodied cries for emotional engagement. However, in an institution where emotional regulation is prioritised over emotional understanding, these needs are often misinterpreted or ignored. The emotional messages Rapha conveys through his behaviour, whether through humming, running, or disobedience, are symptomatic of an environment that struggles to accommodate the full range of childhood emotional experience.

Rapha's emotional life thus exposed the uneven terrain of institutional feeling rules. His expressions, whether loud or withdrawn, rarely elicited reflective engagement. Instead, they were managed. Clarke and Hoggett's (2009) concept of *affective economies* helps us see how Rapha absorbed emotional charge from the environment. His behaviours were not singular disruptions, but expressions of the nursery's own psychological tensions, amplified in the child whose feelings could not be neatly contained. The emotional life of the nursery unfolded through this intricate choreography of affective expectation, shaped not by explicit instruction but by tacit rules about what could be expressed, managed, or ignored. These feeling rules were internalised relationally, through glances, redirections, withheld attention, or praise, and enacted not only by staff, but by the children themselves.

While staff were positioned as containers of emotion, their own affective needs were often deferred. Whitney's quiet withdrawal, Marie's self-critical reflections, and the shifting affective dynamics among staff reveal the psychological consequences of *containment* without support. As Elfer et al. (2012) and Bion (1962) have argued, when institutional holding is absent, emotional labour is pushed inward, managed privately and often invisibly. Children, too, performed this labour. Muhtadi's tense compliance and silent retreat, Rapha's escalating disruption met with correction rather than inquiry, Amy's symbolic battles, and Caroline's composed helpfulness all reflect adaptations to the setting's emotional demands. Each child developed strategies, whether withdrawal, performance, or symbolic displacement, to remain legible within the institutional order.

In contrast, children like Caroline and Amy, whose emotional expressions align more closely with the institutional rhythm, become models of emotional success. They are able to modulate their affect to fit the setting's expectations and, in doing so, avoid the emotional consequences faced by children like Rapha. Yet, as we have seen, this success is not without its costs. The emotional literacy children like Caroline and Amy develop is often tied to the need for recognition, approval, and emotional *containment* from adults. Their emotional competence, while celebrated, also conceals a more profound internal tension: the need to *perform* emotions rather than fully experience or express them.

In a similar vein, staff members, too, are affected by these institutional emotional scripts. As we saw earlier in Whitney's reflection, the emotional demands placed on staff can lead to emotional withdrawal or muted responses. These affective adaptations often go unacknowledged, as staff focus on managing the children's emotional needs without considering their own. This dynamic of emotional regulation, where staff absorb the emotional strain of the setting without recognition,

mirrors the children's experiences. Both staff and children carry the emotional load of the nursery, though in different ways. While children may struggle with expressing their emotions within the given limits, staff struggle with containing the emotional weight of the children's needs, often without sufficient emotional support themselves.

This shared emotional labour is carried by both children and staff, and it reveals the relational and systemic nature of emotion in institutional settings. As Bourdieu (1990) argues, emotional regulation is not merely an individual task but a collective process, shaped by social structures, power dynamics, and institutional priorities. In the nursery, emotional life is constantly mediated by these structures. Children learn to regulate their emotions in ways that align with the setting's needs, while staff manage the emotional needs of children, often without adequate space to process their own feelings. The affective economy of the nursery, in which emotional labour is exchanged, redistributed, and absorbed, remains largely invisible, yet it profoundly shapes the emotional lives of both children and adults.

By examining these emotional dynamics through the lens of *feeling rules*, we gain a clearer understanding of the subtle ways in which emotions are both contained and expressed in the nursery. These rules, though often unspoken, govern the emotional landscape of the setting, shaping how children and staff experience and manage their feelings. Whether through Caroline's quiet competence, Amy's symbolic play, Rapha's loud outbursts, or Muhtadi's emotional withdrawal, the regulation of emotion remains central to the functioning of the nursery. As this chapter has shown, the emotional lives of children and staff are deeply intertwined, shaped by the subtle but powerful feeling rules that govern the institution's affective rhythms.

7.2 Institutional Defences, Splitting, and Role Lock

While the feeling rules of the nursery regulate emotional expressions at the interpersonal level, they are underpinned by deeper institutional dynamics that manage psychological strain through unconscious defences. This section turns to how splitting, role rigidity, and systemic patterns of displacement structure the emotional life of the setting in more covert ways. The psychological costs of care, especially when unevenly distributed or denied, emerge here through institutional defences that are relationally patterned and rarely made explicit. Drawing on Menzies Lyth (1988), Hinshelwood (2001), and Clarke and Hoggett (2009), and extending these insights through relational psychoanalytic perspectives (Benjamin, 2017; Harris, 2009), the analysis explores how emotional strains are absorbed and redistributed across the staff group. Some become carers, other avoiders, and some are positioned as excessive or inadequate. Splitting becomes a defence against overload. Role lock emerges as a symptom of an institutional economy that struggles to metabolise emotional complexity.

The absence of reflective space left these dynamics largely unspoken. There were no structures for supervision, no time set aside for emotional processing. In this vacuum, anxiety circulated through relational patterns: who held the affect, who withdrew, who became the object of frustration. Menzies Lyth's (1988) theory of institutional defence is particularly important here. In the absence of *containment*, the system relied on psychological routines to manage what could not be digested or symbolised. These routines preserved functional order, but at the cost of relational attunement and emotional sustainability. This was evident in the way responsibility was passed, often silently, from one staff member to another. Leonora described how difficult it could be to support a colleague with a distressed child without being seen as interfering, 'Sometimes you want to help,' she said, 'but they think you want to take over.' The risk of offering support

became entangled with the fear of surveillance. Helping could be misread as criticism. In this defensive terrain, the relational field narrowed, and roles became increasingly rigid.

In another reflection, Leonora described the frequent delegation of emotionally demanding children to particular staff members: ‘Some of them just give the child to a stronger adult,’ she explained, ‘someone firm, who can deal with it.’ This was not described as collaborative *containment* but as psychological offloading. The implication was clear: some adults could carry more; others should be protected. Hinshelwood’s (2001) account of role lock clarifies this mechanism where particular individuals are fixed into functional identities. Over time, the relational field becomes structured not by capacity for reflection, but by defensive necessity.

Muhtadi offered a quiet illustration of this dynamic. I observed at one point how ‘he ran toward the staff holding a shell, smiling and nodding as he tried to share his excitement. The adults did not respond. He paused and tried again but was again ignored. His body language faltered, yet he persisted. This scene could easily be overlooked, but its emotional weight was unmistakable. He offered a moment of connection and found indifference. What should have been a bid for recognition became a moment of misattunement.

The setting’s emotional economy had no space for him in that moment. Benjamin (2017) explains this as misrecognition, the failure to meet the other as a subject with feeling. Muhtadi’s shell, his smile, his gesture of sharing, was not refused outright but dissolved into adult distraction. The result was a split between offer and response, between emotional availability and institutional constraint. Orange’s (2010) idea of affective foreclosure is useful here. The child’s longing remained unmet, not through active rejection, but through a systemic absence of response. The emotional contact was blocked to protect institutional functioning.

A similar strain surfaced in staff reflections about children with SEND. Lisa described the pressures involved in trying to attend to all children's needs:

I think they do quite well and the only thing I think we have is too many SEND in the room because we have some children that really, really need almost one-to-one attention. So that takes us quite a lot from other children. Many times you're trying to do an activity, and then there is Maha standing up or starting to throw, so you have to stop and go to them. I think if there were less, um, SEND it would work better... it takes so much time to take care of them. We really, let's say neglect, not neglect, but yeah, feel that I don't spend enough time with all the children or not the time I should spend, because you are yeah, we are yeah.

Lisa's reflection articulates a common institutional bind: the nursery cannot stretch its emotional resources across all children. This is not a critique of individual staff or children with SEND, but a portrait of an affective economy under pressure. Menzies Lyth (1988) noted that institutions often develop defences to protect against emotional overload. In this case, care is allocated in response to the most visible need. Children are unconsciously sorted and differentiated. Those who signal urgency are attended to. Others, whose needs are quieter or more ambiguous, are deferred. Benjamin's (2017) work on relational displacement can be used to illuminate this process. Emotional labour is shifted toward the most visibly distressed, while other forms of need go unacknowledged.

In protecting the institution from being overwhelmed, the system inadvertently reproduces forms of exclusion. Orange (2010) describes this as affective foreclosure: emotion is not rejected but pre-emptively shut down. Routinised responses replace reflective engagement. *Containment*, in

Bion's (1962) sense, is compromised. Emotion is neither received nor transformed. It is managed or avoided. Clarke and Hoggett's (2009) concept of affective economies highlights how emotional energy circulates unevenly, attaching to some while bypassing others. This is not traditional neglect, but a form of institutional splitting. The nursery distributes the emotional burden asymmetrically. This defence preserves daily functioning but limits the possibility of mutual recognition and emotional digestion.

These dynamics surfaced in moments of institutional confusion. During one visit, the manager asked me to sit down, explaining that standing might disturb the children. The shift felt significant. Sitting positioned me symbolically within the relational field of the nursery. A few moments later:

A child with special educational needs, unsupervised, climbed onto my lap. I was seated behind the crafting table, observing Caroline, when I felt his unsteady body against mine. I looked around, but no staff were in sight. I looked at him and I asked him if he could sit on another chair as I was doing an observation, telling him we could call a staff member to play and take care of him, as I was occupied with Caroline. Caroline just stared at us and then looked around, as if looking for another adult to help. Eventually, Marie returned, flustered. Apparently, they were conversing with the manager about some things, as she said. She apologised and told me I could stand if I preferred, aware of the conversation with the manager as if acknowledging the forced shift in my position.

The incident passed quickly, absorbed into the day's rhythm. But it marked something. My body had been silently enlisted into a holding function I had not consented to. I was neither inside nor outside the system yet had become part of its psychological economy. The institution, stretched

thin, had redistributed care onto whoever was available. The absence of acknowledgement revealed more than a lapse. It exposed a deeper vulnerability. The rupture in *containment* was not repaired, only deferred. Rather than confront the breach, the system absorbed it by quietly relocating responsibility.

These displacements extended to how children were perceived. Caroline was often praised as very capable. Yet when she cried or withdrew, staff reframed her as manipulative. Amy was described similarly. She knows how to get what she wants, one staff member said. She plays the emotional card. Clarke and Hoggett (2009) call this affective splitting, where unmanageable emotional intensity is projected into particular figures. The institution maintains coherence by locating excess affect elsewhere. This is not an interpersonal dynamic alone. It is structural. Under pressure, the nursery developed scripts about who could be held and who was too much. Benjamin's (2017) notion of misrecognition is key here. Children become carriers of the system's unprocessed emotions. They are no longer subjects with needs but figures onto whom institutional anxiety is projected.

Amy's positioning within the affective economy of the nursery reflected a different iteration of institutional role lock. Her symbolic play, often rich with imaginative intensity, became a site where relational tension was expressed but rarely engaged with reflectively. Within the broader institutional structure, Amy was frequently praised for her independence and creativity, yet these qualities also carried the burden of performative *containment*. As Clarke and Hoggett (2009) suggest, affective labour is often unevenly distributed across individuals who are seen as emotionally *capable*. Amy's creative assertiveness was admired but also used; her capacity to hold symbolic intensity privately freed adults from engaging more deeply. This burden was subtly reinforced through repetition. In one scene, 'Amy looks up at him with big eyes and goes away,

running to a staff member and another child, and she says to them: Everybody is here.’ This moment, seemingly innocuous, marked a return to a familiar role: that of social organiser, attuned to the emotional and spatial configuration of the group. Amy’s comment was less a factual observation than a relational cue, announcing presence, naming a configuration, asserting a kind of order. Her positioning as emotionally attuned and socially fluent became its institutional function. The recognition she received for her maturity masked the absence of holding. In Winnicottian terms, Amy was not so much playing freely as managing, subtly enlisting into a structure that rewarded coherence but left little space for emotional ambiguity. Over time, this positioning hardened into a role that was difficult to exit, one that mirrored the staff’s role entrenchments, an echo of institutional splitting at the level of the child.

Staff themselves were not immune to the emotional volatility they managed in children. During one lunchtime, a disagreement broke out among staff about who would attend training. The conversation, sharp and unresolved, unfolded beside the children, whose attention quickly shifted from their meals to the escalating tension. As the argument grew, Rapha began making rhythmic mouth noises. ‘Why are you behaving like this?’ one staff member asked. Another replied flatly, ‘I wish I knew’. Their frustration seemed to blur into his behaviour. His disruption mirrored the disarray around him, but instead of recognition, it triggered discipline:

Everyone is sitting down, waiting in silence for the food, but Rapha starts making noises and hitting his mouth while doing this. He repeatedly asks for milk but is ignored. He laughs, grows louder, and begins throwing food. Staff continue arguing nearby about who should attend the training. Rapha starts singing, crawling under tables, and tossing his hat. A girl copies him. Eventually, he is scolded, told to ‘set an example,’ and labelled ‘too big for nursery.’

This moment exemplifies institutional splitting in action. The emotional discord among staff was neither addressed nor repaired. Rapha's noise gave it form. He enacted what could not be spoken. But the response was not curiosity; it was redirection. The setting displaced its emotional strain onto a child whose affective intensity already stretched the limits of staff capacity. As Clarke and Hoggett (2009) argue, such displacements are not accidents; they are mechanisms of psychological survival in the absence of institutional *containment*. Without reflective structures in place, staff roles became increasingly fixed. Some, like Leonora, were consistently drawn into the management of dysregulation, marked as firm, implicitly capable of absorbing emotional excess. Others drifted into quieter, often administrative or observational positions.

These role divisions, while never formally assigned, crystallised over time into what Hinshelwood (2001) calls role lock, defensive configurations that help contain institutional anxiety not by adapting to need but by reproducing a stable, if rigid, emotional choreography. Who held, who monitored, who distanced, these patterns sustained the nursery's functioning, but at a psychic cost. Within this choreography, I too became positioned. Some staff confided in me, others steered away. My presence was interpreted, reinterpreted, and shaped by where I stood, who I spoke to, and what I noticed. Emotional proximity was watched as closely as professional conduct. As Orange (2010) suggests, in defended systems, empathy can feel dangerous. To feel with another might expose a crack in the emotional façade, a vulnerability that cannot be absorbed. So, feeling becomes managed. Care is enacted but not always shared. Reflection is replaced by endurance. Surveillance takes the place of support.

This section has traced some of the unconscious scaffolding of nursery life. Through mechanisms of splitting, displacement, and role lock, the setting maintained emotional equilibrium not by metabolising affect, but by rerouting it. Children who expressed distress too vividly were

reframed as disruptive. Staff who absorbed too much were seen as endlessly capable. Others became invisible. These institutional defences enabled continuity, but they constrained the possibility of emotional repair, limiting space for new relational configurations to emerge.

7.3 Silences, Omissions, and Unconscious Processes

While role rigidity and affective displacement offer some *containment*, they also obscure deeper currents of meaning. This section moves further into the nursery's unconscious life, into the silences that accumulate, the gestures that fail to register, and the psychological debris that resists institutional narrative. The affective landscape of the nursery was shaped not only by what was said or seen, but just as much by what was omitted, overlooked, or misrecognised. I focus here on the silences threaded through staff reflections, children's unspoken gestures, and my own experience as a researcher. These were not gaps in the data, but meaningful absences that revealed the limits of what could be symbolised, emotionally held, or made legible within the institutional field.

I draw on Frosh and Baraitser's (2008) account of the unconscious in social life, Kristeva's (1982) theorisation of abjection, and Long's (2018) work on institutional unconscious processes to explore silence not as a void, but as a defence. These absences acted as affective strategies, collectively reinforced to contain what exceeded the nursery's psychological and structural capacities. Relational psychoanalytic theorists such as Jessica Benjamin (2017) and Adrienne Harris (2009) are used to further illuminate how intersubjective absence may signal not only personal rupture but institutionalised defence, where recognition falters and relational co-construction breaks down.

Silences, then, are not empty. They are saturated with meaning. Within the nursery, some emotional dynamics were readily acknowledged: regulation was praised, outbursts were managed, and caregiving was folded into narratives of character. Yet other dimensions of psychological life remained unspeakable, fragmented, deferred, or absorbed without response. These omissions were not incidental. They operated as forms of unconscious communication embedded in what Kristeva (1982) terms the semiotic underside of institutional life, a space where affect leaks through gesture, withdrawal, and repetition. Harris (2009) argues that in such contexts, the absence of attuned witnessing can foreclose reflective functioning. When no one is present to receive the emotional meaning of a gesture, the gesture remains suspended and unresolved.

This section attends to such silences as psychosocial phenomena. Rather than seek to fill in what was missing, I explore the texture of what could not be spoken. Some children's stories remained unfinished. Staff experiences were bracketed, redirected, or misread. At times, my presence as a researcher was forgotten, excluded, or left unacknowledged. These moments, seemingly minor, echoed broader institutional dynamics. As Frosh and Baraitser (2008) argue, the unconscious does not reside solely within individuals but within relationships, rhythms, and institutional logics.

Silence in the nursery is rarely a matter of absence. Rather, it often signals the presence of something unspoken, emotional currents too difficult to name, institutional gaps too routine to interrogate, and unconscious dynamics too embedded to dislodge. In what follows, I explore how these omissions surface across parental interviews, staff reflections, and child observations. I attend to what is left unsaid, half-spoken, or misrecognised, reading these moments psychoanalytically as symptoms of institutional unconscious processes. Drawing on Kristeva's (1982) notion of abjection, Frosh and Baraitser's (2008) work on ethical relation, and Long's

(2018) insights into institutional defences, I consider how *containment* breaks down not just in words but in the very structure of interaction.

This breakdown is palpable in the temporal lags of care, moments where recognition fails or arrives too late. Rapha's mother described one such episode when the nursery was slow to respond to emerging concerns about her son's social communication:

Yes, but at the same time, I was slightly disappointed in the time it took ... because we brought it to the attention probably a few months after it started. And then they said they were going to do the referral and then the referral didn't happen for about nine months. And then by the time the referral happened, it was probably another six months before we got seen.

The long delay is rendered as a slow erosion of trust, not through any single betrayal, but through cumulative omission. The silence is not care's absence, but its deferral. The institution's temporality, structured by its bureaucratic rhythms and resource limitations, does not align with the emotional urgency of parenting a child in distress. The mother's careful cadence, 'yes, but at the same time...', reveals a split between her desire to remain supportive and her unspoken disappointment. It is here that silence becomes saturated: with worry, with waiting, with a wish that things had unfolded differently.

These silences were plural in form. Some were relational, manifest in how staff avoided certain topics or deflected emotionally saturated material. Others were historical, connected to unspeakable aspects of children's home lives, such as absent fathers, trauma, or loss. Still others were procedural, embedded in the lapses and omissions that mirrored a deeper institutional discomfort with emotional complexity. As I returned to my fieldnotes and transcripts, I was struck

by how often the most telling moments were those quickly passed over, subtly avoided, or closed down without explanation. These were not simply information gaps. They marked psychological fault lines, places where what could not be said was nevertheless insistently present.

One such silence emerged in relation to Amy's paternal history. In casual conversations with staff, her father was referred to ambiguously, occasionally mentioned, but often passed over. 'I think it's just mum,' one staff member offered with a shrug, then changed the subject. Another, when asked directly, paused and said, 'I'm not sure we ever see him,' and moved on. These deferrals suggested more than a lack of knowledge. They signalled an institutional unease with emotional narratives that did not lend themselves to easy coherence. What remained unsaid often echoed more loudly than what was spoken. Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject is useful here. The abject is that which must be excluded from the symbolic to sustain psychological coherence, yet it is never fully eliminated. The absent father, never formally acknowledged yet implicitly registered, functions as such a presence: emotionally charged, structurally marginal, and psychologically disorganising when brought too close to the surface. Within the nursery's *Symbolic Order*, the father's absence lingered as a kind of noise, there, but not metabolised.

Even in her mother's narrative, the topic of Amy's father was handled with visible caution. When asked about him during our interview, she stood up and moved to another room, quietly closing the door behind her before answering, saying his nationality and religion. She offered this carefully, before shifting the conversation back toward other matters. The gesture itself, that subtle act of *containment*, marked the subject as emotionally charged, and possibly unspoken even within the home. What was said, and what was left unsaid, echoed the broader silences circulating in the institutional environment: emotionally significant, yet buffered by deferral.

Amy herself did not refer to her father during the period of observation. Yet in moments of play, her affective positioning hinted at something more complex than her calm exterior suggested. In one scene, she was observed playing with a set of plastic insects, arranging them quietly until another child approached: ‘She snatches it back instantly, and the girl walks away. Amy keeps playing and making sounds as the insects fly and fight’. The silence here is multi-layered. Amy does not speak to the other child, nor does the girl challenge her withdrawal. The entire interaction unfolds without language. There is no staff intervention, no invitation to reflect or name what is happening. Amy’s decision to snatch the toy, and her immediate retreat into solitary, sound-based fantasy, echoes what Bion (1962) describes as a defensive withdrawal in the face of overwhelming affect, an absence of a containing other, leading to a collapse into what he termed *beta-elements*, raw, unprocessed emotional material expelled from the mind. The fantasy of fighting insects becomes a scene through which Amy can project and manage internal conflict without verbal elaboration. Her body remains composed, but the psychological content of the moment is relocated into symbolic play. This moment also resonates with Lorenzer’s (1986) concept of the *scenic understanding*, where meaning is embedded not in linguistic expression but in embodied, affectively charged interactions that carry unconscious resonance.

Later in the week, a different encounter offered a further glimpse into her emotional strategies: ‘Amy stares at a crying child with big, overwhelmed eyes but then goes away, running to Mark and Leonora, saying in relief, “Everybody is here.”’ The phrase ‘everybody is here’ functions as more than an observation. It operates as a stabilising utterance, a ritualised confirmation of social *containment* in the face of emotional ambiguity. Amy had just witnessed a child’s outburst, yet she did not refer to the incident. Instead, she returned to a relational safe zone and reasserted a sense of group cohesion. Her words perform a reparative function, covering over the rupture with

the fantasy of collective presence (Harris, 2009). Winnicott (1960) might see this as a transitional move, a way of preserving her inner reality in the face of external chaos. The nursery's environment, however, offered little in the way of reflective holding. Her capacity to symbolise was limited by the absence of adult mediation. Without a containing adult to help process the affect, Amy regulated the interaction through redirection and affirmation, positioning herself in a space where the emotional disruption could be quietly managed.

Institutionally, Amy was often positioned as easy, independent, and well-behaved, labels that implied emotional stability and required little intervention. Yet these very traits may have masked deeper psychological turmoil. Institutions tend to valorise emotional restraint aligned with civilising norms, rewarding children who self-regulate without demanding *containment* (Bourdieu, 1977; Elias, 2012; Elfer, Goldschmied, & Selleck, 2012). Amy's silence became a form of adaptive compliance, shaped by a system that encouraged dissociation from emotional complexity. Kristeva (1982) reminds us that what cannot be symbolised often returns affectively. Amy's quiet withdrawal into non-verbal play and her efforts to stabilise group dynamics suggest an attempt to manage what remained unspoken. The absent father, the staff's non-engagement, and the nursery's limited space for reflection all contributed to a psychological economy where emotional gaps were glossed over by surface composure. These omissions were not Amy's alone. They were relationally produced, sustained by institutional discomfort with ambiguity.

As Benjamin (2017) argues, recognition requires a space where the subject is held as an agent, not merely cared for. Amy's affect fell between categories, neither disruptive nor explicitly expressive, leaving her suspended in a silence that preserved order but constrained symbolic elaboration. Other omissions took quieter forms. In one observation, Muhtadi is seen moving a plastic box that blocks the exit of the nursery room:

Muhtadi suddenly stops and looks at the tube in his hand, he walks to the closed entrance and moves the plastic box that is blocking the exit. Marie, who is sitting beside the box, singing along, looks at him and pushes the box to block the exit again. She asks Muhtadi if he is sure he wants to leave.

Here, Muhtadi does not speak. His gesture toward the exit, his silence, and the staff's ambiguous question all exists in a space of emotional opacity. The scene unfolds like a metaphor for psychological escape. Muhtadi's physical action mirrors a desire to exit the emotional pressures of the nursery. The staff's response, more procedural than attuned, misses the opportunity for containing or naming his affective state. The emotional labour of silence is performed instead through gesture, evasion, and turning away. This moment navigates a delicate boundary between emotional validation and symbolic *containment*. The staff member's response is measured, but it also implies a broader cultural and institutional context where affect must be managed rather than accepted.

This absence of reflection was also voiced by staff. Leonora described the institutional climate bluntly: 'There's no one to talk to... Management spends so much time in meetings... I'm just here. Time's going by, but it's not being acknowledged.' The psychological toll of this silence is significant. Without spaces for staff to metabolise their own emotional experiences, the nursery becomes a site of cumulative omission. Feelings are suppressed, empathy is dulled, and unconscious anxieties are displaced, often onto the children. As Leonora continued: 'There's a fear of staff talking up. And it's not just now, it's been a long time... You feel like no one's supported you.' This fear of speaking, of being shut down or disbelieved, mirrors the emotional dilemmas faced by the children themselves. The institutional unconscious, in this case, is not only

a function of policy or structure. It is lived through the repeated failure of recognition, what Benjamin (2017) describes as the ethical demand of relation gone unmet.

Caroline's interaction with Whitney offers a poignant example of how aggression and silence intertwine when recognition fails to arrive. As Caroline suddenly appears very upset and Whitney notices this:

She asks her what's up, and then goes, 'Oh, I think I know why...' Greta asks Caroline what it is that she is holding, and Caroline just says, 'No!' It seems she is talking both to Greta and to Whitney. Whitney looks at her with a concerned face, saying, 'What was that, Caroline? What's wrong? Won't you talk to me? Why are you so angry? Use your words ... or do you not want to talk about it? Oh well, have a little rest and you can always talk to me when you feel like telling me.' Caroline looks at her and runs off to hide herself in the coat rack, only her shoes are visible. She stays like this for a while. When she decides to come out, she purses her lips, and her body is tense. Her hair is now falling out of her braid, and it looks very messy. She walks to the sofa that is next to the kitchen cupboard. She opens and closes the cupboards from behind, as if she is hugging the cupboard. A girl approaches her, and she goes behind the furniture as if hiding away from her. The girl goes away, and Caroline goes to the rocking chair, standing on the legs from behind. She starts pushing it hard, rocking back and forth. She almost falls, so she stops and walks off. She walks to the costume wardrobe in the corner of the room and when she passes the mirror, she touches her reflection and looks at it silently. Whitney asks her, 'Do you want to talk to me?' as the mirror is behind her. Caroline does not turn to look at her and just says 'no.' She hides behind the clothes inside the wardrobe. At some point, Whitney walks

away, and Caroline comes out and sits on her big chair. She grabs something off the table, and Whitney comes back and asks her to sit in the small chair next to her.

Caroline's sequence of refusal, retreat, rhythmic rocking, mirroring, and eventual re-engagement reflects what Harris (2009) identifies as a breakdown in relational witnessing. Her affective distress is visible but remains uncontained, displaced into movement, tension, and disavowal. Whitney's response is calm and ostensibly supportive, yet it subtly reinstates the nursery's normative affective script: to speak, to explain, to return to equilibrium. Her messiness, her silent roar, and her refusal to be soothed fall outside what can be easily symbolised or managed. These gestures are neither fully disruptive nor easily assimilated. They sit uneasily in the institutional field.

As Benjamin (2017) suggests, recognition is a mutual act that can only take place when the subject is not reduced to a function or problem. Caroline is eventually asked to sit in the small chair. The moment is absorbed back into routine, but what remains is a residue, a fragment of the emotional life the nursery could not metabolise. The silences traced across these accounts were not incidental, nor were they simply the absence of speech. They marked sites of emotional saturation where the limits of institutional *containment* were laid bare. Whether through staff's reluctance to probe, children's retreat into symbolic or physical withdrawal, or the guarded language of parents navigating personal loss, each omission revealed something about what the nursery could not hold.

These gaps functioned defensively, both protecting and foreclosing, sustained by a broader institutional culture where emotional complexity was frequently side-stepped in favour of surface stability. The unsaid did not disappear; it circulated affectively, expressed in play, posture, tone,

and gesture. As Kristeva (1982) suggests, that which cannot be symbolised often returns in distorted, affect-laden forms. In this setting, the return came in subtle disruptions: the child who broke apart her creation, the staff member who avoided confrontation, the parent who closed a door before speaking of a father. Across these vignettes, a picture emerges of the nursery as a space ‘thick’ with unspoken affect. Emotional expression is truncated, redirected, or bypassed entirely. What remains is a residue: scribbles, glances, gestures, absences. Silence, then, is not the opposite of speech. It is its double, saturated, expressive, and heavy with what cannot be said.

From a Lacanian perspective, such silences can be understood as ruptures in the *Symbolic Order*, where the real, the raw and unmediated intensity of experience, surfaces in forms that escape linguistic *containment*. What is foreclosed at the level of speech re-emerges through embodied gestures, deferred interactions, and the fragmented terrain of play. These moments reflected not only psychological defences but also the institution’s struggle to tolerate ambiguity and loss. As Benjamin (2017) reminds us, recognition is not a given but a process, dependent on the creation of shared space where affect can be held and meaning co-created. In the absence of such spaces, the nursery remained caught in a cycle of emotional deferral, where the potential for transformation was sensed but rarely realised.

The silences and omissions explored in this section reveal the subtle but pervasive ways in which emotional complexity is contained, suppressed, and deferred within institutional settings. These absences are not mere voids but are laden with meaning, reflecting the limits of the nursery’s capacity to symbolise, contain, and process affective experience. Whether through staff’s avoidance, children’s retreat into symbolic actions, or parents’ guarded narratives, each silence speaks volumes about the emotional dynamics that remain unaddressed. By attending to these gaps, we gain insight not only into the psychological workings of the nursery but also into the

broader institutional unconscious, where recognition falters and the potential for transformation is constrained. The challenge, then, is not to fill these silences, but to recognise them as part of a larger relational field that shapes both individual and collective experiences. In acknowledging these omissions, we open up the possibility for a more reflective, compassionate, and attuned engagement with the emotional lives of both children and staff within institutional settings.

Conclusions: Holding, Defending, Forgetting - The Psychological Life of the Institution

This chapter has examined the emotional architecture of the nursery as a site of intense psychological and relational labour. Through the exploration of feeling rules and the management of emotion, institutional defences and role rigidity, and the silences and omissions that shape what can and cannot be known, I have traced the subtle and often contradictory ways in which emotional life is organised, distributed, and defended within the institutional field. Drawing on Bion's (1962) theory of *containment* and Hochschild's (1983) notion of emotional labour, my analysis began by attending to how staff regulate children's feelings through implicit norms of conduct and composure, while simultaneously absorbing affect that is neither named nor metabolised. These feeling rules were not evenly applied; rather, they were shaped by hierarchies of gender, race, and developmental expectation, performed as much through tone, proximity, and gesture as through explicit instruction.

The psychological weight of this emotional choreography fell unequally. While children were expected to learn the grammar of emotional restraint, staff were left to enforce it without institutional holding. The emotional labour expected of adults was idealised as natural and spontaneous, yet it was rarely supported. The setting relied on the affective labour of particular figures, mainly women, to maintain relational coherence while denying the psychological toll of

this work. This contradiction, where care was both demanded and unsupported, created a setting in which *containment* became a fragile necessity. Bion's (1962) conception of *containment* helped to trace these failures not as personal shortcomings but as systemic ruptures in emotional processing.

The second section examined how staff became caught in unconscious institutional dynamics. Drawing on the work of Menzies Lyth (1988), Hinshelwood (2001), and Clarke and Hoggett (2009), I explored how emotional strain was absorbed and redistributed through defensive structures such as splitting, scapegoating, and role lock. Some staff members became informal containers for emotional excess. Others withdrew into functionalism or surveillance. These configurations were often naturalised as matters of temperament, but they reflected deeper anxieties about dependency, vulnerability, and the limits of care. Institutions, as Benjamin (2017) and Harris (2009) suggest, are relationally and psychologically produced rather than neutral backdrops. In the nursery, these patterns structured who was allowed to feel, who was expected to contain, and who became the site of projected difficulty.

The final section turned toward what could not be said. Silences, omissions, and half-spoken narratives revealed the psychological edges of the setting, where emotional meaning failed to find symbolic form. They were not passive absences. They were defences, saturated with affect and structured by what the institution could not bear to recognise. Drawing on Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject and Frosh and Baraitser's (2008) reflections on temporal disruption and ethical relation, I explored how the unspeakable persisted in gesture, withdrawal, repetition, and disavowal. In Long's (2018) terms, these moments reflected the institutional unconscious, not as a force beneath surface activity, but as a structuring presence that organised what could be seen, felt, or known. My role within this emotional economy was not beyond its reach. I was, at times, a

witness and, at others, an unwitting participant. Moments of discomfort, alliance, or erasure became data in their own right. They pointed to the affective circuits in which I was entangled and to the unconscious pulls that shaped my presence. As Rustin (2011) and Frosh (2019) argue, reflexivity involves more than methodological self-awareness. It is a mode of emotional attunement that reveals the unconscious processes shaping the research encounter.

What emerges across this chapter is a portrait of the nursery as a space where emotional life is at once pervasive and elusive. *Containment* is expected but not structurally supported. Recognition is longed for but often fails to arrive. Emotional meaning, when it surfaces, is frequently redirected, moralised, or bypassed. Emotional burden circulates through institutional roles and relational formations. It is shaped by unconscious dynamics that defend against psychological overload while limiting the possibility for relational repair. The institution survives in part through these defences. Yet the cost is felt in the everyday, in the withdrawal of a child, the silence of a staff member, or the tension that builds and disperses without reflection.

In the next chapter, I return to the nursery, not only as a defended institution but also as a symbolic and *transitional space*. My analysis focuses on how children's emotional and linguistic expressions unfold within this terrain, and how moments of play, misattunement, and resonance open the possibility for new meanings to emerge. Drawing on Winnicottian theories of potential space, alongside Lacanian, Doltian, and post-Freudian perspectives on symbolisation and relational meaning-making, I ask how emotional life becomes thinkable. While this chapter has traced the psychological costs of emotional *containment* and its institutional defences, the next one explores the possibility of transformation through the ways affect may enter into language, gesture, and play, and how, under particular conditions, something new might be said.

Chapter 8: Language, Symbolisation, and the Nursery as Transitional Space

Introduction

Having traced the psychological weight of care in the previous chapter, this one shifts focus to the symbolic life of the nursery, specifically how children communicate affect, negotiate recognition, and construct meaning through language in its broadest sense. Language is not viewed here as a discrete developmental milestone or endpoint, but as a relational and affective process: situated, charged with emotion, and inseparable from the social fields in which it emerges. Shaped by the rhythms of the setting and the dynamics of intersubjective life, language surfaced in fragments through whispers, gestures, laughter, and refusals. It carried with it the emotional labour of being seen, understood, or misread. In the nursery, language was not only spoken but also gestured, played, withheld, echoed, and misheard. It took form through playdough, was buried in shared jokes, or resisted in silence. This chapter explores the nursery as a symbolic space, where children negotiate the boundaries of self and other, inside and outside, speech and affect.

Conceiving of language in this way requires a shift from developmental psycholinguistics to a psychosocial framework. One that draws on Winnicott's (1971) concept of the *transitional space*, Kristeva's (1982) writings on the semiotic and abjection, and Lacanian ideas of the *Symbolic Order* and the subject's entry into language through loss. Language is treated here as a process of *symbolisation* that is never neutral but always embedded in structures of power, recognition, and affective investment. In this sense, the nursery becomes a site where the tensions between inner experience and external expression are negotiated through the body, through play, and the rhythms of relational life.

Throughout the fieldwork, moments of speech revealed the layered interplay between emotional life and institutional scripts. Some children, like Caroline, offered richly symbolic expressions through narrative and play, while others, like Muhtadi, inhabited the space between silence and speech, evoking what Dolto (1984) refers to as a *language of the body*. Still others, such as Amy and Rapha, moved fluidly between verbal and non-verbal registers, using affect, gesture, and sound to insist on their own forms of meaning. In each case, the question was not whether children could speak, but rather under what conditions their voices could be heard, taken up, and transformed within the relational field.

This chapter is divided into three interlinked themes. The first, *Language as Transitional Space*, examines how children use verbal and non-verbal expression to bridge the gap between self and other. The second, *Embodying the Institutional habitus*, explores how institutional norms are enacted and resisted through bodily communication and affective positioning. The third, *Containment, Misattunement, and Relational Meaning*, turns to the psychological dimensions of these processes, asking how *symbolisation* is supported, interrupted, or foreclosed in moments of emotional resonance or institutional strain. Together, these sections explore how meaning is made, and unmade, in the ordinary moments of nursery life. They trace how language becomes a medium for negotiating proximity, power, exclusion, and care. And I consider what is at stake for children and adults when the *Symbolic Order* falters, when words fail, or when silence speaks loudest.

8.1 Language as Transitional Space

While the previous chapter established the symbolic significance of language across the nursery, this section focuses on how children used language in its multiple forms to navigate affective

experience and relational recognition. In this context, language functioned not merely as communication but as a medium for negotiating presence, proximity, and emotional meaning. Spoken words, silences, gestures, and rhythms formed part of a wider relational matrix through which symbolic meaning was both constructed and deconstructed. In this section, I draw on Winnicott's (1971) concept of *transitional space* to explore language as a phenomenon emerging in the spaces between self and other. Here, language is not fixed or developmental in a linear sense but emerges through textures of encounter. Children sought recognition through verbal and non-verbal means, but these efforts were met with varying responses. At times, language created space for emotional elaboration. At other times, it was redirected, ignored, or met with moral instruction.

Within such encounters, the nursery became a setting marked by symbolic possibility and constraint. Language also helped children delineate the boundary between internal feelings and external legibilities, shaping whether emotional life could be shared or managed. As Lacan (1966) argues, entry into language also signifies entry into the *Symbolic Order*, a social field where subjectivity is conferred through recognition. Yet recognition is not automatic. As Frosh (2003) and Benjamin (2017) note, the voices that are heard are shaped by institutional dynamics and affective economies, which determine whose meanings are recognised and whose are marginalised.

What follows are moments in which children's emotional expressions, whether articulated or withheld, were received in varying ways. Some found symbolic *containment*, while others remained unmet. Through close attention to the experiences of the children, I explore how affect was shaped into communicable forms. In some cases, these were recognised and affirmed within the relational field of the nursery. In others, they hovered at the edges of recognition, either

redirected or overlooked. These differences go beyond individual variability. They reveal the structural and unconscious limits of the nursery's capacity to hold emotional communication. However, language rarely appeared as structured dialogue. Instead, it emerged through fragments, gestures, silences, rhythms, and sounds. Each was a symbolic effort to bridge internal experience with a relational response. As Winnicott (1971) argues, *transitional space* allows psychological material to be symbolised, but this depends on the availability of emotional holding. In the nursery, such holding was uneven. It was shaped by moments of play and presence, but also by misattunement and interruption:

He suddenly becomes aware of my gaze as he looks up and immediately puts the book to his face for about 10 seconds. I suddenly become aware that we are alone in this side of the inner room, and I worry that this has made him more aware of my gaze.

In this moment, Muhtadi uses the book as a transitional object. It becomes a means of shielding himself, but also of managing the intensity of mutual gaze. My presence, once unnoticed, intrudes into his symbolic space. His gesture is both defensive and expressive, regulating the emotional exposure between us. In Lacanian terms, this could be seen as an encounter with the gaze of the *Other*, destabilising the coherence of the symbolic field. Yet Muhtadi's movement is not a collapse. It is a form of repositioning that reasserts his agency. The scene illustrates how children use material objects not only for play but also as tools for negotiating affect in intersubjective encounters.

In another scene:

Leonora asks him if he feels good. He shakes his head from behind the bookshelf but smiles. He steps out and looks at the staff. She says, 'No words, I need to hear words. I

have not heard words today.' Muhtadi responds with a thumbs down and a smile. She replies, 'I know you've got words, 'cos when you talk to Sarah (his sister).' Muhtadi giggles, puts his fist in his mouth, then sticks out his tongue. They stand over the playdough table, where emotion cards with blank faces are laid out. He touches the cards. She asks, 'Where have your words gone?' He shrugs and smiles. She then asks where Sarah is. 'School,' he whispers. At the same time, a girl speaks over him. The staff tells her to stop and listen, but she continues until she is reprimanded. The staff turns back to Muhtadi and repeats her question. This time, he smiles widely and answers more clearly, 'School.' She responds, 'So you do have words, and very beautiful.' He smiles at her.

Muhtadi's repetition of the word 'School' becomes an assertion. It is a moment of symbolic expression, a reach for recognition. The staff's initial response is affirming, but the moment is fragile. The conversation soon shifts away from him. What lingers is a subtle emotional residue. His sadness does not seem tied to the topic itself, but to the rupture in sustained attunement. As Stern (1985) reminds us, development is supported not simply by language but by the quality of interpersonal matching. Here, the symbolic function of speech loses its potential when the relational rhythm breaks.

Muhtadi stands up, flapping his arms and sticking out his tongue. In the bathroom, he chooses the furthest sink, which has no soap. Another boy tries a different dispenser, but it is also empty. Muhtadi bursts into loud laughter.

This shift in tone offers a glimpse into symbolic play as a form of affective regulation. Muhtadi's laughter is not random but a response to the breakdown of routine expectations, a way of metabolising that disruption. The absurdity of the empty soap dispensers becomes a source of

shared amusement. In Winnicottian terms, this preserves the *transitional space*. Humour becomes a form of relational regulation. Muhtadi's laughter subtly resists the script by interpreting dysfunction not as distress, but as play.

Turning now to Rapha:

Rapha looks around while they wait for snacks, yawning and rubbing his face with his hands. He leans his head into his hands. A plate is placed in front of him, but slightly off to the side. He looks at it without saying anything. Once all the plates are given out, it is clear that he has not received one. He stares into the distance, picks his nose, then rubs his eyes.

Rapha's silence holds weight, his body communicating a sense of disconnection. The misplaced plate disrupts the *Symbolic Order*. It is present yet not positioned for him. This small dislocation seems to push him outside the frame of recognition. In Lacanian terms, this may represent an encounter with the real, the point at which structure fails, and experience cannot be symbolised. Rapha's gestures, his nose-picking and his eye-rubbing function as affective strategies. They mark a turn to the body when language no longer holds. The symbolic has been interrupted, and what remains is a physical expression of unsymbolised feeling.

Rapha smiles and says, 'I did and it is yummy!' Marie asks him how many raisins are on his plate. He begins counting excitedly: 'One, two, three, four! Four! Like me!' Lisa laughs and says, 'Oh, you are four years old... and you?' she asks the boy next to him. He also says four. Rapha starts blowing into his cup, making loud noises. The other boy copies him. They laugh together. The boy calls for Rapha to look at him. Rapha raises his eyebrows and continues blowing loudly into his milk.

This vignette offers a contrasting moment. Here, symbolic coherence is achieved. Rapha links the raisins to his age. His excitement is mirrored and extended by others. This becomes a shared space of symbolic play, sustained by laughter and mimicry. Blowing into the milk cup becomes more than noise. It is a ritualised act of non-verbal language, a shared rhythm that sustains the relational field. In this moment, recognition is mutual. Following Benjamin (2017), we can see this as a scene of co-created meaning, where subjectivity is affirmed through playful interaction:

Rapha stops and stares at a group of staff members nearby, discussing who should leave for training and who should stay. As the discussion becomes more tense, the children fall silent and watch with serious faces. Rapha continues to eat, still watching, placing fistfuls of food into his mouth.

Here, language becomes spectral. The staff's heated exchange disrupts the emotional atmosphere of the nursery. The children's silence becomes a collective withdrawal. Their stillness mirrors the breakdown in adult regulation. Rapha's response, eating with visible intensity, becomes an embodied attempt to process the tension. The *Symbolic Order*, cannot be fully possessed or enacted by any individual; we are all inserted into a pre-existing symbolic structure that shapes and mediates our experience (Lacan, 1966). Adults may enact aspects of this order through routines, rules, or guidance, but they themselves are subject to its constraints and the inevitable alienation it produces. When their attention is divided or their regulatory function falters, the symbolic structure becomes partially unstable, and affect circulates through the relational space, experienced and expressed bodily rather than articulated verbally. This can be explained by Kristeva's (1982) concept of *abjection*, where what cannot be spoken is absorbed somatically. Rapha's action is not about hunger. It is a way of metabolising the emotional rupture around him.

Where Rapha's silence registered as a bodily response to institutional rupture, Amy and Caroline's gestures extend this theme, revealing how children navigate the tension between expression and erasure through symbolic withdrawal, ritualised play, and selective muteness. This tension is further illuminated in Amy's quiet retreat beneath a table, where gesture, sound, and silence coalesce into a moment of fragile meaning-making:

Amy is lying under the table, watching the light through the chair legs. She whispers a song to herself, then stops and covers her mouth with both hands. When a staff member calls her name, she does not respond.

Amy's silent song and subsequent self-censorship suggest a layered use of *transitional space*. Her position under the table marks both a physical and symbolic withdrawal from the structured social life of the room. The whispered song offers a fleeting symbolic link, a private thread of meaning that is abruptly cut off. This moment recalls Dolto's view that symbolisation always emerges in tension, suspended between what can be said and what must remain veiled. Amy's silence is not the absence of language, but the removal of speech from relational negotiation. Her refusal to respond represents both a protective boundary and a quiet act of resistance. Within the symbolic field of the nursery, her silence creates a space apart.

Amy's retreat into silence stands in contrast to Caroline's expressive withdrawal, which took shape through gesture, movement, and symbolic play. Caroline's body and actions spoke in ways that bypassed verbal expression, yet conveyed complex meanings related to care, loss, and relational need. Following her earlier involvement in supporting Ali, a child with special needs, as described in a previous chapter, Caroline begins to withdraw:

Caroline walks past the playdough table. Her hip grazes the edge, pulling the tablecloth and all the materials onto the floor. She does not look back, and no one seems to notice. She heads to the corner of the room where a chest of doll clothes sits. Selecting a baby doll from under a pile of hanging clothes, she methodically undresses it, folds the old outfit, and places it in a drawer. She then selects a blouse with red flowers and begins dressing the doll. Struggling to get the sweater on, she calls out, 'Marie,' repeating her name until she receives help. Once dressed, Caroline returns to the table, closes the doll's sweater clumsily, and sits in silence.

The second half of the scene marks a shift into the symbolic. Caroline's movement from caregiving to symbolic mothering draws her into what Winnicott (1971) terms *transitional space*, a psychological territory in which internal states can be externalised through play. Earlier, her compliance in supporting Ali reflected the institutional script of emotional maturity. Yet the unnoticed spill at the playdough table interrupts that narrative. It suggests a moment of protest or emotional overload, perhaps a non-verbal appeal for care that passed unacknowledged. Her return to the doll chest reverses the earlier dynamic. Where she once mirrored adult caregiving, she now performs the need for care. Her repeated call for Marie is more than a request for assistance; it is an invocation for presence and recognition.

Kristeva's (1982) concept of the semiotic is helpful here. Affect is not necessarily mediated through coherent language, but through rhythm, gesture, and embodied movement. Caroline's actions speak in this semiotic register. Yet even this moment of vulnerability is short-lived. She quickly resumes her role, smoothing the doll's sweater, performing care once again. Her play mirrors the institutional redistribution of emotional labour. It becomes a rehearsal of *containment* in the absence of being contained. What is expressed through her actions is both affective and

symbolic. The spill, the folded clothes, and the invocation of Marie all become part of a scenic narrative. Using Spielrein's (1995) account of destruction and transformation, the moment can also be read as a psychological undoing that opens the potential for symbolic renewal. Caroline's retreat is not collapsing. It is a reorganisation of emotional meaning, a symbolic act that reveals the weight of institutional feeling rules on the child's inner world.

In another scene, Caroline lifts her drawing and says, 'This is the quiet house where you can't talk.' She places it carefully in the cubby, then walks away without looking back. This drawing becomes a symbolic inscription of Caroline's emotional world. The quiet house is not only a site of imagination but a metaphor for the institutional atmosphere. It is a space that contains, but also silences. Her act of placing the drawing in the cubby and walking away without acknowledgement suggests a withdrawal that is simultaneously expressive and protective. The gesture does not invite commentary; it preserves meaning through distance. In Lorenzer's terms, this is a *scenic understanding*, a material and symbolic act that stands in for narrative. Caroline's action registers a double movement of protest and preservation, a subtle but powerful response to the constraints of the setting.

Threaded through these moments is a fragile economy of *symbolisation*. Language, in its broadest sense, served as a bridge between affect and *containment*. Yet that bridge was often precarious. Whether through whispered songs, bodily gestures, or symbolic play, the children's expressions depended on how those utterances were received, held, or redirected. The nursery did not operate as a neutral site for language development but was a relational and institutional field where symbolic and social dimensions became entangled in complex ways.

These scenes serve as reminders that symbolisation is not an automatic or guaranteed process. It relies on relational holding, cultural expectations, and the availability of attuned recognition.

When those conditions are met, children's symbolic expressions can be elaborated, extended, and transformed. When they are absent, expressions may become fragmented, withheld, or saturated with affects that find no place to be absorbed. In the next section, I explore how these dynamics are further shaped by the *institutional habitus*. I consider how expectations around emotional legibility, behavioural discipline, and developmental readiness influence which forms of expression are encouraged, recognised, or left outside the frame of meaning.

8.2 Embodying the Institutional Habitus

What unfolded through language in the previous section found quieter, often unnoticed expression in the body, where meaning settled into movement, posture and touch before it could be spoken.

Children's gestures, postures and movements became sites where the unspoken rules of the nursery were absorbed, enacted and at times, troubled. As Bourdieu (1990) notes, the body is where social history becomes 'nature'. It is the site where institutional logic is sedimented into habit. *Habitus*, in this sense, is not simply learned through instruction; it is acquired through participation in relational structures that confer meaning on particular forms of bodily conduct.

What children did with their hands, how they moved through the room and reached out to others bore the traces of institutional shaping.

Elias's (2012) understanding of the *civilising process* offers further insight into these embodied norms. In early years settings, such processes are evident in the regulation of bodily rhythms and emotional expressions. Children learn when to speak, when to sit still, how to queue and contain excitement. These processes are not only behavioural but also affective and symbolic, forged

within the nexus of institutional expectation and relational response. Through repetition, children became skilled in reading and adjusting to these cues. Yet this adaptation was not always smooth. At times, their bodies revealed affects too unruly to fit the expected script. The *institutional habitus*, then, is not only visible in formal routines but materialised in the ‘micropolitics’ of space, time and gesture. Children navigated this terrain with varying degrees of fluency. Some, through proximity to staff or confident verbal performance, gained *symbolic capital*. Others, encountering misrecognition, indifference or disciplinary correction, found themselves positioned at a distance from the nursery’s idealised subject. As Bourdieu (1991) emphasises, recognition is distributed unequally through pre-existing power relations. The same gesture may be read as confidence in one child and disruption in another, depending on their location within the social and affective economy of the setting.

In what follows, I explore how the *institutional habitus* is not simply imposed but lived through the body, negotiated in the gestures, rituals and affective exchanges of daily life. Through vignettes of children’s embodied interactions, I examine how institutional expectations are both internalised and contested. Children’s bodies did not merely mirror institutional rules; they negotiated them. At times, they reproduced the dominant codes. At other times, they created ruptures or spaces of play and protest where the body refused full alignment. Staff too moved within this affective architecture, often unconsciously embodying the very structures they were tasked with maintaining. Their pace, tone and attentiveness carried the weight of institutional history and resource constraints. As Hinshelwood (2002) observes, in emotionally demanding settings, staff often defend against psychological saturation through routinisation, physical withdrawal or emotional flattening. These bodily strategies, while adaptive, also shape how children experience *containment*, presence and recognition.

The differential legibility of children's gestures, who is seen, who is heard, who is reprimanded, was structured not only by behaviour but by how that behaviour was interpreted through the lens of institutional norms. Those who displayed verbal confidence or emotional composure were often read as competent and secure. Their expressions were taken seriously, and their transgressions more readily forgiven. Others, whose bodies registered discomfort or confusion, were more likely to be seen as needy, oppositional or disorganised. *Symbolic capital*, as Bourdieu (1990) notes, is not evenly distributed. The same gesture, whether a grab, a glance or a shout, may be received as play in one body and defiance in another. This embodied negotiation is visible in moments that initially appear mundane. One child, Muhtadi, repeatedly offered objects, shells, toys and gestures of inclusion to staff, seeking recognition through shared play. In one vignette:

He grabs the shell and starts running towards the staff, smiling and nodding excitedly. He offers the shell to them, but they retreat and seem indifferent to his gestures. Muhtadi looks slightly confused, before offering it again, this time more persistently. He is ignored again but continues to insist.

The shell, in this instance, takes on the quality of a *transitional object* (Winnicott, 1953), a material extension of Muhtadi's desire to connect. The repeated retreat of staff is not merely an interpersonal misattunement but a structural one. What counts as worthy of attention is mediated by the institution's affective economy, where the child's offerings are filtered through the logic of routine and resource. Meaning is conveyed not through explicit dialogue but through patterned, embodied enactments that carry unconscious residue. In quieter moments, Muhtadi's attunement to institutional rhythms was revealed in subtle bodily gestures: Muhtadi smiles, looking up at her and then closes his eyes. He moves on and goes to sit on the carpet to start group time. This small act, closing his eyes before joining the group, reads as a moment of embodied recalibration. It

functions as what Stern (1985) might describe as an instance of affective attunement turned inward. It allows Muhtadi to modulate his emotional state in anticipation of the collective rhythm. It is a form of pre-symbolic adjustment, a bodily negotiation of proximity and participation within the temporal and affective structure of the nursery. Rather than a simple response to external routine, this gesture illustrates how children internalise the tempo of institutional life and actively manage their alignment within it. Such acts echo Bourdieu's (1990) account of *habitus* as a history inscribed in the body, shaping not only what one does, but how one does it.

Where Muhtadi seeks relational synchrony, Rapha's body often becomes a site of joyful transgression. His gestures push against the grain of institutional regulation, enacting a kind of playful defiance that disrupts normative expectations.

Rapha grabs rice with his hand and blows on it. He squeals loudly as he blows some away. No one is looking at him, he turns to me and does a gesture as if asking me if I saw. When he does not get a reaction from me, he smiles and turns back around. He puts the rice that did not blow away into his mouth. Lisa sees him and says, 'Rapha, use your spoon, not your hands.' Rapha looks at her and says, 'But it flies when I blow!' Lisa looks at him as if impatient, 'You don't have to blow so hard.'

This is not simply a moment of disobedience, nor is it reducible to mischief. Rapha's blowing of rice becomes a sensory and symbolic performance, animated by sound and motion. He constructs a new form of invitation, one that attempts to draw attention, provoke joy and temporarily reorder the logic of the meal. In this sense, his actions recall a *transitional space*, the zone of symbolic play where meaning is experimented with and relational possibilities are tested. However, the institutional response reinscribes the expected frame. The correction offered by staff does not

register the creative impulse of the act. Instead, it reduces the scene to a deviation from behavioural norms. The spoon, here, is more than a tool. It signifies the boundaries of acceptable conduct, a marker of abjection, the point at which the excesses of the body must be curbed to preserve *Symbolic Order* (Kristeva, 1982).

Rapha's exuberant gesture thus unsettles the *civilising process* described by Elias (2012), in which bodily spontaneity is gradually subordinated to social control. His moment of resistance does not collapse into chaos, but it does mark a friction between embodied desire and institutional *containment*. The emotional charge of the act is met with disciplinary calm, restoring order while leaving the affective significance unacknowledged. This erasure reveals not only the limits of institutional recognition but also the fragility of symbolic *containment* itself. In contrast, Amy's movements through the setting reflect a form of affiliative identification that aligns closely with adult authority. Rather than resisting institutional norms, she appears to embody them. She is often seen managing, guiding or correcting younger peers through phrases and gestures drawn directly from the staff repertoire: 'Amy grabs his face and keeps asking him if he is okay. Rapha nods while grabbing a backpack and walks towards Rapha, "Rapha here is your backpack. Mark, you don't need other big children!"' Amy's gestures suggest more than imitation. They reveal what Bourdieu (1991) might call the acquisition of *symbolic capital* through performative alignment with institutional authority. By adopting the linguistic and affective styles of staff, she secures proximity to power and legitimises her position within the social field of the nursery. Her mimicry is not a passive reproduction of adult behaviour but a form of embodied agency. It repositions her within peer hierarchies while simultaneously reaffirming the normative codes of the setting. This performative re-enactment also recalls Butler's (1997) view that subject formation occurs through citation, the repetition of regulatory norms that produce the illusion of

coherent identity. In this sense, Amy's behaviour is a citational act, simultaneously constituting and negotiating her place within a field structured by both care and control.

Yet embedded in these gestures is a relational appeal. Her enactment of authority also gestures toward a desire for recognition, for anchoring herself in a structure that confers value through relational competence. As Benjamin (2017) argues, mutual recognition is central to the formation of subjectivity. Amy's actions reveal a complex dynamic: while she re-enacts the role of the caregiver, she also signals her own need to be seen within that very frame. Her play, then, is not merely an extension of adult power, but a layered negotiation of identity, affect and belonging within the *Symbolic Order* of the nursery.

Caroline, in contrast, embodies the tension of wanting to be seen while fearing the cost of that exposure. Her movements hover between invitation and retreat:

I come in, she is at the table doing blocks with three boys. 'See what I made?!' She grabs the blocks and puts them on top of the roof of a building that's there. She presses a block between two towers, connecting the roofs. Caroline pretends not to look at the boys by constantly looking at them and then turning away fast.

The ambivalence is palpable. Caroline builds a bridge, literally and symbolically, but the boys do not respond. Her sideways glances suggest hope edged with self-protection. Later, her attempts become more explicit: 'She grabs two blocks that are already put together and turns to the boys at the table. "Guys, look what I made." They ignore her, so she runs off'. These gestures form a rhythm of approach and withdrawal, which Frosh and Baraitser (2008) might describe as the repetition of relational failure. The wound is not visible, but it is felt. Caroline hovers at the threshold of inclusion, not fully expelled but never fully welcomed, embodying what might be

understood as the experience of the abject, where subjectivity is threatened by an encounter with that which cannot be fully integrated (Kristeva, 1982). Her bids dissolve into the atmosphere, neither met nor meaningfully refused. They are absorbed into the institution's affective residues that circulate unprocessed, unnamed and unclaimed within the psychological structure of the setting (Long, 2018).

Throughout these scenes, I too was implicated. The very dynamics I was observing, who is seen, who is held, who is passed over, which resonated with my own position as a researcher. I too felt the pressure to maintain distance, to remain observant but not intrusive, to witness without disrupting. These reflexive tensions echoed the children's bodily negotiations: the desire to be noticed, the fear of rejection and the strategic shaping of presence. In this setting, the *institutional habitus* is not simply enforced, but lived, absorbed and at times resisted through the moving, expressive bodies of children and adults. It materialises in the pacing of children's steps, the cadence of staff corrections and silent retreats from scenes. These gestures form a language of their own, dense with meaning, shaped by history and open to interruption. As Bourdieu (1990) reminds us, *habitus* is not deterministic. It is a structure in motion, constantly reproduced yet always at risk of being transformed.

8.3 Containment, Misattunement, and Relational Meanings

Building on earlier sections that explored the transitional function of language and the embodied negotiation of institutional norms, this section turns more directly to the affective and intersubjective dimensions of nursery life. If language offered a bridge to symbolisation and the body carried the imprint of *institutional habitus*, the focus here shifts to the psychological reverberations of these interactions. The concept of *containment* becomes central, not as a

singular act of care, but as a dynamic and relational process through which emotional meaning is held, transformed, or foreclosed. This section attends to the moments in which children's emotional expressions were received, misread, or redirected, and explores how the potential for recognition was shaped by the emotional availability of adults, the rhythm of institutional life, and the wider *Symbolic Order* of the setting.

To consider the nursery as a site of *containment* is to engage with a field of relational complexity shaped by psychological, institutional, and cultural forces. *Containment*, here, is not a single gesture of emotional holding, but a recursive, intersubjective process shaped by the interplay of affect, symbolisation, and misrecognition. As Bion (1962) argues, the containing function is one in which unprocessed emotional experience is received, metabolised, and returned in a form that can be tolerated and understood. Yet such processes are not always available. They depend on the emotional capacities of caregivers, the structural constraints of the setting, and the *institutional habitus* that shapes the recognition or refusal of affective experience.

In the everyday life of the nursery, this *containment* was uneven, fragile, and often fleeting. There were moments where staff mirrored children's expressions, creating space for meaning-making and symbolic elaboration. Yet there were as many moments as possible where affect was redirected, foreclosed, or flattened into behavioural correction. Drawing on Winnicott's (1971) notion of the *holding environment* and Dolto's (1984) emphasis on symbolic mediation, this section explores how children's emotional expressions were engaged or bypassed within a setting shaped by both care and constraint. Frosh and Baraitser's (2008) work on institutional omission is particularly salient here, as what remained unsaid, unrecognised, or uninterpreted often left a deeper mark than overt misattunement.

The nursery did not merely contain or fail to contain. It also structured the very possibilities of emotional legibility. Some expressions, animated songs, shared laughter, and quiet gestures were met and amplified. Others, particularly those outside normative scripts of behaviour or emotional regulation, were overlooked or subtly disciplined. Elias's (2012) work *On the Process of Civilisation* offers a sociological lens through which to view this emotional governance. Through routines, spatial ordering, and discursive practices, children were taught to regulate their bodies and feelings in ways aligned with institutional norms. Yet this alignment often masked a psychological cost: the withdrawal of spontaneous expression, the redirection of unmet affect into silence or symbolic play.

Across the fieldwork, each child revealed different facets of how *containment* operated or failed in the relational life of the nursery. Caroline's repeated bids to share joy, express distress, or make meaning through play were rarely fully held. Her gestures, tone, and rhythm, what Kristeva (1982) refers to as the *semiotic*, were often redirected or reduced to praise for compliance, rather than taken up into symbolic dialogue. Muhtadi's quieter offerings, including shells, glances, and shared objects, suggested a persistent search for recognition. These gestures carried symbolic weight but were frequently overlooked, exposing the tenuousness of relational attunement. Amy's expressions emerged through structured play and mimicry. Her singing, instructive gestures, and emotional care for peers reflected both an internalisation of institutional norms and a desire for recognition within them. Yet her bids were also vulnerable to misreading, especially when their affective charge disrupted the flow of routine.

Rapha's exuberant expressions through movement, sound, and symbolic defiance often blurred the boundary between play and disruption. His affective communications were rich but frequently reframed as behavioural issues, leaving their symbolic significance unmet. Amid these patterns,

moments of genuine attunement stood out. Rapha being held after injury, Amy mirrored in her song, Muhtadi engaged with an emotion-colour book, and Caroline attempting to share a cherished object, each of these revealed glimpses of the nursery as a *transitional space* (Winnicott, 1971), where affect could be received and transformed. But these moments were fragile, often isolated, and stood in stark contrast to the broader landscape of misattunement, where children's expressions were either overlooked or managed through behavioural scripts.

My own role in the field was similarly marked by these dynamics as I too became subject to misattunement and omission. An unannounced closure of the nursery and a failure to communicate logistical changes revealed the ways in which institutional life routinely bypasses affective consideration, not just for children, but for all participants. As Frosh and Baraitser (2008) argue, these omissions are not incidental. They are woven into the unconscious life of institutions. The interpretations that follow trace the affective echoes of these moments. In doing so, they seek not only to document but to interpret, to hold in mind the fragments of interaction through which children expressed, processed, or defended against emotional experience. Some of these moments were met and transformed. Others were left suspended, held only by the rhythms of play, or lost to the flow of the day. In each, the question of relational meaning remains central: what becomes possible when a gesture is recognised, and what is foreclosed when it is not?

Holding this tension between what was offered and what was missed became part of the work of seeing, feeling, and interpreting the nursery's emotional landscape.

Caroline's relational world was marked by an ongoing oscillation between invitation and retreat, a choreography of presence and absence that seemed to mirror the nursery's own ambivalence around affective engagement. Her bids for recognition, often articulated through gesture and

rhythm rather than coherent speech, were not readily legible to the institution. As Kristeva (1982) suggests, meaning often resides not in the verbal but in the *semiotic* register: tone, rhythm, and movement. Caroline's expressions occupied this space, yet they were frequently met with redirection or surface-level praise rather than symbolic elaboration. In one early observation, Caroline tried repeatedly to share an object that clearly held emotional significance:

She runs off to talk to Marie, and she tells her while standing by her feet, 'My dad took my lipstick away. So my mum got me a new one.' She says this in a loud voice, as Marie had said she could not hear her and that she needed to wait a little bit. So Caroline repeats this to her. Marie is sorting things out in the water basin. Caroline yells the same sentence until Marie makes a sound that she understands. Marie finally replies, 'Oh, why is that? Why did your daddy take it away?' Caroline replies while laughing, 'I didn't do anything.' She looks shyly down. Marie replies, laughing, 'Oh, you're naughty. That is why dad took it away.'

The object, her coloured lip balm, becomes a *transitional phenomenon*, a Winnicottian (1971) *potential space* between self and other, private and shared meaning. Caroline's repeated attempts to share her story signal not only a desire to be heard but a deeper psychological gesture: the need for emotional holding, for her excitement and ambivalence to be reflected and given shape. Instead, the interaction becomes transactional, shifting from a moment of connection to a moral classification, 'you're naughty'. Her laughter, her shy glance, her repetition each contain emotional weight that is neither metabolised nor transformed. As Dolto (1984) insists, even seemingly trivial utterances carry unconscious meaning and should be received as offerings. Here, the offering is returned in a distorted way.

She goes to her jacket and calls Greta. Caroline takes her lipstick out and thrusts it in the air in my direction, as if for me to take a look, but does not speak to me. Caroline brags to Greta, 'Look, it's pink, it sparkles, my mum got it for me.' Caroline shows me her lipstick again, then runs back to Marie to show her. Marie seems very stressed and just asks her to put it away. Caroline takes a step away, and immediately the staff tells her, 'Good listening.'

Again, the shift from shared meaning to behavioural management truncates the symbolic potential of the exchange. Caroline is praised for compliance, not for communication. The institutional rhythm presses toward efficiency, transforming affective address into performative obedience. This rhythm is not merely logistical but laden with psychological meaning: the phrase 'good listening' becomes part of a gendered and behavioural script into which Caroline is being socialised, emotion as that which must be tidied away, not elaborated.

Later, her internal state seems to spill into action without words:

Caroline balances herself against the coat holder. She almost falls, then slides to her knees. Whitney notices and says she must find something to do, that she cannot just be like that. Caroline seems disinterested; she sneaks a look to the activity table and sees it is the paper chicks, looks at Whitney and shrugs... [she is called by other staff members, all trying to get her to join an activity, and ultimately stands near Lisa who is going to the garden to sort some things]. Caroline straightens up immediately and walks to the glass door that leads to the garden. Lisa asks if she wants to come and she nods. She is asked to put her jacket on as per the rules. Caroline puts the jacket hood over her head and one arm in. She stares at Lisa, who is outside, getting on with her job. Caroline fails to put her other arm in

the jacket, and after two attempts she gives up rather quickly and hangs her jacket back silently. Another child is trying to get her attention, but she ignores him. She stands there, looking sadly at her backpack, scratching at the dinosaur's wings. Lisa approaches from outside and opens the door, asking if she changed her mind. Caroline nods softly, grabs her braids and pulls them slightly upwards, then walks away like this.

This scene unfolds in slow gestures, each saturated with quiet protest. The failed attempt to dress, the scratching of the dinosaur's wings, all echo what Bick (1968) might call the *skin function* of the psyche, where touch or texture substitutes for missing emotional *containment*. Her hesitant compliance, then silent withdrawal, reveals the conflict between external regulation and internal feeling. What follows in the same scene traces the oscillation between symbolic play, protest, and disrupted *containment*.

She grabs a rag doll near the door, where the kitchen play area is. She flops over and over the doll's hair, then caresses her own face with it while staring at the table, playing with the blue playdough. (...) She rocks softly while moving the doll against her face, staring blankly ahead.

In these gestures, we see a moment of self-soothing that operates in the *semiotic* register, where rhythm, repetition, and tactile connection precede language (Kristeva, 1982). The doll functions as a *transitional object* (Winnicott, 1971), mediating between internal state and external environment. Caroline's rocking and blank gaze suggest an attempt to regulate an unspoken affect, absorbed in what Dolto (1984) would call symbolic activity carrying unconscious charge.

She starts banging the rag doll against a colourful paper plate that says, 'happy birthday', sitting on top of the counter. Leonora looks over with concern and asks if she is okay.

Caroline stops abruptly, as if just realising what she was doing, then shyly looks at me and nods to the staff. (...) Caroline looks annoyed, as if Leonora misread her action, and shakes her head hard, then stomps away. Even her stomps look soft, as if lacking energy.

The contrast between the joyful sign and the banging introduces a tension aligned with the *abject*, the intrusion of what cannot be symbolised into the symbolic (Kristeva, 1982). The staff's question misreads the affective weight, responding with surface concern rather than containing the ambivalence. Caroline's depleted stomps signal a withdrawal from a failed bid for symbolic recognition.

She goes to the little kitchen and grabs a teddy and the rag doll. She sits the rag doll on the table and pretends the teddy is cooking at the stove. At first, it looks like she is cooking the teddy, but then it becomes the chef. (...) She puts these in a bowl (...) and stabs the toys with a fork. She moves as if playfully, but all her actions carry a trace of violence.

The shifting roles suggest play with ambivalence and role reversal, echoing Benjamin's (2017) idea of mutual recognition. These actions reveal an attempt to work through conflictual internal states through symbolic substitution. The playful violence hints at unmet *containment* and repetition compulsion.

She holds the teddy while stabbing the bowl, then stops and looks at me shyly. (...) It feels like she is conjuring objects out of thin air. She opens the toy fridge to take out more items, still holding the teddy.

Caroline's glance towards me becomes a bid for recognition. The collection of objects materialises emotional need. Dolto (1984) reminds us that such play is never empty; it is always an address.

Suddenly, two children start screaming, startling everyone, but Caroline barely looks up.

When one scream is louder, she looks at me worriedly, almost as if worried about me rather than herself. (...) She starts to feed the teddy and doll, ignoring the noise.

This concern appears redirected toward the adult observer, a reversal of roles where the child becomes the container for the adult's potential distress (Benjamin, 2017). Feeding the toys becomes an act of reasserting control amid chaos.

She continues feeding her toys, but another scream pierces the air and this time she tenses up, then quickly recovers. (...) She begins sorting objects into baskets.

These sorting movements function as a defence, restoring order when emotional holding is absent (Bick, 1968). The repetitive acts manage anxiety through external control.

When other kids approach, Caroline dumps all the food from her plate while watching them seriously. When they walk away, she puts everything back and resumes organising the 'fridge'. (...) She thinks for a while then starts to look around until she finds a plain cup without a handle, she stacks this in the middle, allowing her to properly stack the cups.

Here, the plain cup becomes a *transitional device*, allowing symbolic mastery. Her determination shows a fragile and solitary attempt to hold together an internal world. This is not a moment of mutual recognition, but self-regulation in the absence of relational *containment*.

She then puts a fork in the box and shakes it hard. All of the organised stacked objects are scattered inside the big box, and she looks happy about it. She then looks at me with big eyes filled with fear. I again do not know why, but her gaze changes fast, and she smiles.

The deliberate undoing of order gestures toward the *abject*. Kristeva (1982) describes such moments as liminal, poised between integration and breakdown. The smile is not reassurance but a cover for something more uncontainable. The deliberate scattering of previously ordered objects suggests a return to the *abject*, an undoing of the fragile *Symbolic Order* she had just enacted through play, which was a small, self-made system of care, *containment*, and *differentiation* assembled to hold anxiety at bay. The gaze that follows is fearful, then smiling, which may reflect the instability of her internal state.

She moves on to pick up books with the doll on her arms, (...) She squints her eyes at him and pulls intensely at Whitney, and says, 'It is broken! It is broken! He did it, I think! (...) Whitney looks and shakes her head and thanks her for telling her but tells her to give the broken books to the room leader, Marie. (...) They excitedly walk to Marie, to show them here, but she is deep in thought (...) and says after their repetitions, 'Ok! I get it! Thank you, I am busy, leave them!'

This sequence illustrates the institutional misattunement where attempts at communication are registered but not received. Caroline's excitement dissolves into frustration. Her gesture is dismissed; her symbolic message flattened under adult preoccupation:

Whitney comes back to them and says, 'whenever someone is tearing books up you have to stop and tell an adult just like you did... well done.' Something about her tone puts me off, as well as her facial expressions that don't match what she is saying, she looks very

upset. Caroline widens her eyes and dives into the floor, she says, ‘oh I need to find... mine...’ and she starts picking up the whales on the floor surrounding the water basin.

The mismatch between verbal affirmation and nonverbal cues from the adult creates confusion. Caroline’s exaggerated dive and renewed searching behaviour could be read as *displacement*, a turn back into the *semiotic* where *affect* finds expression in motion and repetition. Again, the gesture is symbolically rich yet slips past the adult register of meaning.

Together, these scenes reveal the fragility of *containment* in institutional life. Caroline’s symbolic play moves within a *transitional space* that is neither fully held nor entirely rejected. Her gestures, objects, and glances carry the weight of a child navigating a setting that rarely listens to the language she speaks.

Furthermore, this scene was preserved in its entirety because it offers a rare, layered window into the psychological landscape of the nursery. Rather than presenting a singular moment of rupture or care, it unfolds as a sustained sequence in which Caroline’s *symbolic world* is built, disrupted, and rebuilt through gesture, rhythm, and play. The unbroken continuity of the vignette allows the reader to witness how *affect* circulates across time, objects, and relational exchanges, revealing the cumulative weight of minor *misattunements* and fleeting recognitions. To cut the scene would be to fracture its psychological logic, to remove the slow building of meaning, the shifting tones of interaction, and the embodied strategies Caroline deploys to navigate an environment that often fails to hold her experience. In its fullness, the vignette functions as a *scenic composition*, offering a textured landscape of the nursery’s emotional life. It captures the recursive tensions between *containment* and collapse, *symbolic elaboration* and institutional scripting, allowing a deeper

scenic understanding of how *affect*, gesture, and *misattunement* accumulate across space and time.

Muhtadi's interactions also offered a compelling view into the subtle architectures of *containment* and *symbolic mediation* within the nursery. Without overt disruption or conflict, his actions traced the quiet labour of *affective expression*, revealing how a child might navigate the inconsistencies of relational attunement through gesture, rhythm, and *symbolic substitution*. The following scene captures one such moment, where a sequence of ambiguous bids for recognition unfolds through his interaction with peers, staff, and symbolic objects. What emerges is not a singular event but a layered *scenic composition*, shaped by both the limitations of the institutional environment and the child's creative efforts to be seen, understood, and held.

He walks into the sofa area and grabs a teddy bear and then smashes its face against the window. There is a group of children on the other side of the window. It looks like he wants to show off the teddy bear to them, but the kids ignore him as they are preoccupied with trying to put a fire truck on top of the window. He keeps trying to show off the teddy bear to them until one of them puts his hand against the television from the other side as if asking him to stop. Muhtadi misreads this as if they want to play with him, so he grabs the teddy bear and runs off outside to meet them. They ignore him, so eventually he gets tired and goes back inside.

Here, the teddy bear became a *symbolic extension* of Muhtadi's desire for connection. His repeated efforts to present it to the other children, through the glass and across boundaries, functioned as a bid for recognition. The gesture oscillated between play and aggression, communication and defence. As Dolto (1984) reminds us, every act of communication from the

child is already addressed to an *Other*. The failure of this address to be reciprocated or even noticed risks reinforcing a psychological loop of exclusion, confusion, and shame. *Misattunement* did not result in immediate withdrawal, however. Instead, Muhtadi persisted. The repeated presentation of the bear became a refrain of *emotional insistence*. It was a hopeful rhythm, a *scenic composition*, laden with unspoken *affect* and unconscious expectation (Lorenzer, 1986).

He sits, and Leonora keeps talking to him, but she is ignored. She then says, ‘What is happening today?’ He smiles big. She leaves, rolling her eyes, but it feels playful, and he laughs. He is sitting on the sofa looking at the book but then decides to sit on the floor. He flips through the pages. It is a colour book that shows emotions for each colour. He seems to really enjoy it. He makes big faces and excessive reactions to each page. When the red page comes along, for anger, he sticks out his tongue very far out. Then he flips to the green page, calm, and he touches his heart and sighs.

This encounter with the colour-emotion book marked a shift from enacted gesture to *symbolic play*. In the absence of relational reciprocity with the adult, the book offered an external *symbolic frame* within which Muhtadi could experiment with *affective expression*. His exaggerated facial responses to the colours, sticking out his tongue for anger and sighing for calm, suggest a moment of *self-containment* and elaboration. The book temporarily fulfilled a *containing function*, offering back to him an image of emotional states that could be played with and processed. Unlike the adult, the book did not misread or correct. It simply held the space for *projection* and return. The container must do more than absorb; it must transform (Bion, 1962). Here, the transformation occurred not through dialogue but through a symbolic object that allowed the child to regulate and recognise his own feeling states.

Amy's play on a *transitional quality*, offering a private space where subjective experience can be externalised and metabolised. But this space is fragile, dependent on freedom from both adult and peer intrusion.

A boy comes and seems excited by seeing Amy play. He puts his hand near the ladybug and Amy turns to him very angry, 'Stop it!' Amy places some blocks to limit her area and makes a movement as if saying this is her space. The boy tries again to join, and she screams in anger, stomping her feet. She tells him to stop again as she grabs all the insect figures and holds them against her body.

Amy's sudden escalation in response to the boy's presence indicates a rupture in the *containing space* she had constructed. Her anger is not simply territorial but conveys an unconscious recognition that the *symbolic function* of her play, the work of containing emotion, was under threat. The absence of a *containing adult* who could recognise the *symbolic charge* of her play left her alone with unprocessed emotions. With no external container available, her body becomes the vehicle for her defence. She barricades her space, clutches the figures to her chest. Her scream is not dysregulation; it is defence. And yet it is likely to be read through a behavioural lens, not a symbolic one.

The staff come over and ask where have all the insects gone, but Amy does not look at her and continues playing with the ladybug on top of the hill of dirt that covers the other insect figures. The staff tells her they need to share as they are for everyone. Amy looks upset and stops playing and walks away from the table without saying anything.

The staff intervention demonstrates a quiet yet consequential *misattunement*. The moral imperative to share, framed as institutional fairness, overrides the emotional complexity of Amy's

play. No space is made for inquiry. No interest is shown in the *symbolic terrain*. Her withdrawal is not an act of resistance but one of deflation. This is a moment of omission, a failure to hold or interpret (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). What the adult hears is a logistical question about toys. What is missed is a psychological address, a child's carefully constructed *symbolic field* dismantled by institutional logic. This sequence reveals the micro-dynamics of *containment* and how easily they can be foreclosed. Amy's repeated engagement with the buried insect, her sound-based narrative, and her protective gestures all speak to a child negotiating the limits of relational space. Her play, layered with meaning, anticipates a listener. As Dolto (1984) writes, even the smallest *symbolic act* is a gesture toward the *Other*. But in the absence of a response, the bid remains unanswered. Its meaning is suspended.

Amy's ability to return to play after such disruption is never guaranteed. Sometimes she resumes with quiet determination. Other times, as in this scene, she retreats, leaving behind a trace of *affect* lodged in the materials. *Containment*, in this context, is not merely the adult's role in holding the child's feelings. It is also the recognition of the emotional labour the child is already performing. Amy's *symbolic gestures*, her leaves, her chants, and her scream are not noise. They are structured bids for relational meaning. When that bid is met, something transformative becomes possible. When it is missed, what remains is not only sadness but the unsettling sense that something vital has been overlooked.

Turning now to Rapha's expressions of *affect* which often hovered at the edge of legibility, animated, urgent, and saturated with meaning, yet frequently reframed by the institutional gaze as disruptive or excessive. In his case, the line between *symbolic communication* and behavioural management was particularly fraught. *Containment*, when offered, was inconsistent and often

arrived only after escalation. One such moment unfolded in the garden after a conflict with another child.

Rapha has a big spoon that is almost his size, he covers his face with it as the staff is telling him that he is not being nice. The staff keeps scolding him, but he drops the spoon and walks off. The staff member rolls her eyes and turns around, leaving as well. Amy picks up the spoon that was dropped and seems very excited.

This moment marks a telling rupture. Rapha covers his face with the oversized spoon, not in defiance but as a gesture of withdrawal, of shielding himself from the emotional charge of the adult's disapproval. It is a bodily metaphor, a defence against overwhelming *affect*. Rather than inviting him to speak or inquiring into what prompted his action, the adult delivers a reprimand framed by moral instruction. The emotional context of his behaviour, the possibility that it expressed confusion, frustration, or anxiety, is collapsed into a judgment of character. This is not an isolated instance but emblematic of a wider institutional pattern, where children's gestures are swiftly re-situated within a behavioural framework that leaves little room for *symbolic interpretation*.

The rolling of the staff member's eyes as she turns away is subtle but saturated. In institutional terms, it is a minor dismissal. However, it signals a withdrawal of relational engagement. As Benjamin (2017) notes, recognition is not simply being seen, it is being seen as a subject capable of meaning. Here, Rapha is seen only in fragments: as the boy who misbehaved, as the child who provoked adult frustration. The potential for mutuality, for *symbolic repair*, is foreclosed.

Later that day, Rapha finds himself in a quieter moment indoors, one of the rare instances where a bid for *containment* is more directly acknowledged. He has bumped his head and received a cold compress.

Rapha hits his head and starts to cry. (...) Marie comes and comforts him. She tells him to come with her so she can get an ice pack and tells another staff member to fill out the corresponding form. He is taken to the sofa by Marie, who places a cold compress on his head. He lies there with a furrowed brow, eyes wide open. Marie speaks softly to him, rubbing his back, 'You're okay'. He does not speak, but his breathing slows as he pouts.

In this scene, the relational field shifts. Rapha is not asked to explain, perform, or correct. He is simply held, physically and emotionally, within the quiet parameters of care. Marie's actions recall Bion's (1962) *container-contained* dynamic, in which the adult's role is to absorb the unprocessed *affect* and return it in a metabolised, bearable form. Her tone is low, her presence steady. The intervention may appear banal, yet it is precisely in these banalities that *containment* operates. The soothing rhythm of her words, the touch of her hand, and the permission to rest all mark a temporary *holding environment*. This rare instance of attunement stands in stark contrast to other moments in Rapha's day, where he is redirected without affective inquiry. There is an irony between the two scenes that draws attention to the complex psychological life of institutions. As Lorenzer (1986) notes, *symbolic forms* can become frozen when their social context no longer supports their elaboration. Rapha's gestures, his absorption in play, all become emptied of meaning when the adults fail to meet them within a shared narrative frame. Without recognition, even creative expression becomes alienated, cast as noise rather than communication.

In an interview, Whitney reflected on Rapha's behaviour:

Rapha is very smart; he knows a lot of things. And he always like challenge, he wants to do something challenging. (...) Sometimes, oh, he's spoiling things he's doing. But he is challenging himself. So sometimes I, you know, as long as another child is not getting hurt, or he's not getting it, let's leave him to do what he's doing. He loves to challenge himself. (...) He used to listen, but now they say he doesn't listen. (...) It's just a challenging behaviour at the moment.

This reflection, though offered with empathy, carries within it a subtle tension. Rapha's expressions are framed as boredom and autonomy, but also as 'spoiling' or 'challenging' behaviour. The language vacillates between recognition of his agency and a dismissal of difference. His preference for doing things alone is acknowledged, yet the implications of being misunderstood or uncontained remain latent. In Benjamin's terms, what is missing is not attention but recognition, an attunement to the *symbolic texture* of Rapha's actions (Benjamin, 2017). His gestures are not simply indicators of restlessness or defiance, but of a child navigating the *affective gaps* left open by a system not structured to interpret complexity. What remains striking about Rapha is the tenacity of his *symbolic efforts*. Even in the face of repeated correction or misreading, he continues to seek meaning through rhythm, sound, movement, and play. His body becomes the stage for emotional translation. His songs, interruptions, and objects all perform a *symbolic function* when words fail. Yet in the institutional life of the nursery, these performances are easily reframed as dysregulation. The challenge, then, is not simply to manage behaviour but to hear it. To approach Rapha's actions as part of a communicative repertoire shaped by need, longing, and *affect*. When *containment* does occur, it alters the relational field, not by controlling emotion, but by allowing it to be *symbolised*. Rapha does not need less expression; he needs more room for his interpretation.

In the interstices of play, silence, and gesture, the nursery revealed its complex and often contradictory capacities for *containment*. Across Caroline's *symbolic reversals*, Amy's protective rituals, Muhtadi's ambiguous retreats, and Rapha's *affective eruptions*, the question of what it means to be held, psychically, emotionally, and symbolically, remained suspended rather than resolved. *Containment*, where it emerged, was provisional and fragile, often undermined by the pace of routines, the absence of attunement, or the narrow interpretive frameworks available to staff. Bearing witness to these scenes was not a neutral act. As a researcher, I was repeatedly drawn into their emotional weight, pulled between the urge to interpret and the discomfort of watching bids for recognition falter. There were moments that felt painful to observe, where the absence of response or the misreading of gesture carried a particular kind of psychological violence. And yet, within these fragments, there were also glimpses of what might be possible, a space where emotional life is not dismissed as excess or noise but taken seriously as a source of relational meaning. Holding this tension, between what was offered and what was missed, became part of the work of seeing, feeling, and interpreting the nursery's emotional landscape.

Conclusions: Symbolic Threads and Embodied Silences - Meaning in Motion

In the relational textures of the nursery, language did not stand apart from the body. It surfaced in fragments, gestures, rhythms, murmurs, and silences. It flickered between children and staff as a tool of expression, a means of *containment*, and, at times, a defence against what could not be fully held. Language here was not merely a developmental milestone to be mastered. It was a structure that organised emotional experience and positioned children within an institutional and psychological field already marked by expectation, regulation, and desire (Lacan, 1966). Yet this *Symbolic Order* did not always arrive seamlessly. At its edge, as Harris (2013) notes, lies a fragile *transitional space*, where language functions as both a potential bridge and a protective shield. In

this in-between zone, children's efforts to symbolise experience became legible in gesture, rhythm, repetition, or withdrawal. Their communications slipped between the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* (Kristeva, 1982), carried more in tone than syntax, more in posture than proposition.

These were not deficits in expression but dense, affective signals, pleas, refusals, invitations that demanded recognition. Whether and how they were received depended not only on the sensitivity of staff but on the institutional framing that made certain meanings legible and others opaque. Some expressions were easier to hold. Children who demonstrated linguistic fluency or emotional regulation were often interpreted as developmentally successful; their bids for meaning met with affirmation, praise, or sustained engagement. Others, whose gestures were more fragmented or ambiguous, remained on the periphery of recognition. Their attempts to enter the symbolic field were at times redirected, overlooked, or prematurely silenced. This unevenness was not incidental. It was symptomatic of a broader affective economy (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009) in which some forms of expression were welcomed while others provoked discomfort or were swept aside by institutional necessity.

What emerged was not an absence of speech but a crisis of *symbolisation*. In the Lacanian sense, these were encounters with the *Real*, those moments that resist integration into language, which exceed narrative *containment*. Harris's (2013) framing of language as a *transitional space* becomes vital here: a space where affect may be shaped into form, but where the risk of foreclosure looms large if no receptive other is present to meet the gesture. In those moments, when no one could, or would, hold the child's utterance, meaning threatened to collapse into repetition, avoidance, or silence. Such dynamics played out in the ordinary, the fleeting, the overlooked. A story interrupted. A song abandoned. A child whispering to no one. The rhythm of nursery life often demanded smoothness and speed. But children rarely complied with such

tempos. They placed toys into others' hands, danced when no one watched, and whispered songs into the folds of a cushion. These were not just acts of play. They were offers of meaning.

These moments highlight the relevance of Bion's (1962) concept of containment. When staff can receive, metabolise, and return emotional experience in a form that is manageable, children's expressions are held, recognised, and integrated into symbolic understanding. Where containment fails through the absence of reflective space, structural pressures, or procedural focus, children's gestures, words, and affective offerings remain unresolved, unacknowledged, or misinterpreted. This failure is systemic rather than individual, shaping not only children's emotional experiences but also the institutional climate. For professional practice, this suggests that reflective spaces, supervision, and emotional processing are crucial: they allow staff to respond with attunement rather than mere regulation, metabolise the affective demands of the nursery, and sustain a symbolic space in which children's bids for meaning can be taken up rather than silenced. Professional development is therefore inseparable from the relational and emotional work of the setting, enabling practitioners to meet intensity with containment and care.

As Benjamin (2017) reminds us, recognition does not arise from mirroring alone, but from transformation within a relational third, where the child's subjectivity is met, altered, and confirmed through an *other* who can stay with the intensity of the encounter. Yet the other was not always available. Staff navigated institutional pressures that limited their capacity for attunement. *Containment*, when offered, was often partial, procedural, or strained. The demands of routine, safety, and control pressed against the slower, uncertain work of recognition. Within this tension, language became both a medium of connection and a terrain of misrecognition. The child's offer was not always accepted. Sometimes it was misunderstood. Sometimes it was too much.

When language faltered, the body spoke. Averted eyes, tightly clasped fists, repetitive movements; these gestures became vessels for unarticulated feeling. Gitz-Johansen (2009) draws attention to this embodied musicality, to the rhythm and form of interaction itself. In doing so, the nursery emerges not as a neutral site of developmental progression but as a symbolic field in which subjectivities are both shaped and constrained. Here, as Elias (2012) argued in his work *On the Process of Civilisation*, learning occurs not only through instruction but through bodily discipline, through the sedimented practices of daily life. Even in silence, meaning circulated. It hovered between child and adult, between observer and scene. The absence of response was never neutral. It carried the weight of what could not be spoken, what was repressed or excluded within the symbolic economy of the nursery. These absences formed a kind of institutional unconscious, a structuring of experience that shaped who could speak, and how they would be heard.

My own presence was not outside of this economy. I too searched for coherence, for scenes that could be rendered intelligible. Yet what emerged was often messy, partial, and affectively dense. As Frosh and Baraitser (2008) propose, the work of psychosocial research lies in remaining within that mess, not smoothing it out, but registering its dissonance. The desire for completion, for wholeness, must be set aside in favour of listening to what resists being said.

This chapter has not sought to resolve the contradictions it explores. Rather, it has offered a tapestry of symbolic and affective life, woven through song, gesture, resistance, misattunement, and play. Some threads hold. Others unravel. But each thread reveals how meaning is never simply transmitted; it is negotiated, embodied, and sometimes refused. In the nursery, language functions not as a transparent tool but as a psychological and institutional process through which children are positioned, recognised, or excluded. Their bids for meaning, the staff's partial responses, and the structural silences all point to the uneven terrains of early *symbolisation*. And it

is in the gaps, the repetitions, the gestures that do not land, where the potential for meaning-making resides.

The final chapter turns now to these lingering threads. It reflects on what has been gathered, what remains unsymbolised, and what kind of psychosocial inquiry becomes possible when we attend not just to what is said, but to the rhythm of its saying, the silence that surrounds it, and the structures that shape who gets to speak at all. It returns to the methodological and theoretical questions that have shaped the inquiry, not to tie them off, but to reflect on what has been revealed by following these strands. The nursery emerges as a densely textured site, one where affect circulates, unconscious dynamics unfold, and children's subjectivities are stitched together through gesture, language, and care. Rather than offering closure, this chapter dwells in the complexity of these interwoven processes, drawing attention to the subtle, often unseen ways that meaning is produced and lived in early childhood settings.

Chapter 9: Concluding Reflections on Weaving Intersubjectivity, Habitus and the Symbolic through the Spaces In-between Care

Introduction

Concluding does not simply signal the end of a process. Rather, it offers an opportunity to gather the scattered threads of theory, emotion, and lived experience that have been woven throughout this inquiry. This thesis has approached the nursery not as a fixed or fully knowable institution, but as a constellation of spaces in between: between gesture and recognition, between *habitus* and expression, and between the child's need and the institution's capacity to respond. These interstitial spaces, so often charged with emotion, are where care is enacted and continuously shaped through silence and speech, structure and rupture, *containment* and collapse. They are the

mutable grounds upon which the emotional architecture of the nursery is constructed, negotiated, and at times destabilised.

Across this study, the nursery has emerged as a symbolic site in which emotional life is not simply managed, but actively configured through the psychological, cultural, and institutional demands placed upon children, staff, and families. These in-between spaces are neither neutral nor static. Instead, they function as generative zones where meaning is formed through emotional exchanges, relational tensions, and symbolic elaborations. They are structured by *the institutional habitus*, the unspoken emotional scripts and social expectations that regulate expression and affect. This final chapter does not aim to produce definitive conclusions but rather returns to the subtle textures of institutional life: the glances, hesitations, omissions, and improvisations through which *intersubjectivity* is lived and institutional structures are both enacted and resisted. These moments offer insight into how care, emotional, symbolic, and physical, is co-created, sustained, and disrupted within the everyday life of the nursery.

The concept of ‘transitional space’ has been central to understanding the emotional and relational dynamics in the nursery. Drawing from Winnicott’s (1971) notion of *transitional space*, the nursery emerges as a site where children are not merely progressing through developmental stages but are actively navigating emotional and relational terrains. These spaces are experienced as zones of provisional meaning, where the child’s gestures, play, and expressions are continually interpreted, mirrored, and negotiated with peers and adults. Transitional space here is less about a fixed environment and more about the fluid interplay of emotional presence, symbolic engagement, and relational attunement. It is shaped as much by the child’s bids for recognition as by the constraints, routines, and cultural scripts of the institution. These spaces are neither fixed nor linear. Instead, they are dynamic and fluid environments where emotional regulation, identity

formation, and symbolic negotiation unfold. The findings of this research suggest that the nursery, as a relational and emotional field, operates as a symbolic space in which children engage with and interpret emotional expression and connection. These *transitional spaces* are shaped through a continual interplay between a child's emotional needs and the institution's capacity to respond to those needs. Emotional expression is not solely an internal or developmental phenomenon. It is deeply shaped by institutional norms, cultural values, and relational expectations.

Children do not enter the nursery as passive recipients of care. They arrive already formed through familial, cultural, and affective histories, and in these in-between spaces, they negotiate those histories with the symbolic structures of institutional life. What emerges within these spaces is not a straightforward path toward regulation but a series of encounters, some attuned and others misaligned, through which children must navigate. Emotional behaviours such as withdrawal, protest, or outburst are not incidental; they are scenes of negotiation between inner experience and outer demand. These are pivotal moments in which the tension between a child's need for emotional recognition and the institution's framework of behavioural management becomes sharply visible. In these moments, the child is not simply reacting. They are attempting to make sense of themselves in relation to a world that often misunderstands or misreads their gestures.

Crucially, these ruptures are not necessarily final. They carry the potential for repair, and the findings show that repair does occur, although unevenly. The nursery's emotional architecture, which emerges through staff-child dynamics and the institutional scaffolding that holds them, can offer moments of reconnection and shared meaning. These moments matter. They represent the possibility for growth, for a child to feel held and known. But they also depend on the institution's emotional infrastructure, on whether staff have the time, space, and internal resources to reflect and contain. As the findings suggest, institutional limitations often leave these spaces unattended,

resulting in missed opportunities for *containment* and emotional understanding. The result is a recursive pattern where unprocessed emotional need gives rise to further rupture. These *transitional spaces* are not neutral. They carry with them both potential and limitations. In these zones, the symbolic meanings of children's experiences are constantly being negotiated. Staff are not merely observers or facilitators but emotionally invested participants engaged in parallel labour, trying to meet the child's needs while managing their own. But institutional pressures such as emotional fatigue, limited staffing, and the absence of reflective time can hinder the depth of this engagement. In these conditions, *containment* becomes patchy, and the child's emotional reality risks being lost or recast as behaviour that needs correction.

The nursery also operates as a space where emotional identities are co-constructed. Children do not simply absorb the institution's expectations. They engage with them, push against them, and reshape them through their own strategies of adaptation or refusal. This dynamic is critical. It reveals that children are not merely expressing emotions but are making symbolic claims about who they are and how they wish to be understood. Through this lens, emotional expression becomes not only an affective act but a relational one, an effort to shape a field of meaning that includes others, including adults who may or may not be able to respond. Play, silence, and emotional gesture emerge here not just as behaviours but as forms of symbolic action. Play, often emphasised in developmental discourse, functions as a site of serious emotional inquiry.

The findings show that children use play to work through emotional contradictions, tensions, and desires. In one scene, a child's violent pretend play was not an enactment of aggression but a symbolic response to an institutional environment that could not hold her feelings. In that moment, the symbolic act of burying and protecting insects became a way of expressing inner fragmentation, and the play itself became a space of provisional *containment*. Silence, too, speaks.

As seen in multiple examples across the thesis, silence can be a powerful form of resistance, a way of refusing the emotional demands of a system that fails to recognise complexity. One child's ongoing withdrawal from group activities was not a symptom to be corrected but a gesture that signalled something too complex to put into words. As Lacan (1966) and Spielrein (1912) suggest, silence can exceed the symbolic, becoming a form of expression when language fails. In the nursery, silence is often misread as passivity or compliance. Yet in these findings, it functions as a site of protest, where emotional truth resists being collapsed into normative scripts.

In conclusion, these *transitional spaces* do not merely mark shifts in developmental stage. They are dynamic zones where emotional and symbolic meaning is co-created, tested, and sometimes refused. The findings from this study point to a nursery that is always in negotiation, between child and adult, between internal and institutional life, between expression and *containment*. These spaces offer no easy answers. But they open the possibility of seeing care differently, not as something delivered but as something enacted, relationally, symbolically, and with all the uncertainty and fragility that such processes entail.

9.1 Language as Transitional Space - The Bridge Between the Inner and Outer Worlds

In the nursery, language emerged not simply as a tool for communication but as a crucial mechanism mediating emotional regulation and relational exchange across multiple layers: emotional, symbolic, cultural, and institutional. The findings show that language was employed to shape children's emotional expressions and offered insight into how emotional meanings were negotiated within the nursery's institutional space. For children able to express emotions in ways deemed socially acceptable, language provided validation and support. Yet, for those whose

expressions fell outside institutional expectations, language often became a site of misrecognition, leading to misunderstanding, redirection, or dismissal.

This dynamic reveals language's dual function as both a boundary-setting tool and a bridge between the child's inner emotional world and the outer social order of the nursery. Some children could articulate frustrations or anxieties aligned with adult expectations, thereby accessing emotional validation. For example, verbalising sadness or frustration directly tended to elicit supportive staff responses. This aligns with Hochschild's (1983) concept of *feeling rules*, whereby institutional norms shape which emotions are permitted and which are suppressed.

However, many children struggled to verbalise complex emotional needs, particularly when lacking the vocabulary or symbolic means to do so. In these cases, emotional expression was often framed as disruption rather than unmet need. This illustrates the limitations of institutional scripts regulating emotion within the nursery. Children whose emotional gestures did not fit these scripts were frequently redirected or labelled disruptive, their experiences obscured rather than engaged with (Benjamin, 2017). Such tensions between inner emotional experience and institutional regulation underscore the power relations embedded in language use, where recognition and misrecognition circulate through both verbal and nonverbal acts.

Furthermore, this language dynamic functions as a form of *emotional socialisation*, shaping children's developing emotional identities. Through language, children learn which feelings are acceptable and how to express them within institutional expectations. Yet this process is far from neutral or inclusive. As Bourdieu's (1990) notion of *habitus* suggests, internalised dispositions reflect and reproduce the cultural and institutional structures that govern emotional expression.

The nursery's *institutional habitus* strongly influences which emotions receive support and which are suppressed, perpetuating existing power asymmetries.

The *transitional space* of language, as theorised by Harris (2009), is thus a multi-layered zone of negotiation, where emotional expression is shaped and reshaped through relational exchanges embedded within institutional contexts. Language offers both potential connection and exclusion. It can hold the child's emotional experience or render it invisible. These findings invite reflection on how language acts not only as a communicative tool but as a key site for co-creating and contesting care within the nursery's emotional architecture.

The findings also highlight how silence functions within this dynamic. For children lacking the language to articulate their emotional experience, silence often became a powerful form of nonverbal communication and protest against the emotional demands of the institution. One child, for example, repeatedly withdrew from group activities not out of disinterest but as a way of signalling discomfort with the emotional expectations placed upon them. This silence can be understood through Spielrein's (1912) notion that silence may represent unspoken emotional realities that exceed the *Symbolic Order*. It was not passive refusal, but an active gesture of emotional conflict inadequately addressed by institutional scripts.

Such forms of misrecognition, as Benjamin (2017) explains, risk emotional alienation by failing to acknowledge the child's emotional or symbolic needs. Within the nursery, these unrecognised expressions reinforce a cycle of emotional invalidation, where children whose emotional needs fall outside the bounds of institutional scripts experience neglect or misunderstanding. This cycle reveals the relational power of language and silence in regulating emotional experience and social inclusion.

Finally, these observations point to the nursery's institutional structure as deeply implicated in regulating emotional expression. Staff, routines, and policies collectively produce an *emotional habitus* that privileges certain forms of expression while marginalising others. Children who conform to these norms are more likely to be recognised and supported, whereas those who do not may be excluded from care and *containment*. This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between emotional labour, institutional power, and relational care that language mediates in the nursery setting.

In conclusion, language in the nursery is not merely a vehicle for communication but a powerful tool for emotional regulation and relational negotiation. It mediates between the child's inner emotional world and the external social world, shaping how emotions are expressed, recognised, and validated. The nursery's emotional landscape is structured by a *Symbolic Order* where language serves as both bridge and boundary, guiding children's emotional experiences and relationships. Yet, this process is far from neutral: language functions as a tool of emotional socialisation that reinforces institutional norms, regulating which emotions are valid and which are not. Children able to navigate these norms are recognised and supported, while those who cannot are often left to manage their emotional worlds alone. The role of language in these emotional exchanges is central to how care is co-created and disrupted within the nursery, shaping the children's emotional development and relational understanding.

9.2 Intersubjectivity - Emotional Co-Creation and Symbolic Negotiation

The concept of *intersubjectivity*, as explored in this research, has been central to understanding the relational dynamics within the nursery. Through the lens of *intersubjectivity*, emotional meaning is not merely transferred between individuals but is co-created through relational

exchanges. This thesis has argued that the emotional and relational dynamics within the nursery are shaped by an ongoing process of mutual recognition and misrecognition between children, staff, and parents. In the nursery, moments of recognition and misrecognition were frequent, and these moments had profound implications for emotional development. As the findings suggest, recognition is a key psychological need that influences emotional well-being. When children's emotional needs were recognised, they were often met with validation, comfort, or encouragement. Conversely, when children's emotional expressions were overlooked or misunderstood, they were left to navigate their feelings without the necessary emotional support. These processes were explained by Bion's (1962) theory of recognition, which argues that the capacity to receive and metabolise another's emotional state is fundamental to psychological growth. In the nursery, moments of recognition were vital to children's sense of emotional security and belonging. However, these moments were often interwoven with misrecognition, leading to feelings of frustration, confusion, and emotional disconnection.

Misrecognition was especially evident when children's emotional expressions were framed as disruptive or manipulative rather than as legitimate emotional responses. For example, one child's emotional distress at being separated from a parent was frequently dismissed by staff, who redirected the child with commands to calm down and join the group. This response demonstrates a failure to recognise the child's emotional needs and reflects the broader institutional script that prioritises emotional regulation and compliance over emotional validation and *containment*. This dynamic was explained by Benjamin's (2017) concept of misrecognition, which occurs when the symbolic or emotional needs of individuals are not acknowledged, leading to alienation and psychic injury. In such moments, the child's feelings were not recognised within the relational field of the nursery, and as a result, their emotional experience was left unmet and unprocessed.

The interplay between recognition and misrecognition was also shaped by broader institutional pressures, including staff shortages, emotional exhaustion, and the lack of reflective space. These pressures meant that staff often struggled to attune to children's emotional needs. The findings highlighted how these institutional limitations affected the emotional responsiveness of staff and how this contributed to relational ruptures. The emotional labour involved in supporting children's emotional needs was often unacknowledged, leaving staff to navigate their affective strain with limited institutional support. Without time or space for reflection, staff struggled to process their own emotional projections, which could then be displaced onto the children. This echoes Hinshelwood's (2001) analysis of institutional *containment*, where unprocessed anxieties within the system lead to fractured and defensive care practices.

Within the nursery, emotional interaction was not a one-way transfer of affect or care, but rather a recursive process of mutual shaping. When children's emotional needs were acknowledged and validated, they were often able to re-enter the relational field with renewed confidence and security. However, when their emotional expressions were misread or ignored, they became isolated within their own affective experience. In such cases, children either withdrew or responded with heightened emotionality. This dynamic can be interpreted by Trevarthen's (1979) concept of primary *intersubjectivity*, which emphasises the foundational role of mutual emotional engagement in the development of relational understanding and communication.

The findings also suggested that *intersubjectivity* was not only about emotional recognition but about symbolic negotiation. Children were not passive recipients of adult interpretations but were actively engaged in shaping the relational space. Bourdieu's (1990) concept of symbolic negotiation helps to illuminate how children navigate the emotionally coded scripts of the nursery. Institutional norms structure expectations for how emotions should be expressed, who is

permitted to express them, and what form these expressions should take. Children who aligned their affective responses with these norms were more likely to be recognised and supported. In contrast, those whose expressions transgressed institutional expectations were more likely to be ignored, disciplined, or misunderstood. This dynamic was particularly evident in the regulation of emotional boundaries. Children who demonstrated empathy, self-regulation, and emotional deference were praised and positioned as role models. These behaviours accrued *symbolic capital*, affirming the child's value within the nursery's relational economy. By contrast, children who expressed distress through defiance, withdrawal, or silence were often excluded from emotionally meaningful interaction. These patterns revealed an uneven distribution of emotional recognition and support, shaped not by need alone but by conformity to institutional norms.

Furthermore, recognition and misrecognition were not merely individual or relational events but were also shaped by broader social structures. Gender, race, and class played a significant role in determining which children's emotions were seen, validated, or marginalised. Children from racially minoritised or working-class backgrounds were more likely to have their emotional expressions interpreted as deviant or disruptive, rather than as meaningful or contextually appropriate. This finding was related to Bourdieu's (1986) theory of *symbolic capital*, which suggests that certain forms of expression are more highly valued within institutional fields. In the nursery, emotional capital accrued unevenly, reinforcing pre-existing social hierarchies and complicating the emotional landscape in which care was enacted.

Within this context, *intersubjectivity* in the nursery cannot be understood as a simple matter of empathy or attunement. It is shaped by institutional logics, socio-cultural values, and structural inequalities that frame how emotions are read and responded to. This process unfolds within a multi-layered field where emotional, symbolic, cultural, and institutional logics converge, making

intersubjectivity a complex site of negotiation and power. The process of symbolic negotiation that emerges from this intersubjective space is therefore central to how care is co-created.

Children, staff, and families continuously adjust their emotional positions in relation to each other, forming and reforming the affective field through which recognition becomes possible or foreclosed.

Care emerges here as a relational practice embedded within institutional routines and cultural scripts, shaped simultaneously at micro and macro levels. Children's emotional expressions embody a dialectic of compliance and subtle resistance, negotiating institutional power as they seek recognition. My own positionality as a researcher intersected with these dynamics, as I both witnessed and took part in the emotional exchanges shaping the nursery's affective life.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal that *intersubjectivity* in the nursery is a dynamic and recursive process of emotional and symbolic exchange. Recognition is a psychological necessity, yet it is not evenly distributed. Misrecognition, particularly when structured by institutional or social inequalities, creates emotional ruptures that can significantly shape a child's sense of self and relational capacity. Intersubjectivity, then, is both a relational process and a symbolic negotiation. Understanding this interplay provides a deeper insight into the co-construction of care and the ways in which emotional meaning is produced, constrained, or transformed within the complex institutional life of the nursery. This complexity invites further inquiry into the persistent tensions shaping emotional life and care within institutional childhood settings.

9.3 Habitus, Symbolic Capital, and the Emotional Infrastructure of the Nursery

The emotional and relational dynamics observed in the nursery were not only shaped by individual emotional responses but were also deeply influenced by broader structures of *habitus*, capital, and socialisation. In the context of this research, Bourdieu's (1990) concept of *habitus* offers a useful framework for understanding how children and staff internalise and reproduce the emotional norms and relational scripts of the institution. Complementing this, Elias's (2012) notion of the *civilising process* provides insight into how these emotional dispositions are embedded within long-term historical and social developments, where self-restraint and regulation become embodied as part of a *collective habitus*. These norms and scripts, deeply ingrained through institutional practices, shape how emotional and relational exchanges are structured within the nursery.

The findings highlighted that children are not passive recipients of care or emotion. Rather, they are active participants who bring with them dispositions shaped by familial, cultural, and social contexts that they continuously negotiate within the nursery. These dispositions are not fixed but are continually reshaped through interactions with staff, peers, and the institutional environment. This resonates with Benjamin's (1995, 2017) concept of intersubjective negotiation, where children's subjectivities emerge relationally and symbolically through ongoing encounters. The concept of *habitus* helps to explain how children's emotional responses to the nursery are both a product of their personal histories and a reflection of the broader institutional structures in which they operate.

Children, shaped by their family environments, enter the nursery with certain expectations, emotional tendencies, and ways of relating to others. These emotional tendencies often clash with the *institutional habitus*, which influences the behavioural norms and emotional scripts within the nursery setting. For example, children who express their needs in ways that align with the

emotional and behavioural norms of the institution are more likely to be recognised and supported. Those whose emotional expressions deviate from these norms, such as outbursts, emotional withdrawal, or non-compliance, are often redirected or misinterpreted (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

These patterns of behaviour were explained by Bourdieu's (1990) argument that *habitus* shapes how individuals perceive and respond to the social world, including the emotional dynamics within a particular institution. However, *habitus* must also be understood as an embodied and affective structure, transmitted through gestures, rhythms, and emotional tone, which shapes how children and staff 'live' and perform the emotional life of the nursery (Lorenzer, 1986). Within this field, *symbolic capital*, as discussed by Bourdieu (1986), plays a crucial role in shaping how emotional and relational dynamics unfold. *Symbolic capital* refers to the value placed on certain behaviours, emotional responses, and social roles within a particular social context. In the nursery, *symbolic capital* is distributed unevenly based on children's ability to conform to institutional emotional norms. Children who display emotional regulation, empathy, and compliance with adult expectations are recognised and validated, accumulating *symbolic capital*. These children are more likely to receive praise, attention, and emotional support from staff, reinforcing a feedback loop that enables their emotional and social development (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008).

In contrast, children who do not conform to these emotional norms, those who express their needs in disruptive or non-compliant ways, are often overlooked or misrecognised. These children, despite their emotional needs, are marginalised within the nursery's emotional infrastructure. Their access to emotional resources becomes constrained. This dynamic reveals the interplay between emotional regulation and *symbolic capital*, where children's emotional expressions are

not only shaped by their own needs and dispositions but also by the cultural and institutional value placed on those expressions. Emotional expressions that align with institutional norms are rewarded, while those that deviate are either disregarded or penalised. This uneven distribution of emotional support and validation reinforces and reproduces broader emotional hierarchies, where some children are granted access to care while others are excluded (Elias, 2012; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008).

The concept of *symbolic capital* also helps to explain how emotional roles and relational dynamics are assigned within the nursery. Children who display emotional competences, defined as the ability to regulate and express emotions in ways that align with the nursery's expectations, are often positioned as role models. These children accumulate *symbolic capital* through their self-regulation, becoming more visible and recognised within the nursery's emotional and social structure. In contrast, children who express emotions in ways that challenge normative expectations, whether through refusal, outbursts, or emotional retreat, are marginalised. In this way, *symbolic capital* was not just a part of individual development but also reflected the institutional power structures that privilege certain forms of expression over others (Benjamin, 2017).

The findings also suggested that the *institutional habitus* and the distribution of *symbolic capital* are shaped by societal structures, including gender, race, and class. These social categories influence how children's emotional needs are perceived, recognised, and responded to within the nursery. For example, children from ethnic or lower socio-economic backgrounds may be more likely to experience misrecognition, with their emotional expressions being read through cultural assumptions or deficit-based framings. This dynamic reflects broader patterns of inequality, where certain emotional expressions are privileged over others based on cultural norms. As a

result, children from marginalised backgrounds may encounter greater obstacles in achieving recognition and emotional validation. When emotional behaviours do not conform to institutional norms, whether because of cultural difference or because they are perceived as difficult to manage, those behaviours are more likely to be marginalised (Hollway & Froggett, 2013).

These children's emotional expressions are often labelled as disruptive, reinforcing an institutional logic that prioritises regulation over recognition. This marginalisation is reinforced by the socio-cultural forces that determine which emotions are intelligible and which are silenced. Children from dominant social groups are often more readily offered the benefit of interpretive generosity. Their expressions are more likely to be understood as legitimate, deserving of support. In contrast, the emotional needs of children from less privileged backgrounds are more easily dismissed (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008).

Power dynamics between staff and children also shape the emotional regulation and symbolic negotiation within the nursery. Staff act as the gatekeepers of *symbolic capital*. Their responses to children's emotional expressions not only affect individual children's access to emotional resources but also influence the construction of the broader emotional hierarchy of the nursery. This can be explained by Foucault's (1977) concept of power as relational and embedded within knowledge. Emotional norms are enforced not only through overt instruction but also through the implicit structuring of everyday interactions. These structures subtly regulate how emotions are read, managed, and responded to, creating a normative framework for what emotional life should look like in the nursery. Moreover, these micro-powers operate through affective regulation, shaping emotional expression through tone, gesture, proximity, and institutional feeling rules (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009). A more detailed analysis of the broader socio-political, structural, or

intersectional dimensions of power is beyond the scope of this study, but could provide a valuable avenue for further research.

In conclusion, the findings of this research suggest the nursery functions as a site where *habitus* and *symbolic capital* shape the emotional lives of children, staff, and parents. Emotional responses and behaviours are continuously negotiated within this space, influenced by both personal histories and the institutional norms that govern relational life. The distribution of *symbolic capital*, through mechanisms of recognition and misrecognition, plays a significant role in determining whose emotional needs are acknowledged and met. These dynamics reflect broader social forces that structure the emotional architecture of the nursery. As revealed in the earlier chapters, these processes are embedded within an affective economy (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009), where emotional regulation is not only a developmental achievement but also a site of moral and institutional significance (Elias, 2012). Through an understanding of *habitus* and *symbolic capital*, drawing on both Bourdieu and Elias alongside psychoanalytic and psychosocial perspectives, we can gain a deeper insight into how emotional meaning is constructed, how care is distributed, and how symbolic negotiation defines who is seen, supported, and held within the institutional landscape of early childhood care.

Conclusion: The In-between and the Possibilities of Care

This thesis has argued that the nursery is far from being a simple site of early education and care. Instead, it emerges as a dense symbolic space where emotional and relational negotiations are constantly unfolding. It is an environment in which children, staff, and parents engage with one another in complex, often unconscious ways marked by moments of recognition, misrecognition, and repair. The children navigate not just developmental milestones but also institutional

expectations that shape whether they are allowed to be the '*good child*', a figure that is far from neutral (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). It is a construct embedded within adult projections, social expectations, and gendered norms, making the nursery a site where the 'good child' is not simply formed through institutional demands, but also through the unconscious enactment of these gendered emotional scripts. Children learn to embody emotional expressions that align with these expectations, thus reinforcing gendered norms from an early age. These negotiations are not reducible to the transfer of knowledge or the management of behaviour. Rather, they concern the making of identity, the construction of emotional norms, and the shaping of social relationships. The construction of identity and emotional norms is also deeply gendered.

From early childhood, children are often unconsciously assigned emotional roles shaped by gendered expectations. As Chodorow (1978) and Benjamin (2017) argue, these emotional roles become ingrained through relational practices that privilege forms of emotional expression in girls and boys. For instance, girls are often expected to express vulnerability, caregiving, and sensitivity, while boys are socialised to suppress vulnerability in favour of stoicism or aggression. These gendered emotional scripts complicate the emotional landscape of the nursery, shaping not only how emotions are expressed but also how they are recognised and validated within the institution. In this sense, the nursery becomes a space of symbolic and affective encounter, a small world where broader societal structures and personal histories meet, press into each other, and sometimes transform through that contact.

Through the key concepts of *transitional space*, *intersubjectivity*, *habitus*, and *symbolic capital*, this thesis has developed a framework for understanding how the emotional and symbolic infrastructure of the nursery shapes everyday care practices. The nursery, as a social institution, is not simply a backdrop to development, but a force that actively configures how care is felt,

understood, and enacted. This thesis has chosen to work with *habitus* and *symbolic capital* (Bourdieu, 1990) alongside the *civilising process* and relational dynamics emphasised by Elias (2012). Not to merge them into a single theory, but because each brings something essential: while Bourdieu helps trace how emotional norms and social hierarchies become internalised and reproduced, Elias offers a longer historical and cultural view that situates these dispositions within evolving patterns of self-regulation and intersubjective negotiation, making visible how affect, language, and relational practice converge in the nursery's daily life. Together, they allow us to see how *habitus* is not only inherited through family or culture but emerges within language itself as a *transitional space* where private feeling becomes shared meaning. In these quiet rituals, pauses, and fleeting gestures, children's dispositions encounter institutional norms and are slowly, sometimes uneasily, reshaped.

Yet this is not solely a sociological process. By bringing in the psychosocial, as explored by Frosh (2003), Benjamin (2004), Bollas (1987), and Kristeva (1984), I have argued that children's emotional life is co-constructed, shaped by relational encounters and saturated with affect that resists easy articulation. Each of these thinkers offers something distinct: Frosh (2003) attends to the tension between the social and the psychic; Benjamin (2004) foregrounds the ethics of mutual recognition; Bollas (1987) draws our attention to the unspoken textures of everyday life; and Kristeva (1984) reminds us of the place of language, silence, and the semiotic in the making of subjectivity. Holding these frameworks in dialogue, rather than settling on one, keeps alive the contradictions and uncertainties that define everyday life in the nursery. This perspective has direct implications for professional practice: practitioners should attend not only to measurable developmental milestones but also to the symbolic and emotional dimensions of nursery life, recognising the partial and relational nature of care. Staff training could emphasise reflective

practice, helping adults attune to subtle, non-verbal cues and the emotional work embedded in everyday routines. Supervision should support staff in noticing and responding to moments of rupture or misattunement, recognising emotional labour as central rather than peripheral to practice.

Ruti (2010) reinforces this stance, emphasising that the richness of psychoanalytic theory lies not in seeking to reconcile divergent perspectives but in allowing them to coexist and inform one another. In this way, holding these frameworks in dialogue, rather than settling on a singular approach, illuminates the complexity of children's emotional lives, keeping alive the contradictions and ambiguities that permeate both their internal worlds and external relational experiences. In terms of policy, these insights suggest that early childhood frameworks should extend beyond outcomes and developmental benchmarks to include attention to relational, emotional, and symbolic processes. Assessment tools could incorporate observations of affective and relational dynamics, and policy should support reflective supervision and practices that allow repair, resilience, and nuanced engagement with children's emotional needs.

These insights matter beyond the boundaries of this thesis. In policy conversations that remain dominated by developmental milestones and measurable outcomes, the emotional and symbolic life of the nursery is too often overlooked. Yet it is here, in the partial, relational, and sometimes awkward moments of exchange, that the ground for emotional growth and resilience is laid. Recognising this complexity invites a way of thinking about nursery care that values not only what can be counted, but also what can be witnessed, held in mind, and made meaningful in relationship.

I was always part of this emotional and symbolic life that I was trying to understand. There were moments when I felt gently absorbed into the rhythms of the day, invited into the quiet rituals of care. And there were moments when I felt out of place, unsure, or unnoticed. These experiences were not on the margins of the research. They shaped the way I observed, the way I listened, and the way I came to understand what care looked like in this setting. There were times I hesitated, uncertain of how to respond. When children cried and no one came quickly, when staff looked tired and overwhelmed, when emotional moments passed unacknowledged, I sometimes felt I had failed to act or to notice in time.

Yet these feelings did not disappear; they stayed with me, requiring a reflection that was emotional as much as intellectual. In moments of rupture, when care falters or *misattunements* occur, I was reminded of Charles's (2019) reflection on hope within relational settings. Charles reminds us that emotional lapses, rather than being purely devastating, can become sites for repair. This is particularly important within the nursery, where emotional ruptures are not final. The emotional infrastructure of the nursery, shaped by both its limitations and its potential for repair, carries within it the hope that even moments of neglect or misrecognition can be transformed into opportunities for reconnection. In the midst of this tension, the emotional labour of both children and staff continually holds space for growth, resilience, and emotional re-engagement.

My presence in the nursery shifted constantly: shaped by the day, the children, the staff, and the hesitations I carried. This movement was not an interruption of the research, but part of it. It taught me to listen not only to what was said, but also to what was left unsaid. As Frosh (2003) reminds us, it is often in the gaps, hesitations, and contradictions that meaning becomes visible. I began to feel that knowing in this setting did not come from certainty, but from what hovered on

the edge of awareness. I did not stand outside the space between recognition and misrecognition; I inhabited it. And in doing so, I witnessed fragments of children's emotional lives that were private, incomplete, and still becoming. They were not performances, but moments of genuine emotional labour. To be present for them was a privilege. What I came to value most was not the neatness of what I saw, but the partial glimpses that revealed something important about care: that even when it falters, it can still matter deeply.

Looking back, I see this thesis as something woven from many threads: the play of children, the speech of staff, the hopes and hesitations of parents, and my own unsettled observations. These threads do not lie flat. They twist, resist, and sometimes break. Yet gathered here, they form something like a scene: not a finished picture, but a shifting landscape where emotion, language, silence, and care remain in motion. This scene cannot be fully resolved. And yet within it, I found something important: a way of witnessing that holds space for complexity, a way of listening that does not rush to explain, and a way of writing that tries, imperfectly, to carry what was shared with care.

This research does not set out a model of best practice. Instead, it invites a rethinking of what it means to care within institutions shaped by symbolic hierarchies, affective norms, and wider social structures. By exploring the symbolic life of the nursery, I have highlighted not only the emotional norms that shape institutional care, but also the ways in which gendered scripts, and the figure of the 'good child' are negotiated within this space. Children are not passive recipients of these emotional norms; they actively engage with them, pushing back against or conforming to them. As gendered expectations are enacted within the nursery, the emotional work of both children and adults becomes a site of struggle, where care is continually reimaged. These

struggles are not futile; they carry with them the possibility of transformation, as misattunements and emotional ruptures are not the end but a beginning.

Hope is embedded within the very process of emotional negotiation. The dynamic and sometimes imperfect relational exchanges within the nursery offer glimpses of potential repair:

transformative moments where children's emotional needs, often misread or dismissed, can be recognised anew. This recognition, when it occurs, is not the result of a singular moment but a continual process of emotional engagement, understanding, and re-engagement that can never be fully captured or measured.

Care emerges amid contradiction: it carries the hope of repair yet is always exposed to rupture; it can be fragile and fleeting, yet also quietly sustaining. The nursery, in this sense, is never a finished system but always in the making, shaped not only by policies and routines but by the everyday, often unnoticed moments of recognition, refusal, speech, and silence. These are the spaces in between; they resist neat definition, cannot be fully measured, and do not lend themselves easily to policy language. Yet it is precisely from within this shifting ground where private histories meet institutional expectations, where language becomes a transitional space, and where intersubjective encounters offer moments of attunement or fracture, and it is where identity and care take shape. The concept of *habitus* helps us understand how these emotional dispositions are both inherited and continually reshaped through such relational experiences within the nursery. To acknowledge this complexity is not to celebrate ambiguity for its own sake, but to take seriously the emotional and relational labour that underpins the life of the nursery. It means recognising that care, in its most vital form, is neither a fixed technique nor an outcome to be delivered, but something always relational, always negotiated, and always on the edge of becoming something more.

In attending to these implications, this thesis seeks to ripple outward into practice and policy, urging a care that is reflective, attuned to emotion, and alive to the subtle currents of relational life. It invites staff training that listens to what is often unspoken, that honours gestures, pauses, and silences as much as words and routines. It calls for policies that recognise the invisible threads: the symbolic, the affective, the relational, as these shape children's experience, alongside the measurable outcomes that so often dominate the discourse. This ongoing relational negotiation is not without its challenges, but it holds within it the potential for hope. As I have argued throughout, care is never a simple or static exchange. It is an emotional and relational process that requires ongoing engagement and reflection. Even in the face of misattunements, there is always the possibility for repair, for a new way forward. In the nursery, these relational ruptures are not insurmountable. In fact, they offer children, staff, and parents opportunities to reshape their emotional connections and continue the process of emotional growth. To embrace this view of care is to embrace the complexity of emotional life itself. Perhaps, it is in attending to this restless and unfinished quality, in the quiet hesitations, partial recognitions, and fleeting moments of connection, that we find the most honest way to speak about what care is and what it might yet become.

References

- Abram, J. (1996). *The Language of Winnicott: A Dictionary of Winnicott's Use of Words*. Karnac Books.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S. (1978). *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Erlbaum.
- Alexander, S. and Taylor, B. (2012). *History and Psyche: Culture, Psychoanalysis, and the Past*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Aquinas, T. (2006). *Summa Theologiae*. Cambridge University Press.
- Aristotle. (2000). *Nicomachean Ethics* (R. Crisp, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.
- Armstrong, D., & Rustin, M. (2014). *Social Defences Against Anxiety: Explorations in a Paradigm*. Karnac Books.
- Arnaud, G. (2012). The contribution of psychoanalysis to organization studies and management: An overview. *Organization Studies*, 33(9), 1121–1135.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612448153>
- Ball, S. J. (2003). *Class Strategies and the Education Market: The Middle Classes and Social Advantage*. Routledge.
- Bar-Haim, S. (2021). *The Maternalists: Psychoanalysis, Motherhood, And The British Welfare State*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. Available at: <https://www-degruyter-com.uniessexlib.idm.oclc.org/document/doi/10.9783/9780812299649/html>.

- Benjamin, J. (1988). *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*. Pantheon Books.
- Benjamin, J. (1995). *Like Subjects, Love Objects*. Yale University Press.
- Benjamin, J. (2004). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness. In *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 73(1), 5–46. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2004.tb00151.x>
- Benjamin, J. (2013). Recognition and destruction: An outline of intersubjectivity. In N. Skolnick & S. Warshaw (Eds.), *Relational Perspectives in Psychoanalysis* (pp. 43–60). Routledge.
- Benjamin, J. (2017). *Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315688524>
- Benvenuto, B. (2018). *Lacanian Psychoanalysis with Babies, Children, and Adolescents: Further Notes on the Child* (C. Owens & S. F. Quinn, Eds.). Routledge.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1991). *The Social Construction of Reality*.
- Bick, E. (1968). The experience of the skin in early object-relations. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 49, 484–486.
- Bion, W. R. (1962). *Learning from Experience*. Heinemann.
- Bion, W. R. (1989). The psycho-analytic study of thinking. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 82(2), 301–310. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2167-4086.2013.00030.x>

- Bollas, C. (1987). *The Shadow of the Object: Psychoanalysis of the Unthought Known*. Columbia University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1977). Structures and the habitus. Outline of a theory of practice, 72–95. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507.004>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1996). *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Ferguson, P. Parkhurst. (1999). *Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Societies*.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Attachment*. Basic Books.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Britton, R., Feldman, M., O'Shaughnessy, E., & Steiner, J. (1989). *The Oedipus Complex Today: Clinical Implications*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429482601>
- Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford University Press.
- Charles, M. (2003). On faith, hope, and possibility. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 31(4), 687–704. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jaap.31.4.687.23000>

- Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England. (2018). [UK Government.](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/surveys-on-childcare-and-early-years-in-england)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/surveys-on-childcare-and-early-years-in-england>
- Chodorow, N. (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. University of California Press.
- Clarke, S., & Hoggett, P. (2009). *Researching Beneath the Surface: Psycho-Social Research Methods in Practice*. Routledge.
- Corsaro, W. A. (1988). Peer culture in the preschool. *Theory Into Practice*, 27(1), 19–24.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00405848809543326>
- Corsaro, W. A. (1993). Interpretive reproduction in children's role play. *Childhood*, 1(2), 64–74.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/090756829300100202>
- Corsaro, W. A. (2000). Early childhood education, children's peer cultures, and the future of childhood. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 2, 89–102.
- Corsaro, W. A., & Rizzo, T. A. (1988). Discussion and friendship: Socialization processes in the peer culture of Italian nursery school children. *American Sociological Review*, 53(6), 879.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2095897>
- Cowley, S. J., & al., et. (2004). Cognitive dynamics and distributed language. *Language Sciences*, 26(6), 531–554.
- Cramer, B., & Palacio Espasa, F. (1993). Projective identification in the parent–infant relationship. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 48, 51–65.

- Croteau, J. M., Anderson, M. Z., & VanderWal, B. L. (2008). Models of workplace sexual identity disclosure and management. *Group & Organization Management*, 33(5), 532–565. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601108321828>
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The Foundation of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. Sage.
- Dahlberg, G., & Moss, P. (2005). *Ethics and politics in early childhood education*.
- Deacon, T. W. (1997). *The symbolic species: The co-evolution of language and the brain*. W.W. Norton.
- Denham, S. A., Bassett, H., Mincic, M., Kalb, S., Way, E., Wyatt, T., & Segal, Y. (2012). Social-emotional learning profiles of preschoolers' early school success: A person-centered approach. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 22(2), 178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2011.05.001>
- Department for Education (DfE). (2021). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. HM Government. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>
- Department for Education and Skills (DfES). (2003). *Every child matters*. The Stationery Office. <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications>
- Dermott, E. (2008). *Intimate fatherhood: A sociological analysis*. Routledge.
- Dollander, M., & de Tyche, C. (2004). Françoise Dolto and the symbolic. *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, 68(1), 161–172.

- Dolto, F. (1955). *The psychoanalytic treatment of children*. The Hogarth Press.
- Dolto, F. (1984). *The language of the body*. Jason Aronson, Inc.
- Dolto, F., & Nasio, J.-D. (1995). The mirror's child. *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*.
- Durkheim, É. (1912). *The elementary forms of religious life*.
- Education, U. K. M. of H. and M. of. (1945). *Report on post-war childcare policy*. UK Government.
- Elfer, P. (2006). Exploring children's expressions of attachment in nursery. *International Journal of Phytoremediation*, 21(1), 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930285209931>
- Elfer, P. (2012a). Emotion in nursery work: Work discussion as a model of critical professional reflection. *Early Years*, 32(2), 129–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.697877>
- Elfer, P. (2012b). Psychoanalytic methods of observation as a research tool for exploring young children's nursery experience. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 15(3), 225–238. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2011.582295>
- Elfer, P. (2015). Emotional aspects of nursery policy and practice – progress and prospect. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 1752–1807. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2013.798464>
- Elfer, P., Goldschmied, E., & Selleck, D. (2012). *Key persons in the nursery: Building relationships for quality provision*. Routledge.

Elias, N. (2010). *The society of individuals*. In *The collected works of Norbert Elias, Vol. 10*.

University College Dublin Press.

Elias, N. (2011). *The symbol theory*. In *The collected works of Norbert Elias, Vol. 13*. University

College Dublin Press.

Elias, N. (2012). *The civilizing process*. In *The collected works of Norbert Elias, Vol. 3*.

University College Dublin Press.

Employment, U. K. D. of E. and. (1999). *Early years framework and nursery provision policy*.

UK Government.

Fonagy, P., & Luyten, P. (2009). A developmental, mentalization-based approach to the

understanding and treatment of borderline personality disorder. *Development and*

Psychopathology, 21(4), 1355–1381. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579409990198>

Foucault, M. (1980). *El ojo del poder: El Panóptico*. Siglo XXI Editores.

Fraiberg, S., Adelson, E., & Shapiro, V. (1975). Ghosts in the nursery: A psychoanalytic approach

to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships. *Journal of the American Academy of*

Child Psychiatry, 14(3). [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-7138\(09\)61442-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0002-7138(09)61442-4)

Freud, A. (1936). *The ego and the mechanisms of defence*. Hogarth Press.

Freud, A. (1946). *Introduction to psychoanalysis for children*. Hogarth Press.

Freud, S. (1900). *The interpretation of dreams* (J. Strachey, Trans.). London: Hogarth Press.

- Freud, S. (1907). Obsessive actions and religious practices. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 9, pp. 115–128). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1908). ‘Civilised’ sexual morality and modern nervous illness. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 9, pp. 177–204). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1912). The dynamics of transference. *Standard Edition*, 12, 97–108.
- Freud, S. (1912–1913). *Totem and taboo: Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics* (J. Strachey, Trans.). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Freud, S. (1913). The claims of psychoanalysis to scientific interest. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 13, pp. 165–190). London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. (1925). Negation. In *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 19, pp. 233–239). London: Hogarth Press.
- Frosh, S. (2003). *Psychoanalysis outside the clinic: Interventions in psychosocial studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Frosh, S. (2019). Psychosocial studies with psychoanalysis. *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 12(2), 101–114.
- Frosh, S., & Baraitser, L. (2008). Psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 13(4), 346–365. <https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2008.28>

- Gabriel, N. (2017). Growing Up in Society - A Historical Social Psychology of Childhood. *Historical Social Research*, 42(4), 207–226. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.42.2017.4.207-226>
- Gilliam, L. G. E. (2014). Making children ‘social’: Civilising institutions in the Danish welfare state. *Human Figurations*, 3(1).
- Gillies, V. (2005). Raising the ‘meritocracy’: Parenting and the individualization of social class. *Sociology*, 39(5), 835–853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505058368>
- Gitz-Johansen, T. (2020). Childcare in uncaring times: Emotional processes in a nursery and their political context. *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 13(3 Special Issue), 263–276. <https://doi.org/10.1332/147867320X15986395984087>
- Gitz-Johansen, T. (2022). Intersubjectivity in the nursery: A case-study from Denmark. *Childhood*, 29(1), 112–125. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09075682211065582>
- Gitz-Johansen, T. (2024). Singing and emotional development in day-care: A case study from a Steiner Waldorf day-care centre. *Nordisk Barnehageforskning*, 21(3), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.23865/NBF.V21.534>
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor Books.
- Graham, P. (2008). Susan Isaacs and the Malting House School. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 34(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00754170801896035>
- Gripsrud, B., Mellon, N., & Ramvi, E. (2018). Scenic understanding: A psychosocial method. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 15(2–3), 221–234.

- Groarke, S. (2008). Psychoanalytical infant observation: A critical assessment. *European Journal of Psychotherapy & Counselling*, 10(4), 299–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642530802577042>
- Gross, J. J. (2014). Emotion regulation: Conceptual and empirical foundations. In *Handbook of emotion regulation*, 2nd ed. (pp. 3–20). The Guilford Press.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage.
- Hall, G. (2009). Le désir de vivre: An introduction to the life and work of Françoise Dolto. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 25(3), 312–330. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0118.2009.01125.x>
- Hall, S. (2009). *The development of symbolic functioning in childhood*. Routledge.
- Harris, A. (2007). *Gender as soft assembly*. Analytic Press.
- Harris, A. (2009). *The role of recognition in relational psychoanalysis*. Routledge.
- Harris, A. (2013). Dialogues as transitional space: A rapprochement of psychoanalysis and developmental psycholinguistics. In N. Skolnick & S. Warshaw (Eds.), *Relational perspectives in psychoanalysis* (pp. 199–216). Routledge.
- Harris, A. (2015). Language is there to bewilder itself and others: Theoretical and clinical contributions of Sabina Spielrein. *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 63(4), 727–767. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065115599989>
- Hendrick, H. (2003). *Child welfare: Historical dimensions, contemporary debate*. Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.46692/9781847425645>

- Hinshelwood, R. D. (1993). *Locked in role: A psychoanalytic perspective on the individual and the institution*. Free Association Books.
- Hinshelwood, R. D. (2001). *Thinking about institutions: Milieux and madness*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hinshelwood, R. D. (2002). The person of the therapist in the institution. In R. D. Hinshelwood & N. Skogstad (Eds.), *Observing organisations: Anxiety, defence and culture in health care* (pp. 63–80). Routledge.
- Hinshelwood, R. D. (2013). *Research on the couch: Single case studies, subjectivity and psychoanalytic knowledge*. Routledge.
- Hinshelwood, R. D., & Stamenova, K. (2019). *Methods of research into the unconscious: Applying psychoanalytic ideas to social science*. 283.
- Hinshelwood, R. D., & Skogstad, N. (2000). *Observing organisations: Anxiety, defence and culture in health care*. Routledge.
- Hivernel, F. (2013). ‘The parental couple’: Françoise Dolto and Jacques Lacan: Contributions to the mirror stage. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 29(4), 505–518.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/BJP.12048>
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.

- Hollway, W., & Froggett, L. (2013). Researching in-between subjective experience and reality. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 38(2), 133–148.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2013.798156>
- Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2008). The free association narrative interview method. In L. Given (Ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Vol. 1, pp. 296–315).
- Hopkins, J. (2006). Facilitating the development of intimacy between nurses and infants in day nurseries. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 33(1–4), 99–111.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443880330108>
- Husserl, E. (1936). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology*.
- Irigaray, L. (1985). *This sex which is not one*. Cornell University Press.
- Isaacs, S. (1933). *Social Development in Young Children* (1st edition.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315010588>
- Klein, M. (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 27, 99–110.
- Knestrick, T. D. (2002). A post-modern critique of attachment theory: Moving towards a socially just ecological framework [University of Cincinnati]. In *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*.
- Krause, I.-B., & Davids, M. F. (2018). The complexity of cultural competence. In *Thinking Space* (pp. 109–126). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429483974-7>
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. Columbia University Press.

Lacan, J. (1938). The family complexes in the formation of the individual (C. Gallagher, Trans.).

Lacan, J. (1958). *Seminar VI: Desire and its interpretation*. Gallagher of an unofficial transcription of seminar.

Lacan, J. (1966). *Écrits* (A. Sheridan, Ed.).

Lacan, J. (1977). The mirror stage as formative of the I function as revealed in psychoanalytic experience. *Écrits: A Selection*, 1, 1–7.

Lacan, J. (1988). *The seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The ego in Freud's theory and in the technique of psychoanalysis, 1954–1955*. Cambridge University Press.

Laplanche, J., & Pontalis, J.-B. (2018). *The language of psycho-analysis* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429482243>

Leavy, S. A. (2017). Lacan and language. A reader's guide to *Écrits* by John P. Muller and William J. Richardson. *International Universities Press, Inc.*, 53(4), 582–632.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21674086.1984.11927086>

Lieberman, A. F., Padrón, E., van Horn, P., & Harris, W. W. (2005). Angels in the nursery: The intergenerational transmission of benevolent parental influences. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 26(6), 504–520. <https://doi.org/10.1002/IMHJ.20071>

Litowitz, B. E. (2014). Intersubjectivity and language. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 34(4), 366–377.

Long, S. (2018). *Transforming experience in organisations: A framework for organisational research and consultancy*. Karnac Books.

- Lorenzer, A. (1986). *Language, the unconscious, and society: A psychoanalytic and social-psychological perspective*. Suhrkamp.
- Lowe, F. (2007). Colonial object relations: Going underground black-white relationships. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 24(1), 20–33. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0118.2007.00061.x>
- Mauss, M. (1934). *Les techniques du corps*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/030851473000000003>
- Melhuish, E. (2004). A literature review of the impact of early years provision on young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Menzies Lyth, I. (1988). *The functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety*. Free Association Books.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phenomenology of perception*. [_](#)
- Midgley, N., & Holmes, D. (2018). *Psychosocial studies: An introduction*. Routledge.
- Miller, H. T. (2016). From social constructivist epistemology to context realism. *Critical Policy Studies*, 10(3), 365–379. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2016.1200476>
- Miller, T. (2011). Falling back into gender? Men's narratives and practices around first-time fatherhood. *Sociology*, 45(6), 1094–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038511419180>
- Mitchell, J. (1974). *Psychoanalysis and feminism: A radical reassessment of Freudian psychoanalysis*. Pantheon Books.

- Morris, A. S., Silk, J. S., Steinberg, L., Myers, S. S., & Robinson, L. R. (2007). The role of the family context in the development of emotion regulation. *Social Development (Oxford, England)*, 16(2), 361. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1467-9507.2007.00389.X>
- Moss, P. (2016). A politics of the ‘good child’: Repositioning early childhood education and care in the globalized world. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 24(3), 357–370.
- Muller, J. P., & Richardson, W. J. (1994). *Lacan and language: A reader’s guide to “Écrits.”* International Universities Press, Inc.
- Ogden, T. H. (1982). *Projective identification and psychotherapeutic technique*. Aronson.
- Ogden, T. H. (2004). On holding and containing, being and dreaming. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 85(6), 1349–1364.
- Phillipsen, L. C., Burchinal, M. R., Howes, C., & Cryer, D. (1997). The prediction of process quality from structural features of child care. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 12(3), 281–303. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006\(97\)90004-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0885-2006(97)90004-1)
- Pomykacz, A. (2011). The effects of daycare on children’s socialization in the first three years of school.
- Rogers, R. (2011). *An introduction to critical discourse analysis in education*. Routledge.
- Roiphe, H. (1991). Aggression and victimization in early childhood. *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 46, 443–468.

- Rustin, M. (2006). Infant observation research: What have we learned so far? *Infant Observation*, 9(1), 35–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698030600593856>
- Rustin, M. (2011). Reflexivity and emotional attunement in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 11(2), 209–227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794110390785>
- Ruti, M. (2010). Winnicott with Lacan: Living creatively in a postmodern world. *American Imago*, 67(3), 353–374. <https://doi.org/10.1353/AIM.2010.0016>
- Rutter, M. (1995). Clinical implications of attachment concepts: Retrospect and prospect. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 36(4), 549–571. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1995.tb02314.x>
- Salomonsson, B. (2017). The function of language in parent-infant psychotherapy. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 98(6), 1597–1618. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-8315.12666>
- Sapiro, G. (2015). Habitus. *Sociopedia.Isa*.
- Sayer, A. (2005). *The moral significance of class*. Cambridge University Press.
- Scheler, M. (1924). *Problems of a sociology of knowledge*. _
- Schrans, J. (2018). Lacan and the anthropological foundations of the imaginary. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society*, 23(2), 165–184.
- Shapira, M. (2020) ‘Anna Freud Shaping Child Education and Promoting "Democratic Citizenship" in Britain’, in E. Shapira and D. Finzi (eds) *Freud and the Émigré*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 141–160.

- Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information*, 22(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-2004-22201>
- Simpson, D., Lumsden, E., & McDowall Clark, R. (2019). ‘Seen but not heard’: Practitioners work with poverty and the organising out of disadvantaged children’s voices and participation in the early years. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 27(3), 349–361.
- Skolnick, N. J., Warshaw, S. C., & Ghent, E. (2013). *Relational perspectives in psychoanalysis*. Routledge.
- Slavin, M. O., & Kriegman, D. (1990). Toward a new paradigm for psychoanalysis: An evolutionary biological perspective on the classical-relational dialectic. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 7(Suppl), 5–31. <https://doi.org/10.1037/H0085259>
- Spielrein, S. (1912). Destruction as cause of coming into being (S. K. Witt, Trans.).
- Spielrein, S. (1995). Destruction as the cause of coming into being. In C. Covington & B. Wharton (Eds.), *Sabina Spielrein: Forgotten pioneer of psychoanalysis* (pp. 145–168). Brunner-Routledge.
- Spielrein, S., & Wharton, B. (2015). The origin of the child’s words Papa and Mama. Some observations on the different stages in language development. In *Sabina Spielrein: Forgotten pioneer of psychoanalysis* (2nd ed.).
- Stanley, K., Bellamy, K., & Cooke, G. (2006). Equal access? Appropriate and affordable childcare for every child. *IPPR*. [_](#)

- Steinmetz, G. (2017). From sociology to socioanalysis: Rethinking Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, symbolic capital, and field along psychoanalytic lines. In L. Chancer & J. Andrews (Eds.), *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, 46(1), 46–47. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094306116681813k>
- Stern, D. N. (1973). *The first relationship: Mother and infant*. Harvard University Press.
- Stern, D. N. (1985). *Interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*. Psychoanalytic Electronic Publishing.
- Swartz, D. (1997). *Culture and power: The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tomasello, M. (1995). Joint attention as social cognition. In C. Moore & P. J. Dunham (Eds.), *Joint attention: Its origins and role in development* (pp. 103–130). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Trevarthen, C. (1979). Communication and cooperation in early infancy: A description of primary intersubjectivity. In *Before speech: The beginning of interpersonal communication* (pp. 321–347). Cambridge University Press.
- Trevarthen, C. (2001). The intrinsic motive pulse: Evidence from human psychobiology and infant communications. In *Theories of infant development* (pp. 81–98).
- Tummala-Narra, P. (2016). Psychoanalytic theory and cultural competence in psychotherapy. In *Psychoanalytic theory and cultural competence in psychotherapy*. American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14800-000>

Vincent, C., & Ball, S. J. (2007). Making up the middle-class child: Families, activities and class dispositions. *Sociology*, 41(6), 1061–1077.

Weber, M. (1905). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. _

West, A. (2020). Legislation, ideas and pre-school education policy in the twentieth century: From targeted nursery education to universal early childhood education and care. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 68(4), 459–473.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2020.1804525>

Winnicott, D. (1963). Communicating and not communicating leading to a study of certain opposites. In *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development* (Issue 64, pp. 179–192).

Winnicott, D. W. (1956). Primary maternal preoccupation.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429484001>

Winnicott, D. W. (1960). The transitional object and transitional phenomena. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41, 1–25.

Winnicott, D. W. (1961). *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development*. Hogarth Press.

Winnicott, D. W. (1962). Ego integration in child development. In *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development* (pp. 56–63). Karnac Books.

Winnicott, D. W. (1964). *The child, the family and the outside world*. Penguin Books. _

Winnicott, D. W. (1965). The relationship of a mother to her baby at the beginning. In *The family and individual development* (pp. 15–20). Tavistock Publications.

Winnicott, D. W. (1967). The location of cultural experience. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 48, 368–372.

Winnicott, D. W. (1971). Playing and reality. In *Playing and reality* (pp. 138–150). Tavistock Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203441022>

Appendices

Appendix 1: Approval Letter from the Ethics Board

Decision - Ethics ETH2122-0674: Miss Karla Eli-zondo De La Garza

From ERAMS <erams@essex.ac.uk>

Date Thu 17/1 1/2022 14:36

To Elizondo De La Garza, Karla I<ke21333@essex.ac.uk>

University of Essex ERAMS

17/11/2022

Miss Karla Elizondo De La Garza

Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies, Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies

University of Essex

Dear Karla,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2122-0674

We are pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "A psychoanalytic and sociological understanding of children's development in nurseries" has been reviewed by the Ethics Sub Committee 2, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following conditions:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,

REO Research Governance team

Ethics ETH2122-0674: Miss Karla Elizondo De La Garza

Appendix 2: Letter of Invitation to Nursery

Dear ***,

My name is Karla Elizondo, I am a PhD student at the University of Essex in the Psychoanalytic and Psychosocial Department. I would like to invite you to participate in my thesis research study, "A psychoanalytic and sociological understanding of children's experience in nurseries", under the supervision of Dr Norman Gabriel (ERAMS reference: ETH2122-0674).

This study aims to understand children's experience in nursery, and how it shapes their process of becoming social beings. This relates to exploring their emotional, developmental, and social experiences within the nursery.

We are looking for at least six children, from two to three different nurseries in London, the nursery staff in charge of them, and their primary carers. All participants must provide consent to participate in this study.

With the objective of gaining a robust insight into children's experiences in nursery settings, we will compare the following:

- The consenting child's time/play at the nursery will be observed by the researcher (on four different days for 60 minutes for each child)
- A drawing focus group of the participating children with the researcher, where they will be asked to draw about their experiences in the nursery
- An interview with the child's primary carer or parent, about their perspective on their child's nursery experience
- A focus group with the nursery staff about the selected children's experiences throughout their time in the nursery.

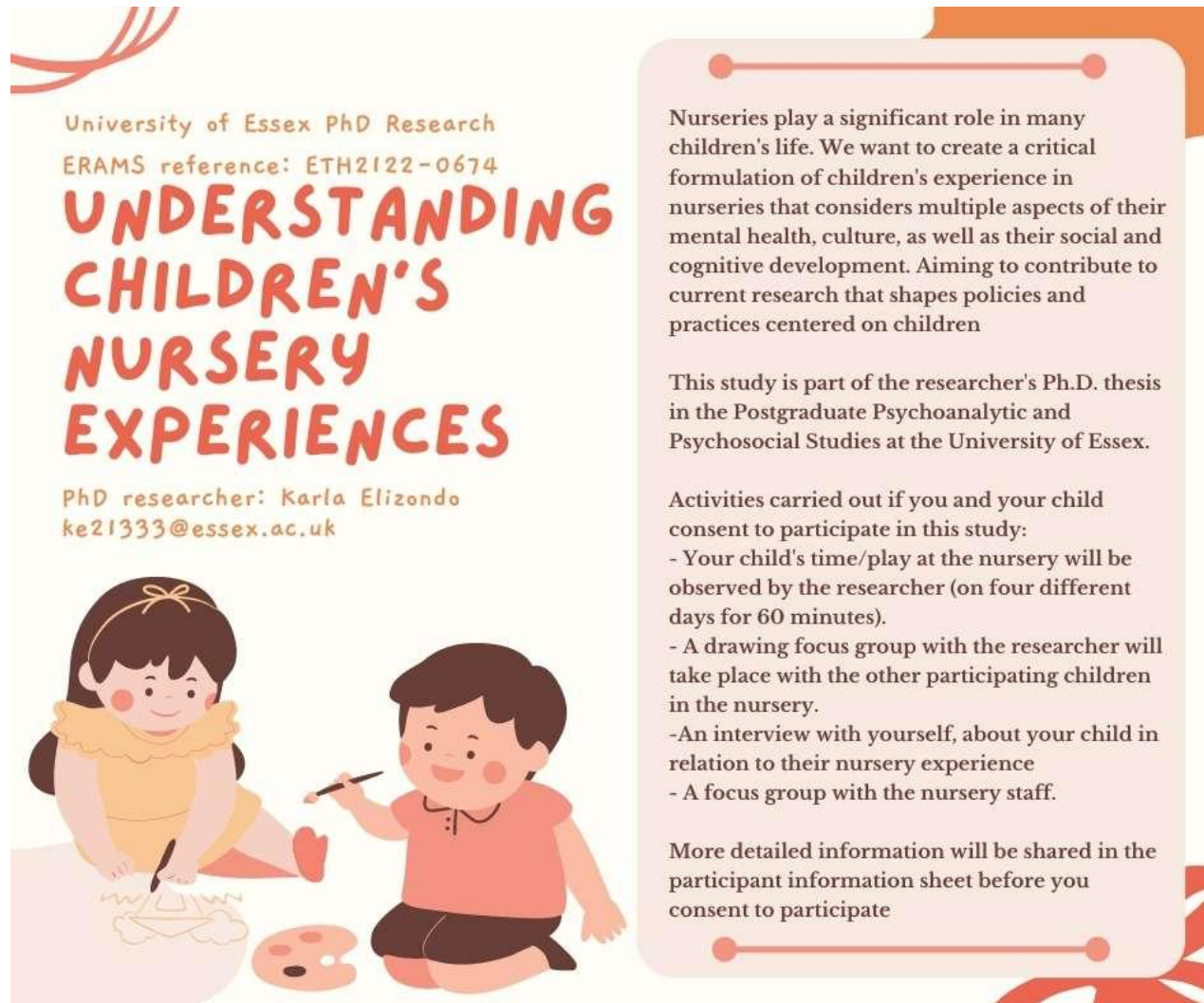
More detailed information will be shared in the participant information sheets and consent sheets provided. Additionally, I have attached a poster to send to the parents so they can be informed about the project.

I would greatly appreciate the nursery's participation in this research. It would be beneficial to study this, as nurseries play a crucial role in children's development and socialisation. This study will provide insight into children's emotional life and growth within nurseries, as well as how development intersects with broader aspects of culture and societal norms. I hope you can join this project and help us fulfil this vision.

All the best,

Karla I. Elizondo

Appendix 3: Flyer for Recruitment



University of Essex PhD Research
ERAMS reference: ETH2122-0674

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S NURSERY EXPERIENCES

PhD researcher: Karla Elizondo
ke21333@essex.ac.uk

Nurseries play a significant role in many children's life. We want to create a critical formulation of children's experience in nurseries that considers multiple aspects of their mental health, culture, as well as their social and cognitive development. Aiming to contribute to current research that shapes policies and practices centered on children

This study is part of the researcher's Ph.D. thesis in the Postgraduate Psychoanalytic and Psychosocial Studies at the University of Essex.

Activities carried out if you and your child consent to participate in this study:

- Your child's time/play at the nursery will be observed by the researcher (on four different days for 60 minutes).
- A drawing focus group with the researcher will take place with the other participating children in the nursery.
- An interview with yourself, about your child in relation to their nursery experience
- A focus group with the nursery staff.

More detailed information will be shared in the participant information sheet before you consent to participate



Appendix 4: Participant Information Sheet

University of Essex

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: A psychoanalytic and sociological understanding of children's experience in nurseries

Dear participant,

I, Karla Irene Elizondo de la Garza, am currently a PhD student at the University of Essex. I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not 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 following information carefully. This information sheet provides you with information about the study and your rights as a participant.

What is the purpose of the study?

As my PhD project, I am carrying out a piece of research entitled, A psychoanalytic and sociological understanding of children's experience in nurseries under the supervision of Dr. Norman Gabriel. We will try to understand children's (aged 3 to 5) experience in nursery, and how it shapes their process of becoming a social being. This relates to the exploration of their emotional, developmental, and social experiences within the nursery through observation, interviews, focus groups and their drawings.

Why have I been invited to participate?

We are looking for at least six children, from two to three different nurseries in London, the nursery staff in charge of them, and their main carers. All participants must provide consent for participating in this study. We aim to gain a robust insight into children's experiences in nursery settings, comparing the observed time in nursery with the perceived experiences of their nursery carers and main carers in their homes, as well as their own ideas of their experience.

Do I have to take part?

Naturally, there is no obligation to take part in the study. It's entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to participate in the study and then change your mind in the future, you can withdraw at any point before the data is analysed. This is because after the gathering of data, all identifying information will be anonymized and it will not be possible to identify your data to withdraw it. Likewise, if

have at least six children in total, aged 3 to 5. Each child will be observed on four different days for sixty minutes. When observations conclude, a focus group, lasting 60 minutes, with the participating children will be carried out in which the children will be asked to draw their experience of being in the nursery. The audio of the focus group will be recorded with a secure audio device and kept secure until the study is finished, and audio recordings deleted.

A focus group, lasting 60 minutes, with the staff members would be held at the end of the observations to explore their perceptions of what goes on in the nursery as well as their own conscious and unconscious processes that could impact the children's development and socialisation process. The audio of the focus group will be recorded with a secure audio device and kept secure until the study is finished, and audio recordings deleted.

Semi-structured interviews will be carried out with the main caregivers, who consent for their children to be observed and their data to be used for this study. This can provide another perspective on how nursery life affects the children outside the nursery and how their main caregiver perceives it.

Interviews will last maximum 60 minutes and will be carried out in person where possible and recorded with an audio recording device that will be kept secure during the study.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There is low risk of any harm, psychological risk, or threat against the welfare of the participants; as well as any fire, first aid or any type of emergency that can cause harm to any participant. If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, the corresponding safeguarding officials and authorities will be contacted.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no specific benefits other than the further understanding of children's experience in nurseries from a multiple disciplinary perspective.

What information will be collected?

Information about the behaviour and emotional experiences of the participating children will be gathered, as well as the beliefs and perspectives of their nursery staff and main carer. All identifiable information will be changed to be anonymised after being transcribed.

Will my information be kept confidential?

All information collected will be kept securely and will only be accessible by myself and the supervisor, keeping all files password protected in encrypted devices. If you are mentioned individually in any publications or reports, then a participant number or pseudonym will be used and identifying details will be removed. If yourself or any participant discloses information that might put themselves or others at risk, safeguarding procedures must be put in place to guarantee everyone's safety. A list may be kept linking participant numbers or

Informed consent will be gathered from all participants. Moreover, The Data Controller will be the University of Essex, to be contacted through: University Information Assurance Manager (dpo@essex.ac.uk).

What should I do if I want to take part?

If you decide to be a part of the study, we would be very grateful for your participation. To register your interest in participating, please return the informed consent sheet signed, or contact me if you require further clarification. If you need to contact us in future, please contact me (ke21333@essex.ac.uk) or Dr Norman Gabriel (n.r.gabriel@essex.ac.uk).

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be used as part of my PhD dissertation and might be published as a journal paper or conference presentation. Any information used will be anonymized as stated before. A copy of the information which we record about you, but not other participants, will be provided, free of charge, on request.

Who is funding the research?

The PhD student is funding the work as their own investment, with no other source of funding.

Who has reviewed the study?

The committee in charge of ethical approval is the University of Essex Ethics Sub Committee 2, with reference: ETH2122-0674.

Concerns and Complaints

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been treated during the course of this study then you should immediately inform the researcher (details above). If are still concerned, you think your complaint has not been addressed to your satisfaction or you feel that you cannot approach the principal investigator, you can contact this project's supervisor, Norman Gabriel (details above). If you are still not satisfied, please contact the University's Research Governance and Planning Manager, Sarah Manning-Press (e-mail sarahm@essex.ac.uk). Please include the ERAMS reference which can be found at the foot of this page.

Name of the Researcher/Research Team Members

Main researcher: Karla Elizondo (ke21333@essex.ac.uk)
 Supervisor: Dr. Norman Gabriel (n.r.gabriel@essex.ac.uk)

Appendix 5: Consent Forms



University of Essex

Consent Form Parent

Title of the Project: A psychoanalytic and sociological understanding of children's development in nurseries

Research Team: Karla Elizondo De La Garza, Dr. Norman Gabriel (supervisor)

The Principal Investigator on this project is Karla Irene Elizondo de la Garza (University of Essex, PhD Psychoanalytic Studies). Please complete this form after you have read the information sheet. If you have any questions, please ask before you decide whether to join in.

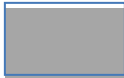
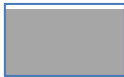
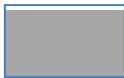
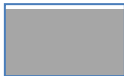
By signing this form, you are agreeing that:

- That your child will be observed within their nursery for 60 minutes on four different occasions and will then participate in a drawing focus group with their classmates who will also participate (max. 3).
- You agree to complete an audio recorded interview with the researcher (once observations have finished), data will be anonymized when transcribed, then the recording will be deleted after data analysis.
- You agree that the nursery staff will share information about your child's experience within the nursery, where an audio conversation will be recorded, data will be anonymized when transcribed, then the recording will be deleted after data analysis.
- You understand that your views and responses are part of a research project, which will be read by people outside of this project, but your name or any information that could identify you will not be mentioned.

Please tick or initial each box if you agree with the statement:

1. I have read the notes above and the information sheet and understand what this project involves. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my child and my own participation at any time before the data is processed and anonymized, without giving a reason. ☐
3. I consent to the processing/use of my personal information (my name, contact details, interview audio recording, and transcript) for the purposes of this project. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential (within the limits outlined in the information sheet) and handled in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation. I understand that it will not be possible to identify me in any publications. ☐
4. I agree for me and my child to take part in this project. All personal and identifying data will be anonymized after being transcribed. I understand that the identifiable data provided will be securely ~~and~~ accessible only ☐

to the researcher and supervisor, to be destroyed after the processing of data. Anonymized data will be kept for ten years in accordance with the recommended University's Policy.

5. I consent to the interviews and focus groups to being audio recorded and understand that the audio recordings will be deleted after the processing of data, but their anonymized transcriptions will be kept for 10 years. 
6. I understand that the data collected will be used anonymously to complete the researcher's PhD dissertation and possible journal article and conference presentations. The anonymized data will be kept for 10 years as per University Policy. 
7. I understand that if safeguarding issues should arise, the corresponding authorities might need to be contacted, and confidential information might need to be shared to eliminate risk to the individuals involved. 
8. I agree that the project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part. 

Participant Name

Date

Participant Signature

Researcher Name

Date

Researcher Signature



University of Essex

Consent Form

The Principal Investigator on this project is Karla Irene Elizondo de la Garza (University of Essex, PhD Psychoanalytic Studies). Please complete this form after you have read the information sheet. If you have any questions, please ask before you decide whether to join in.

By signing this form, you are agreeing that:

- You are in agreement to take part in this project, where all personal data will be anonymized.
- You are in agreement that you will be indirectly observed through the child observations, in which each child that consents to participate will be observed for 60 minutes on 4 different occasions. All data anonymized, then deleted after data analysis.
- You agree to complete an audio recorded focus group along with your consenting colleagues with the researcher (once observations have finished), data anonymized, then deleted after data analysis.
- You understand that your views and responses are part of a research project, which will be read by people outside of this project, but your name or any information that could identify you will not be mentioned.

Please tick or initial each box if you agree with the statement:

1. I have read the notes written above and the information sheet and understand what this project involves. ☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data from the project at any point after my interview/focus group. ☐
3. I consent to the processing/use of my personal information (my name, contact details, interview audio recording, and transcript) for the purposes of this project. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential (within the limits outlined in the information sheet) and handled in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation. I understand that it will not be possible to identify me in any publications. ☐
4. I consent to the focus group being audio recorded and understand that the audio recordings will be deleted at the end of the project. ☐
5. I agree that the project named above has been explained to me to my satisfaction and I agree to take part. ☐

Participant Name

Date

Participant Signature

Researcher Name

Date

Researcher Signature

Appendix 6: Staff's Interview Schedule

- How has ***'s journey in nursery been?
- How have they changed during their stay in the nursery?
- How do you think they feel about attending?
- What do you think they get from attending to nursery?
- What role do you think nursery plays in their life and as they grow up?
- How do you think of and feel about the children in the nursery
- Why did you choose to work in this nursery and as a nursery worker in general?

Appendix 7: Parent's Interview Schedule

- Can you tell me about ** and your family? Ages, siblings and who lives in their house/flat, number of rooms
- Do they have extended family in London?
- When did you decide to put * in the nursery? -did their siblings go as well?
- What made you choose W nursery?
- Did you have any ideas or expectations about the nursery and *?
- How did you feel when they first started? Did you have any anxieties about it, or did they have? How about now?
- How do you think it has impacted them? Emotionally, developmentally. Socially, their role in the house
- In which ways do you think it has affected their life outside nursery and their development?
- How has ***'s journey in nursery been?