"I feel all the feels in my body": The daily separation experiences of reception-aged children.

Suzannah Nelson

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology

Tavistock Education and Training – North London Foundation Trust

The University of Essex

Date of submission: May 2026

Abstract

Daily separation during school entry is a highly emotional experience for young children as they take their first steps into formal education. Existing research has largely focused on the perspectives of parents and staff, leaving a gap in understanding how children themselves experience separation. This study explored the lived experience of separation for young children during their first month in Reception.

A qualitative, multi-method case study design was employed with two children newly starting separate Reception classes in a mainstream primary school. The study was situated within a relativist ontological and subjectivist epistemological framework, adopting a psychosocial approach that values individual meaning making within the participant–researcher relationship. Projective methods, including observation, play, and drawing, were used to explore children's experiences of separation and to foreground the child's voice through developmentally appropriate means.

The findings highlighted the emotional complexity of the separation experience for both children. Each child employed a range of coping and defensive strategies to manage the experience of separation and loss while gradually negotiating the transition to school without their primary caregivers. This study offers insight into young children's subjective experiences of school separation, emphasising the significance of this transition for all children, regardless of outward presentation. It demonstrates the value of providing children with relational and playful spaces to express emotional experiences through multimodal and creative projective methods. Implications for educational professionals are discussed, alongside directions for future research.

Acknowledgements

What a process this thesis and doctorate has been. I have so many people who have helped me through, and my gratitude for the support you give my life is beyond the words in this thesis.

Firstly, I would like to thank the families of Lucy and Oscar. Thank you for trusting me to work with your little ones and capture their voice. It was a highlight of my whole training to play with them and see their wonderful creations. The honesty and expression they put in has given my research such depth and meaning and I will be forever grateful. To Lucy, thank you for sharing your love for your family with me and so eloquently explaining your thoughts and feelings. Oscar, thank you for bringing such honest energy to the space. I learned so much from what you showed me.

To my rents, Moth and Farth, these last three years have been full of change and challenges, and you have given me nothing but unwavering support throughout. I have always known you are there to help which has kept me grounded in those moments of turmoil. Farth, thank you for being such a fun playmate; I take your enjoyment and energy into every session. Moth, thank you for your ability to stay present; you have instilled a depth and interest into the lives of children that drives my work.

To my friends, for the hours of analytic voice notes, deep diving into our psychological lives, dissecting relationships and life events. This keeps me sane, and your love and connection means so much to me. Thank you for being so restorative and bringing such fun and companionship to my life.

To the Tavi, I have loved every minute. The course has brought home truths, challenging environments, new colleagues and relationships and an ethos I wouldn't experience anywhere else. I am proud to have carried on my psychoanalytic journey here and hope I keep on developing as the insightful and curious psychologist you have taught me to be. Supervisors, you have frankly been a God send. A special thanks to Emma and Lexi, for getting me through the roller coaster of year 1. Anna, thank you for always being my cheerleader and seeing my strengths, and Sarah, for giving me such enthusiasm and interest for my passion of separation.

And finally, to myself. Thank you for keeping going and finding that deep resilience you knew you had. You didn't give up; you took enjoyment from the little things and held your conviction that you are a psychologist and the purpose this gives you is worth it. I can't wait for my career ahead, working with so many more inspiring young people, hearing their voices, and never writing a thesis ever again.

This is a presentation of original work. All input of assistance in the creation of this work was through supervision and technology. AI was used to support writing clarity through proofreading and formatting. All interpretations, arguments, and final content are my own, and all AI-assisted material was checked for accuracy and used in accordance with ethical academic guidelines.

Microsoft. (2026). *Microsoft Copilot* [Large language model]. https://copilot.microsoft.com

Contents page

Table of contents

1. *Introduction*……p14

1.1 Chapter overview……p14

1.2 Concepts……...p14
1.2.1 Defining and conceptualising separation……p14
1.2.2 Explanations of psychoanalytic terms and theories……..p16
1.2.2.1 John Bowlby: Attachment Theory and Separation……p16
1.2.2.2 Melanie Klein: Early Object Relations and Psychic Defences……p19
1.2.2.3 Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and W.R. Bion: Projection and Projective Identification……p23
1.2.2.4 D.W. Winnicott and W.R. Bion: Transition and integration……..p24
1.2.2.5 Margaret Mahler: Separation-Individuation and Identity…p25
1.2.3 Conclusion of framework……p26
1.2.4 Caveat: The use of mother……p26

1.3 Context of Attachment……p27
1.3.1 The development of Attachment Theory……p27
1.3.2 Historical theoretical context……p28
1.3.3 Theoretical stages of separation……..p29
1.3.4 First experimental studies of separation……p30
1.3.5 Separation in childcare settings……p32
1.3.6 Studies of separation in childcare settings……p32

1.4 Early Years (EY): Defining the Context……..p33
1.4.1 Legislation in Early Years (EY) provision within political climate….p35
1.4.1.1 1940's - 1960's……p36
1.4.1.2 1970's to now……...p36
1.4.1.3 Attachment Theory in EY provision……..p38

1.5 Exploring the experience of separation……p39
1.5.1 Adult perspective……p40
1.5.2 Child voice……p41

1.6 The EP role in supporting separation……p41

1.7 The current research……..…p42

1.8 Conclusion……..……..……..p42

2. Literature review……p44

2.1 Chapter overview……p44

2.2 Narrative review overview……p44

2.3 Literature review question - Q1: What do children express about their experiences of daily separation in childcare settings?.....p46
2.3.1 Literature review search strategy……p46
2.3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria……p47

2.4 Revised literature search question - Q2: What does research tell us about children's daily separation when attending childcare settings?.....p50

2.4.1 Revised inclusion and exclusion criteria……p50

2.5 Narrative Review……p52

2.5.1 Introduction……p52

2.5.2 Literature overview and appraisal……p53
2.5.2.1 Aims and methodology……p53
2.5.2.2 Participants and sampling……p54
2.5.2.3 Methods of data collection……p56
2.5.2.4 Methods of analysis……p58
2.5.2.5 Reflexivity……p59
2.5.2.6 Ethics……p59

2.5.3 Extraction of themes, subthemes and patterns……p60

2.5.4 Attunement principles……p61

2.5.5 Attunement……p64

2.5.5.1 Responsiveness to child……p64
2.5.5.1.1 Symbolic expression through objects and play...p64
2.5.5.1.2 Response to distress……p66
2.5.5.1.3 Subsequent care……p68

2.5.5.2 Parental relationship with child……p69
2.5.5.2.1 Parental behaviour alteration……p69
2.5.5.2.2 Parent separation strategy……p71

2.5.6 Misattunement……p72
2.5.6.1 Staff relationship with child……p72

2.5.6.1.1 Staff care……..……p72
2.5.6.1.2 Role of staff……...p73

2.5.6.2 Child Response……p74
2.5.6.2.1 Passive despair……p74
2.5.6.2.2 Resistance……p75
2.5.6.2.3 Lonesomeness……p76
2.6 Summary……p77

2.7 Critique of literature and rationale for research……..p79

3. Methodology……p81

3.1 Overview of research……..p81

3.2 Research aims……..p81

3.3 Methodological orientation……...p82
3.3.1 Ontology……...p82
3.3.2 Epistemology……...p84
3.3.3 The ontology and epistemology of psychosocial research……..p85

3.4 Research purpose……p85
3.4.1 Exploratory……...p86
3.4.2 Qualitative research……p86
3.4.3 Researcher values……..p87

3.5 Research design……..p91
3.5.1 Sample……p91
3.5.2 Recruitment process……..p93
3.5.3 School context……p94
3.5.4 Participants……..p96

3.6 Data collection……..p97
3.6.1 Rapport building……..p98
3.6.2 Observation……..……..p98
3.6.3 Drawings……...p100
3.6.4 Play……..p102
3.6.5 Summary of triangulation……p104
3.6.6 Ending……p105

3.7 Data Analysis……..p105
3.7.1 Psychosocial data analysis – PIPS……...p105
3.7.2 The method of psychosocial research……..p106
3.7.3 Adapted method……p107
3.7.4 Psychosocial analysis process example……...p108

3.7.5 Other methods considered……..p110

3.8 Ethical considerations……p111
3.8.1 Consent and assent……p111
3.8.2 Ethical Considerations of Research within an Early Years Classroom……...p113
3.8.3 Withdrawal……p115
3.8.4 Avoidance of harm……p116
3.8.4.1 Avoidance of interpretive harm……p117
3.8.5 Confidentiality and anonymity……p118

3.9 Researcher rigour and trustworthiness……..p118
3.9.1 Sensitivity to context……p118
3.9.2 Credibility……...p119
3.9.3 Transferability……p120
3.9.4 Dependability and confirmability……p121

3.10 Summary……p122

4. Data analysis……p123

4.1 Introduction to data……...p123

4.2 Oscar……p124
4.2.1 Synopsis……p124
4.2.2 Stage 1: Clinging and Protest – Holding on to the Lost Object….p124
4.2.2.1 Personal reflections ……p126
4.2.3 Stage 2: Chaos as a Defense Against Loss……p127
4.2.3.1 Personal reflections……..p132
4.2.4 Stage 3: Splitting and Emerging Trust……..p132
4.2.4.1 Personal reflections……..p136
4.2.5 Stage 4: Change and the Capacity for Excitement……p136
4.2.5.1 Personal reflections……..……p141
4.2.6 Interpretive Summary……..p142

4.3 Lucy……..p144

4.3.1 Synopsis……p142
4.3.2 Stage 1: The Projected Feeling……p143
4.3.2.1 Personal reflections……..p146
4.3.3 Stage 2: Internalisation and the Struggle for Internal Order……..p148
4.3.3.1 Personal reflections……..p151

4.3.4 Stage 3: Mental Withdrawal and the Gate Trap……p152
4.3.4.1 Personal reflections……p157
4.3.5 Stage 4: Processing Difference and Seeking Sameness……p157
4.3.5.1 Personal reflections……p159
4.3.6 Interpretative Summary……p159

4.4 Shared and Comparative Experiences of Separation and Emotional……p161

4.4.1 Shared Processing of Separation: From Non-Verbal to Symbolic Expression……p162
4.4.2 Shared Escapism: Chaos versus Internalising……...p162
4.4.3 Shared Rejection of Integration: Compliance versus Protest…...p163
4.4.4 Shared Level of Outward Expression: Internalization vs. Externalization……p165
4.4.5 Shared Connecting to Others: Finding Secondary Attachment Figures……p166
4.4.6 Similarities and Differences in personal response to the children……p167
4.4.6.1 Closeness and its Limits……p167
4.4.6.2 The Self as a Vessel……p168
4.4.6.3 Reflections on the Inner Child……p169

4.5 Conclusion……p169

5. Discussion……p171

5.1 Introduction……p171

5.2 Key findings……p172
5.2.1 Answering the research question in relation to data, theory and literature……p172
5.2.1.1 Children process their experience of separation loss differently……p173
5.2.1.1.1 Implications for the field……p175
5.2.1.2 Children resist their separations through escapism……p176
5.2.1.2.1 Implications for the field……p177
5.2.1.3 Children express their separation experience symbolically……p178
5.2.1.3.1 Implications for the field……p179

5.2.1.4 Children experience separation within a relational space……..……p180
5.2.1.4.1 Implications for the field……p182

5.3 Reflections on methodology……..p183
5.3.1 Direct involvement……p183
5.3.2 Participant group……...p185
5.3.3 Participant Involvement……p185
5.3.4 Researcher role……p186

5.4 Implications of the findings……p187
5.4.1 Educational psychology practice……p187
5.4.2 Education professional practice……..p190

5.5 Critical considerations……p192

5.6 Dissemination……p194

5.7 Directions for further research……...p196

5.8 Personal Reflections……p199

5.9 Conclusion……..p200

6. References……p202

7. Appendices……p214

7.1 Appendix A – PRISMA flow diagram for included studies……p214

7.2 Appendix B - Full Text Articles Assessed for Inclusion Eligibility……...p215

7.3 Appendix C - Critical Appraisal of Studies Included in the Literature Review……..……p221
7.3.1 Section A……p221
7.3.2 Section B and C……p227

7.4 Appendix D - Overview of Articles Included in the Literature Review……p231

7.5 Appendix E - Recruitment poster……..p240

7.6 Appendix F - Consent forms……p241

7.7 Appendix G - Information sheet……..p243

7.8 Appendix H – Child Info sheet……p247

7.9 Appendix I – Fieldwork Risk Assessment Audit……p248

7.10 Appendix J - Session Plan……..p251

7.11 Appendix K – Distress Protocol……p253

7.12 Appendix L - The psychosocial analysis process……p254

7.13 Appendix M - Webinar excerpts……..p261

7.14 Appendix N – Webinar excerpts……..p263
Ethics form
7.14.1 Email requesting amendments and confirming approval……p292

Tables and Figures

Table 1 Bowlby's stages of separation (1969)

Table 2 Search terms used for literature review question 1

Table 3 inclusion and exclusion criteria for search 1.

Table 4 Revised inclusion and exclusion criteria for search 2

Table 5: Participants and sampling of literature review papers

Table 6: Exclusion and Inclusion criteria for participation.

Table 7: Participant details

Table 8: Data collection process

Figure 1 History of childcare timeline

Figure 2 Thematic Map

Figure 3: Drawing 1 - Oscar

Figure 4: Painting 2 – Oscar's 'Punk Cat Museum'

Figure 5: Painting 3 - Oscar's Castle

Figure 6: Drawing 2 - Oscar

Figure 7: Drawing 3 – Oscar

Figure 8: Drawing 1 - Lucy

Figure 9: Drawing 2 – Lucy

Figure 10: Drawing 3 – Lucy

Figures and tables within the appendices:

Figure 11: Process notes

Figure 12: Coded Process Notes

Figure 13: Annotated drawing

Figure 14: Booklet extracts

Figure 15: Descriptive narrative write up Oscar

Figure 16: Descriptive narrative write up Lucy

Figure 17: Interpretive analysis

Figure 18: Further incorporation of psychoanalytic theory.

Figure 19: Webinar overview slide

Figure 20: Webinar ‘My research’ slide

Figure 21-23: Next steps webinar slides

1. Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

This thesis is concerned with the daily experiences of reception aged children separating from their caregivers within their school settings and aims to give this cohort a space to share their voice. This chapter will start with an explanation of what is meant by daily separation, going on to explore contextual and theoretical history, before introducing the political and legislative background of Early Years (EY) childcare and attachment policy. I will then further explore prevalence of separation distress within childcare settings, and voices within the literature, before finishing with Educational Psychologist (EP) role. The chapter concludes with discussing the importance of separation-based research, whose voices are most prevalent and explaining the rationale behind this current investigation.

1.2: Concepts

1.2.1: Defining and conceptualising separation

Separation can be understood as a psychoanalytic concept stemming from the belief that early childhood experiences shape later behaviour and the emotional experiences of being with, and away from, those closest to us (Bowlby, 1969). The separation could be brief (e.g., being left with a family member) or more long-term (e.g., adoption), but the emotional significance lies in the disruption of the child's developing attachment bond. Bowlby (1969) described attachment as a strong, enduring emotional tie to a specific caregiver that provides the child with a secure base for exploration and a source of comfort in times of distress. Historically, separation has been explained as when a child is physically and literally away from their primary caregiver (PC) (Bowlby, 1969).

Alternatively, separation can be when a child is gradually separating their sense of self and identity from their PC, not necessarily tied to literal space. Mahler described this as separation–individuation theory, which emphasises the developmental process through which infants move from a state of psychological fusion with their caregiver toward a more autonomous and differentiated sense of self (Mahler et al, 1975). The form of separation discussed here refers specifically to brief literal separations between children and their caregivers when a child is left in their childcare setting. Although there will be emotional elements to the experience explored in this research, such as identity and self-separation; the meaning mainly used when referring to separation is the daily physical act of being left without your parent.

In the context of early childhood, separation anxiety is typically understood as the emotional distress a child experiences upon parting from their PC. This should be distinguished from Separation Anxiety Disorder, a psychiatric diagnosis characterised by an atypical and persistent fear of actual or anticipated separation that significantly interferes with daily functioning (Masi, Mucci & Millepiedi, 2001; Leray et al., 2011; Esbjørn et al., 2010). Unless otherwise stated, the term ‘separation anxiety’ in this discussion will refer to the normative emotional responses seen in young children when proximity to their caregiver is withdrawn, interchangeably used with ‘separation distress’. This is because of the theoretical background of separation falling under the description of ‘despair’ (Bowlby 1969), incorporating a mixture of feelings which a young child would not necessarily be able to distinguish. Here, we will view the emotion caused by separation without the need to categorise. It is important within the current research to accept all emotions connected to the separation in a non-pathologising way, and therefore

any mention of distress or anxiety will be viewed as a normative process in feeling the effects of short-term PC loss.

1.2.2 Explanations of psychoanalytic terms and theories

This study is situated within a psychoanalytic and object relations framework concerned with early emotional development, attachment, and the psychic experience of separation. Drawing primarily on the work of Bowlby (1960,1969,1973,1952), Klein (1932,1935,1940,1946), Winnicott (1965), Bion (1962,1985), and Mahler et al, (1975) the analysis integrates observable relational behaviour with interpretations of the child's internal emotional world.

Bowlby's attachment theory provides the foundation for understanding children's responses to separation from primary caregivers, particularly the behavioural and emotional manifestations of attachment distress, such as protest (Bowlby, 1969). Mahler's model of separation–individuation further informs the developmental context of these experiences, offering a lens through which the child's emerging sense of self, autonomy, and identity can be understood (Mahler et al, 1975).

To interpret the internal meaning of these observable behaviours, the thesis draws on Kleinian and Bionian object relations theory. Key concepts include the internalisation of the caregiver as an object, early defensive processes such as splitting, projection, and projective identification (Freud, 1962; Klein, 1940, 1946; Bion, 1962), and the child's phantasy life as a means of managing intense emotional states (Klein, 1946). The movement toward greater emotional integration, alongside the capacity to tolerate ambivalence and loss, is understood as central to psychological development (Bion,

1962). Winnicott's concept of transitional phenomena further illuminates how children negotiate separation through symbolic objects and play, bridging internal and external reality (Winnicott, 1951).

Together, these theoretical perspectives allow for a multi-layered analysis in which separation attachment behaviours are described at the relational level, with psychoanalytic interpretation. Detailed definitions and theoretical elaborations of these concepts will now be provided.

The analysis presented in the whole thesis is framed by the foundational theories of psychoanalytic and object relations thinking, particularly those concerning early childhood development, attachment, separation, and the psychic mechanisms activated in response to these experiences. Specifically, the work of John Bowlby, Melanie Klein, D.W. Winnicott, and W.R. Bion provides the conceptual lens through which the data will be interpreted. The following section defines the key terms derived from these models.

1.2.2.1 John Bowlby: Attachment Theory and Separation

John Bowlby's work (1969) established Attachment Theory, moving psychoanalytic thinking toward an ethological framework where the child's need for the primary caregiver is understood as an innate, survival-oriented instinct. Bowlby's focus on the observable dynamics between child and caregiver provides the foundational context for understanding relational behaviours under stress.

Term	Meaning and Context	Reference
Primary Caregiver	The individual, typically the mother, who provides the main emotional and physical care for the infant. This figure serves as the secure base from which the child explores the world and the safe haven to which they return under stress.	(Bowlby, 1969)
Secondary Attachment Figure	Other consistent and caring individuals in the child's life (e.g., father, grandparents) who provide additional support. The existence and availability of these figures can mitigate the distress caused by the temporary or permanent loss of the primary caregiver.	(Bowlby, 1969)
Bowlby's Protest Phase	The initial phase in a child's reaction to separation from the primary caregiver. It is characterized by active, observable distress, crying, screaming, and demanding behaviours aimed at maximizing the chances of the caregiver's return.	(Bowlby, 1969)

1.2.2.2 Melanie Klein: Early Object Relations and Psychic Defences

Melanie Klein's work emphasises the intensity of the infant's innate drives (love and hate) and the corresponding fantasy/phantasy life that shapes the earliest psychic organisation. She focused on the internal emotional world and the defences utilised to manage destructive impulses and anxieties, particularly relating to 'the object.'

Term	Meaning and Context	Reference
'The Object'	Refers to the internal representation of the other person, often the caregiver. In Klein's model, the object is initially experienced as split into all-good and all-bad parts (part-objects) before being seen as a whole person (whole object).	(Klein, 1946)
Splitting **Defences**	A primary defence mechanism in the early psychic life (the Paranoid-	(Klein, 1946)

	Schizoid Position). The ego defensively splits the internal and external world into separate, mutually exclusive parts: a good object (loved, idealised) and a bad object (hated, persecuted). This keeps the good object safe from destructive feelings but hinders the capacity for integration.	
Manic Defences	A set of defences used to ward off the painful feelings of guilt, loss, and mourning that emerge in the Depressive Position. These defences involve triumph, control, and contempt over the internal object, denying	(Klein, 1940)

	dependence and reparation.	
Depressive Feelings	The painful feelings such as guilt, responsibility, sadness, and loss that arise when the infant recognizes that the loved (good) object and the hated (bad) object are one and the same (the whole object). This realization marks the shift to the Depressive Position and enables genuine concern and reparation.	(Klein, 1940)
Transference/Countertransference	The therapist's emotional reaction to the patient, understood as a communication about the patient's internal world. For Klein and later object relations theorists, the	(Implicit in Klein's technique and subsequent developments)

	feelings evoked in the analyst are valuable data about the patient's internal objects and psychic state. The feeling of countertransference, comes from the projection of feelings that are uncomfortable, transferred into the space (transference), with countertransference being the feeling elicited in the subject.	
Paranoid-schizoid position	An early state where the infant splits experience into the good breast (comfort) and bad breast (frustration), using splitting and projection to manage anxiety (primarily regarding the mother).	(Klein, 1964)

	Good and bad are kept separate because the infant cannot yet see them as parts of one whole object.	

1.2.2.3 Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, and W.R. Bion: Projection and Projective Identification

The concept of taking an internal feeling and placing it "out there" is a core tenet of defensive operations, evolving from Freud's basic concept to Klein and Bion's complex elaboration.

Term	Meaning and Context	Reference
Projection	The earliest concept, defined as the expulsion of unacceptable internal thoughts, feelings, or wishes onto an external object or person, thereby seeing them as belonging to the other person rather than the self.	(Freud, 1894)
Projective Identification	A primitive, two-stage defence in which an unbearable internal object (a feeling, part-self, or internalised figure) is split off and projected into	(Bion, 1962, Klein, 1964)

	another person. The projection is not merely imagined; it is accompanied by unconscious pressure on the other person to feel, embody, or enact the projected role. For example, a person who feels guilt may unconsciously locate that guilt in an internal “angry mother” and then project that internal object outward, inducing someone else to take on that role emotionally or behaviourally.	
Phantasy	An unconscious, psychical activity involving images of what the bodily self is doing to its objects and what its objects are doing to it. Klein uses the spelling 'phantasy' to distinguish it from the everyday concept of 'fantasy,' emphasizing its biological urgency and its connection to instinctual drives and defences.	(Klein, 1946)

1.2.2.4 D.W. Winnicott and W.R. Bion: Transition and Integration

Winnicott and Bion contributed essential ideas about the facilitating environment and the process of moving beyond primitive defences toward psychological maturity.

Term	Meaning and Context	Reference
Transitional Objects	An object (e.g., a blanket or teddy bear) used by the young child to manage the anxiety of separation and to bridge the gap between the internal world and external reality. It is neither fully part of the self nor fully external, existing in an area of transitional phenomena that allows for soothing and creative play.	(Winnicott, 1953)
Increased Integration	The core aim of psychoanalytic growth. It refers to the individual's increasing capacity to tolerate complexity, contradiction, and painful emotional truths without resorting to primitive defences like splitting or evacuation (Projective Identification). The client moves toward a greater capacity for thinking about, rather than acting out, their emotions.	(Bion, 1962)

1.2.2.5 Margaret Mahler: Separation-Individuation and Identity

While the primary frame is psychoanalytic object relations, the developmental observations of Margaret Mahler provide a useful bridge between the formation of the self and the external reality of separation. Mahler’s model describes the psychological birth of the infant through phases culminating in the realization of self-identity separate from the

primary caregiver. This concept directly informs how the data is interpreted regarding a developing sense of self within a family unit.

Term	Meaning and Context	Reference
Separation-Individuation	A developmental process spanning the first three years of life, during which the child emerges from a state of fusion with the mother (symbiosis) and develops a sense of separate self (individuation) and independence (separation). This process involves a necessary balance between moving away from the caregiver to explore and returning for emotional connection.	(Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975)

1.2.3 Conclusion of framework

The dynamic interplay between Bowlby's relational and observable patterns of attachment and separation, the developmental process of Mahler's separation-individuation, and the Kleinian/Bionian perspective on the inner world's defensive operations and emotional processing provides the psychoanalytic frame for the current study.

1.2.4 Caveat: The use of mother

It is important to note that much of this early attachment research reflected the social norms of the mid-20th century, with a predominant focus on mothers and traditional

nuclear family structures. Bowlby's maternal deprivation hypothesis centred on the mother–child bond, which has since been critiqued as narrow and gendered in its assumptions. Subsequent work, such as that of Rutter (1972), broadened the understanding of attachment to include fathers, siblings, carers, and peers, highlighting the significance of multiple attachment figures and diverse family contexts. Within the current study, I will be using 'mother' and 'primary caregiver' interchangeably due to the focus of the study not being around the mother/child relationship, but instead whoever the main caregiver is for the child, and what the separation is like between them.

1.3 Context of Attachment

1.3.1 The development of Attachment Theory

Attachment is the deep and enduring emotional bond that forms between a child and their caregiver. Attachment theory revolutionised thinking about this emotional tie and its disruption through separation, deprivation, and bereavement (Bretherton, 2013). Bowlby suggests that children are motivated by familiarity increasing and stress reducing behaviours which maintain the attachment relationship and trigger separation behaviour (1969,1973). Bowlby and Ainsworth further found separation anxiety to sometimes be excessively low or altogether absent, giving an erroneous impression of maturity, linking to the concept of 'settled'. This concept of being 'settled' can be a deceptive one. As shown by Robertson and Robertson (1989), adult perceptions of a child's internal world can be flawed, leading them to believe an absence of overt distress constitutes wellbeing. Given young children's limited capacity to verbalise their emotional experience, such misreadings may go unchallenged within childcare settings, especially when busy schedules and limited adult to child ratios favour low emotion environments. In our

childcare settings, this poses the question of how we can understand a child's internal world and how they are *truly* experiencing separation. This is thought about in more depth when reflecting on separation experiences in childcare settings in section in section 1.5.

1.3.2 Historical theoretical context

Early relationships, especially with primary caregivers, are seen as critical for a child's sense of security and emotional development. Freud (1905/2017) argued that attachment to a caregiver stemmed from instinctual drives (basic impulses such as the need for food, comfort, and protection) that bound mother and infant together. He suggested that the child's reliance on the caregiver was closely tied to the development of ego defences which are the unconscious strategies the mind uses to manage anxiety and internal conflict. Within this framework, early attachment was also linked to oedipal impulses (the child's unconscious wishes and rivalries within the family) which Freud saw as central to personality development. The way these early dynamics were managed (whether caregivers responded with attunement, frustration, inconsistency, or avoidance) was thought to lay the foundations for later emotional patterns, such as how an individual responds to loss, intimacy, or conflict in adulthood.

Klein (1932) extended this line of thought by emphasising the infant's inner world of phantasies, about the caregiver. She proposed that infants experience powerful internal conflicts between aggressive and loving impulses (drives), which they project onto their caregiver. These create a paranoid-schizoid position, whereby the infant experiences the caregiver as either wholly good or wholly bad depending on the dominant affect and perceives the 'bad' object as persecutory and threatening.

To cope with this state, the child will defend by ‘splitting’, a way to ensure they can protect the positive image of their loving caregiver without accepting their downfalls. In her well-known example of the ‘good breast’ and the ‘bad breast,’ Klein proposed that the same caregiver can be experienced as wholly nurturing when they satisfy the infant’s needs and as persecutory when they frustrate those needs, such as when the breast is unavailable or withdrawn. These early internalised representations of the caregiver become part of the child’s developing sense of self and shape later relationships. From this perspective, separation and attachment are not only about the external presence or absence of a caregiver but also about how the caregiver is imagined and experienced within the child’s internal world, influencing how security, anxiety, and interpersonal trust develop over time.

1.3.3 Theoretical stages of separation

Bowlby, saw attachment behaviour as influenced by the child’s environment and shaped by the caregiver’s own attachment history (Bowlby, 1969; Bretherton, 2013). Bowlby believed that separation anxiety was activated when the child’s attachment system was triggered but the caregiver was unavailable, and that ‘excessive’ anxiety could arise from repeated threats of abandonment or rejection. This attachment system is supposedly activated when proximity to the caregiver is threatened, ensuring the infant’s survival (Bowlby 1969; Bretherton, 2013). He outlined stages of separation distress (protest, despair, and detachment) depending on the duration of separation and the security of the attachment (Bowlby, 1969; Robertson and Bowlby, 1952).

Table 1: Bowlby's stages of separation (1969).

Stage	Description	Behavioural signs
Protest	Immediate response to caregiver absence	Crying, calling, resisting comfort from others
Despair	Hopelessness after prolonged absence	Withdrawal, apathy, sadness
Detachment	Emotional defence after extended absence	Appears indifferent to caregiver, reduced trust

Bowlby (1960, Richards; 1981) conceptualised detachment as a defensive adaptation to prolonged, unresolved separation. When separation is relatively brief, or when the child retains confidence in the parent's return (due to routine, visits, secure attachment style), the protest and despair phases may be observed without progressing to detachment.

1.3.4 First experimental studies of separation

Ainsworth et al (1970) translated theory into action when creating the strange situation experiment and tested Bowlby's theory. This experiment involved a series of eight controlled episodes whereby the infant was exposed to separations and reunions with their caregiver and interactions with a stranger. The quality of interactions, particularly the sensitivity of the mother, is believed to play a crucial role in shaping the child's attachment behaviours. These behaviours include using the mother as a secure base for exploration (e.g., playing nearby) and seeking her comfort when feeling threatened or unsafe. Additionally, the child's response to separation, such as crying and being soothed, crying

and rejecting the parent, or showing ambivalence by not crying at all, further reflects the nature of the attachment bond.

The Robertsons' naturalistic studies of children separated from their parents during hospitalisation vividly illustrated Bowlby's stages, highlighting the profound emotional impact of even temporary separations. Robertson and Robertson (1989) explored short-term separation through their film *"A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital"*, which followed a young child left in hospital for a week, with minimal visiting. At the time, hospital policy restricted parents to short, infrequent visits (usually around thirty minutes), because professionals believed that parental presence unsettled children (due to them crying when their parent arrives and leaves), and because the medical model of care prioritised physical treatment over emotional needs. Rigid ward routines also positioned staff as the primary authority, with parents seen as disruptive to hospital order. Although staff often described these children as 'settled', the Robertsons observed more covert signs of distress that were frequently missed by nurses, who were instructed not to offer comfort for fear of upsetting the child. The children were therefore left emotionally alone, without access to either their parents or a consistent substitute caregiver.

Robertson highlighted how emotional expression only emerged when children felt safe and noted that the absence of parental comfort carried lasting consequences. After returning home, children often struggled to re-establish trust in their parents, with behavioural outbursts and anger directed toward them as a response to the earlier separation. In contrast, when the Robertsons themselves provided continuous care for a child whose parent was absent due to medical treatment, the child was able to maintain a secure attachment and re-attached to the parent with far less difficulty, though support

was needed to help the child gradually detach from The Robertsons' themselves. Together, these observations revealed the profound emotional cost of parental absence, which had long been underestimated. While initially met with scepticism, their insights later transformed hospital care, prompting greater recognition of the need for parental presence, or at least a stable secondary attachment figure, during hospital stays. These psychoanalytic and observational pioneers laid much of the foundation for what became attachment theory, underscoring how the stages of separation, whether overt or not, are important indicators for a child's wellbeing and impact on PC relationship going forward.

1.3.5 Separation in childcare settings

Separation within educational contexts is a routine part of daily life for young children and often brings emotional challenges not only for the child but also for their caregivers. It is important to stress here, that for any child, separation distress is typical, and although a significant experience worth exploring, is not necessarily a cause for concern (Ainsworth et al, 2015). Indeed, brief protest or sadness at the point of separation can be understood as an expression of a secure attachment, reflecting the child's awareness of and investment in the caregiver relationship (Bowlby, 1969). However, the intensity and duration of separation responses vary, influenced by factors such as the child's temperament, prior experiences of caregiving, and the consistency of the educational setting (Groh et al., 2017). For practitioners, recognising the normality of separation distress while also being sensitive to children who experience prolonged or heightened difficulties is essential, as supportive and predictable responses from educators can scaffold children's developing capacity to regulate emotions and engage with learning (Eivers et al., 2010).

1.3.6 Studies of separation in childcare settings

Rutter (1972) emphasised the importance of multiple attachments, including those to fathers, siblings, other carers, and peers, recognising that children's emotional security is supported by a wider network of relationships. Evidence from contexts such as Israeli kibbutzim, where caregiving was shared across adults, demonstrated that children could form secure attachments beyond the mother when care was consistent and emotionally responsive (Rutter, 1972). Similarly, studies of children placed in foster or adoptive families showed that positive outcomes were more strongly associated with the stability and quality of substitute care than with the experience of separation itself. Later research further reinforced this point, with English and Romanian Adoptee studies revealing that while children exposed to neglect and frequent changes of PC often developed significant attachment difficulties, those who were adopted into nurturing family environments were able to recover and establish secure relationships (Rutter et al., 1998). This links to Winnicott's theorising, which considers a nurturing experience to be one whereby you are held in mind. A caregiver needs to provide attunement and containment even when the parent is absent (Winnicott, 1965), ensuring the child does not feel physically and emotionally abandoned, leading to detachment. This mental holding supports emotional security and self-regulation, helping children develop resilience and a stable sense of self (Fonagy & Target, 1997) and the parent child relationship. Taken together, these findings highlighted that the outcomes of separation were not determined solely by the fact of being separated, but by the nature and quality of the emotional support available in the caregiver's absence.

1.4 Early Years (EY): Defining the Context

Before considering the policy and legislative context, it is important to define what is meant by the Early Years (EY). In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) refers to children from birth to five years of age and encompasses both childcare and educational provision prior to compulsory schooling (Department for Education, 2024). The EY period is widely recognised as a time of rapid social, emotional, cognitive, and relational development, during which children are forming foundational attachment relationships, developing emotional regulation, and establishing an emerging sense of self (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Bowlby, 1969).

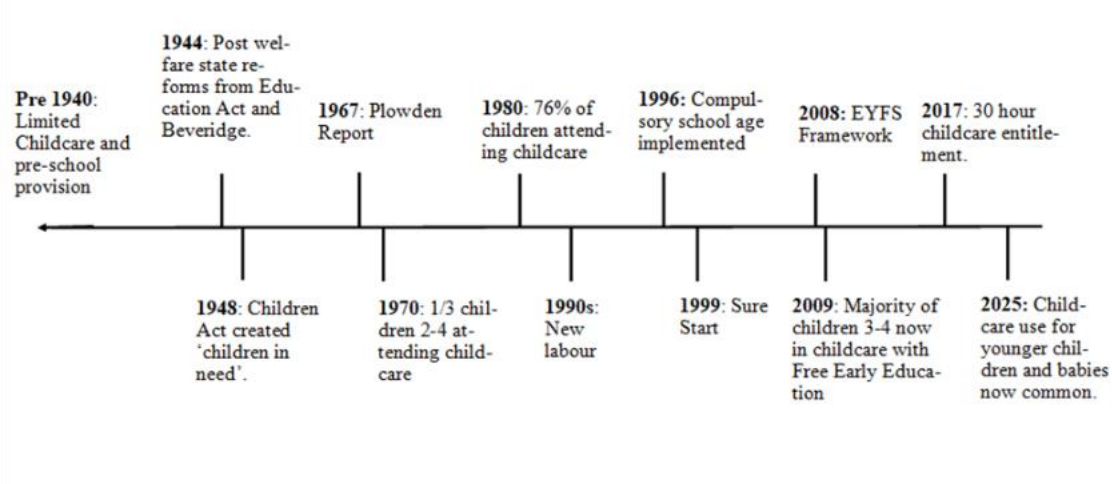
The current research focuses specifically on reception-aged children (four to five years old) during their entry into formal education. While many children will have prior experience of separation through nursery or childcare attendance, the transition into Reception often represents a qualitatively different experience. Children encounter new environments, expectations, peer groups, and adult relationships, whilst also managing the daily separation from their primary caregiver. Reception therefore provides a context in which separation remains emotionally meaningful but children possess greater linguistic and symbolic capacity to communicate their experiences than younger preschool-aged children.

The broader literature review incorporated studies involving children from mainly 9 months to 3 years. This decision was made because research directly examining children's experiences of school based separation is scarce, particularly when child voice is prioritised. Including studies from across the EY age range enabled a fuller understanding of how separation has been conceptualised and experienced within

childcare settings. However, the case study participants were recruited from Reception classes due to their developmental ability to engage in observation, drawing, and play-based methods, allowing richer exploration of their experiences. Furthermore, with Reception being the de facto school starting age for most children, this time of consistent daily separation would provide insight into an experience applicable to all children within England.

1.4.1 Legislation in Early Years (EY) provision within political climate

Figure 1: History of childcare timeline.



1.4.1.1 1940's-1960's

Historically, it was not of concern how children would cope away from their PC as, unless met with unusual or extreme circumstances, children were predominantly cared for within their direct family unit by their mother. This meant that until the post war surge in women taking up work, daily, short-term separation was not common. However, since this change, it has been increasingly evident for childcare providers that these extended periods away from PCs are significant and in need of consideration. EY places were extended from

limited provision to the 1940's post war Welfare state reforms, concentrating on providing support for those considered 'at risk' or in need (Education Act 1944, known as the 'Butler Act'). Britain and Beveridge (1942) set the foundation for state involvement in family welfare, signalling a wider drive for both parents to rebuild the country through employment. By 1948, the Children Act had created the "Children in Need" category, placing responsibility on local authorities to provide day nurseries for vulnerable children, although not compulsory. Despite the wartime recognition of early childcare's broader social importance, the provision remained incredibly limited.

The Plowden Report ("Children and their Primary Schools",1967) was a turning point in UK EY policy. It was one of the first major policy documents to formally recommend universal nursery education, though implementation remained limited due to funding constraints and political shifts (The National Archives, n.d.). Plowden argues within this report that "The British economy and society are likely to change greatly in the next decades with results for childcare which cannot be ignored" and noted that in a sample of children entering school in 1965, 21% of mothers were working (Plowden, 1967, Section 305). While the report cautioned against prolonged separations from mothers (although not explicitly determining this length) with very young children, it argued that "a short absence during the day does not harm the child who is ready for it," (Plowden, 1967, Section 305) and recognised practical limitations to universal rollout, including teacher shortages and the developmental readiness of children under four.

1.4.1.2 1970's to now

This shifted the government's growing interest in evidence-based EY policy during the 1970s and early 1980s and laid the groundwork for later reforms under New Labour in

the late 1990s, positioning early years provision as central to addressing social inequality, improving long-term educational outcomes, and enabling parental employment (HM Treasury, 2004). Within the late 1970's, only around a third of children aged 2-4 were attending registered childcare services (Melhuish, 2004), with 24% of children attending state nursery schools and 52% of children in playgroups by the late 80's (Hansen, Joshi and Verropoulou, 2005). The 1996 Education Act clarified that a child reaches compulsory school age at the beginning of the term following their fifth birthday (Education Act 1996, Section 8), although most children currently join Reception the Autumn after they turn 4, which has led to it becoming the de facto school starting point for most children in England.

The introduction of Sure Start in 1999, followed by Sure Start Children's Centres, brought together education, health, and social care services in a coordinated effort to support families in disadvantaged communities (Department for Education and Skills, 2006), finding uptake to reach 90% for 3 year olds and nearly 98% for 4 year olds by 2009 (Department for Education, 2010, p. 3). The publication of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in 2008 marked the first time that care and education for children from birth to five were unified under a single statutory framework in England. This move reflected a growing policy emphasis on school readiness. By 2017, the 30-hour childcare entitlement was introduced for working parents of 3–4-year-olds, further reinforcing the dual policy goals of supporting labour market participation and improving early educational outcomes (Department for Education, 2017). Now, 93% of 3–4-year-olds are registered within a state childcare provision, with 73% of 9 months to 2-year-olds (Department for Education, 2025).

The newly introduced SEND (special educational needs and disability) reforms published in 2026 consider a systemic shift toward early, locally delivered, evidence-based support (HM Government, 2026). The consultation foregrounds early years and Best Start Family Hubs as central to early identification and intervention and will therefore be increasingly important to our context when exploring children's EY support.

1.4.1.3 Attachment Theory in EY provision

With rising numbers of children in out of home care, increasing maternal employment, and societal shifts in family structure, there has been growing concern over how young children's emotional and attachment needs are supported in EY provision. Here, Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory began to be acknowledged and now underpins much of the rationale for policy emphasis on stable relationships in EY settings. Bowlby argued that infants require consistent, sensitive caregiving from a primary attachment figure to develop secure attachments, which in turn support emotional regulation, resilience, and social skills. Although still a popular viewpoint in western child psychology, the focus on the parental duo being the primary attachment figures is perhaps a less culturally sensitive outlook, not considering the varied roles of community centred childcare and how this may affect separation patterns. However, considering the societal outlook on childcare in England at the time, the parental bond was the most common family structure to consider attachment from. Plowden recognised the significance of separation in his report, writing "One major crisis for the child is the separation required of him when he goes to nursery or school." (Section 71), with the child finding security in the presence of a familiar figure.

The first statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) as mentioned above mandated that "…each child must be assigned a key person" (p. 11) whose role included tailoring care and ensuring stable attachment figures within settings and enhancing support during separations. The policy shift reflected a growing consensus that institutional care should replicate, as far as possible, the secure base provided in responsive family care (Elfer, Goldschmied, & Selleck, 2012), highlighted by the importance of Bowlby (1969, 1973) and Ainsworth's research (1970). EYFS revisions (2012, 2014, 2021) continued to underscore the key person's role in securely supporting transitions and tailoring responsive care. Within 'Birth to Five Matters' (Early Education, 2021; updated 2025), a key person approach was reiterated, helping the child feel "held in mind" (p.19) and providing a secure base for exploration, following Winnicott's earlier theorising. These developments were influenced by a broader recognition that relational care and emotional containment in EY settings directly impact children's readiness to learn, emotional wellbeing, and behavioural regulation (Geddes, 2006; Trevarthen, 2011).

As more children begin attending settings at younger ages and for longer periods of time, attachment aware practice has become essential. Ensuring that transitions are managed with consistent, responsive adults can reduce distress related to separation and support children's emotional development during these formative years.

1.5 Exploring the experience of separation

To further our understanding around how to manage transitions, some research has been carried out to explore how this event is experienced. A consistent pattern throughout time has been the increased understanding of the importance of consistent and attentive care

for children away from their PC. We can see the impact through Bowlby's stages (1969) when this process is unsatisfactory, and when adult perceptions of a child's experience and what they need, can fall short. This can lead to misinterpretations of how the child is coping, raising the question of, even if distress is a normative response, should we as adults be doing more to understand and support this process for children in our care? So far, the voices that have contributed to this topic are as follows:

1.5.1 Adult perspective

Research into separation distress in early years settings highlights the complex, relational nature of the experience, involving staff, parents, and the child, often from the adult lens. Page and Elfer (2013) noted that supporting children through separation can be emotionally taxing for staff, while Jovanovic et al. (2016) found that attachment-based reciprocity between practitioners and children deepens understanding of socioemotional needs. Koç (2023) demonstrated that across multiple countries, structured school adjustment programmes, with a focus on individual family needs, were commonly employed to ease transitions. Here, staff were asked what social-emotional problems with school adjustment the children had, which highlighted separation anxiety and communication with peers as common factors. Although the paper highlights useful recommendations for staff during separations (e.g., using rituals such as drinking tea in the morning with the children, or providing an introductory video of the teacher before starting school), this doesn't tell us how the children experience these strategies. Despite the importance of staff perspectives, these alone do not capture the child's internal experience, only observable behaviour.

Parental behaviour is also influential; research shows that parents' engagement at drop-off impacts child distress and peer interactions (Lollis, 1990), with parenting style and gender shaping separation behaviours (Jreisat, 2023; Świdrak, 2021). Mellenius (2023) found that children often mirrored the affective behaviours of their parents during separation, shaped by parental anticipation of difficulty. Rituals and routines supported by parents also proved helpful in reducing stress (Klein et al., 2010; Jovanovic, 2011). While relationships with caregivers are central, alternate caregivers must ensure that the child's voice and lived experience are prioritised, rather than inferred solely through adults.

1.5.2 Child Voice

Historical and current research on separation rarely positions the child as an active participant in the process. Where the child's voice is included, it tends to be within broader studies on transitions into educational settings, of which separation is a part. Creative, participatory methods such as drawings and photographs have been used effectively to gather children's perspectives in Clark's (2005) Mosaic approach which enabled children to share their transition experiences and highlight what mattered most to them. Similarly, Dockett and Perry (2011) used draw and talk techniques to examine children's school-starting experiences, noting themes of expectations and perceptions of school's purpose. Einarsdóttir (2007) also used the Mosaic method to explore children's views on playschool, including what they enjoyed, learned, and how they perceived adult roles. This multi method approach builds a rich picture by drawing together various forms of child expression. However, while valuable, such methods have largely focused on physical spaces or educational transitions rather than emotional experiences like

separation. A gap here seems to be a child-friendly, creative tool to explore children's emotional worlds more directly.

1.6 The EP role in supporting separation

It is important for Educational Psychologists to understand the impact of separation, as this process is experienced by every child post age 5. This, often dramatic, process can cause distress and long-lasting impact (Kirsten et al, 2008; Milrod et al, 2014; Lewinsohn et al, 2008), meaning EP ability to understand it's complexities will aid decision making around provision. The Standards for Practicing Educational Psychologists, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2023), have outlined the importance of understanding "…educational and emotional factors that facilitate or impede the provision of effective teaching and learning" (12.29). Separation would certainly fall under an impactful emotional factor, with the British Psychological Society (BPS – standards body for training psychologists, 2022) stressing that practitioners should "Demonstrate appreciation of diversity in society and the experiences and contributions of all" (3a, p19). With this being an impactful experience, even long term in a child's life, their personal contributions to this field of understanding are paramount and missing.

1.7 The current research

Throughout my career in education, I have witnessed the separations of many children, and the impact this can have. Within my doctoral training in Educational Psychology, I observed a child for 10 weeks, learning about the development of an EY child. Within this experience, I was most struck by the visible pain some children expressed after being left at the setting, and how for some, this was a prolonged and unresolved process. I

wondered, if given the space to discuss their experience, what would they say? For this current investigation, I would like to gain insight on this wondering. My experiences, and the impact of these, will be discussed further within the methodology section.

1.8 Conclusion

Overall, the shift from in home parental EY childcare, to out of home care has significantly evolved over the last 60 years. This has meant families depend on settings to provide good quality attuned care to replace the family dynamic at younger ages and for longer periods. A child's attachment with those caregivers has been seen to affect this experience, however for any child, this is a significant stage of adaptation and brings challenges. The importance of the EP to understand this event and provide guidance to families and schools around how best to manage this sensitive time is clear. The next chapter will focus on exploring what the literature tells us about children's experiences of separating at school, and what we can learn from this in terms of gaps and further research areas.

2. Literature review

2.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will present a narrative review of the literature to explore the experiences of children separating from their PC. The literature review aims to create a holistic picture of children's experiences through collating themes across studies and identify if the existing literature seeks to hear their voice. Although insights from teachers, professionals, and parents contribute to understanding experiences of separation, growing emphasis is being placed on centering the voices of young people themselves (DfE, 2014). As such, this literature review wanted to concentrate specifically on children's perspectives, however the available literature did not include direct child voice. Instead, what emerged was a discussion of the separation experience from the adult lens and perspective, often using observation. The following findings instead follow a narrative around if the children were perceived to receive attuned or missattuned care, and how this affected the time in their setting.

2.2 Narrative review overview

Narrative reviews occupy a distinctive space within knowledge synthesis. Although often positioned below systematic and scoping reviews in the hierarchy of evidence, they offer a practical way of drawing together diverse sources of knowledge (Pettigrew et al., 2009;

Sukhera, 2022). Systematic reviews rely on narrowly defined questions, pre-specified methods and homogenous evidence, aiming for comprehensive and reproducible synthesis. Scoping reviews similarly map the breadth of a field through structured and transparent search processes. In contrast, narrative reviews allow a flexible, interpretive approach that is particularly valuable when the evidence base is complex, heterogeneous or conceptually diverse.

Rather than aspiring to exhaustiveness, narrative reviews describe what is known while critiquing and interpreting the literature to highlight new perspectives or advance theoretical understanding. As Sukhera (2022) notes, they align with subjectivist and interpretivist paradigms, recognising that knowledge is shaped by context, authorial perspective and disciplinary lens. This makes them well suited to topics where multiple viewpoints coexist or where contradictions require exploration rather than resolution. They are also useful in fields where research is fragmented or underdeveloped, enabling authors to draw on a wide range of sources and use seminal works as analytic touchpoints. Their strength lies not in methodological replicability but in their capacity to provide a coherent, insightful synthesis that situates a body of work within broader theoretical or practical contexts (Pettigrew et al., 2009; Sukhera, 2022). Through repeated engagement with the literature, the researcher identifies recurring ideas and patterns, which accumulate into a narrative that integrates and explains what the field demonstrates as a whole.

My literature review required the interpretation of differing perspectives rather than the aggregation of uniform findings. A systematic or scoping approach would risk constraining

this richness, whereas a narrative review offers the flexibility needed to produce a meaningful, critical and contextually grounded synthesis.

2.3 Literature Review Question

Q1: What do children express about their experiences of daily separation in childcare settings?

2.3.1 Literature review search strategy

An initial literature search was carried out on 3rd March 2025. This search spanned psychology and education databases, including PsycInfo (accessed via EBSCOhost), Google Scholar, and the Tavistock and Portman Library. The search terms used are outlined in Table 1.

Table 2: Search terms used for literature review question 1

Subject mapping terms	Key word search terms	Rationale
1. **Age Range**	children OR child OR young child OR preschool OR reception OR primary school OR nursery OR Childcare	Children's first separation experiences are mainly in the EY.
AND		

2. **Separation**	Daily separation or Everyday Separation OR School separation Or pre-school separation OR Brief Separation OR Separation	Separation is referred to in various forms throughout the literature.
NOT		
3. **Alternate Separation types**	Separation anxiety OR Divorce OR COVID OR Refugee OR Family Separation or Parental Separation OR Incarceration OR Prison	Alternate separation experiences not relevant to this study were avoided.

2.3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 3: inclusion and exclusion criteria for search 1.

Inclusion	Exclusion	Rationale
Question 1 search		
1. Publication date Year of publication 2008-2025	Papers published before 2008	Although there is rich historical exploration of separation, the studies should be related to

		current practice and childcare settings. 2008 brought the first EYFS framework which shaped EY provision.
2. Location Studies conducted worldwide, within education or childcare settings.	Clinic based research	Separation is a worldwide experience for CYP and all cultural voices are of interest. Education or childcare settings give a more naturalistic view of the phenomena.
3. Participants Studies include the views of young children (0-5).	Studies based on behavioural, quantitative data without qualitative view gathering. Children above 5 years old. Studies based on the views of staff, professionals or teachers.	I value the voice of participants whose voice is often overlooked. I wanted to explore if anyone has done a direct views gathering research study on the study of separation.
4. Study focus Studies were included if they explored children's	Separation anxiety as a disorder, long term	I wanted to concentrate on the daily, normative

daily separation experience.	concern or mental health condition Long term separation such as bereavement, adoption or hospital stays	experience in a non-pathologising way.
5. Study type Peer-reviewed journals and doctoral theses.	Articles, magazines or books	Quality assurance

The subject heading search terms were combined with equivalent key word search terms using OR. The two search terms were then combined using AND. The following filters were applied; ‘academic journal’, ‘dissertation’, ‘thesis’, and ‘English’. Following the application of the exclusion criteria, this led to a total of 144 papers from PsycInfo, 2 papers from the Tavistock Library and 34 papers from google scholar. 23 were removed due to duplications and 6 were removed due to not being in English. Upon reading the titles and abstracts, papers concerning separations not related to daily childcare experiences were removed.

Of these papers, none of the papers were based on direct child view gathering and voice. All of the papers were either observational studies or considered the child’s separation experience from an adult’s perspective. This posed the question, is the research focussing on the child’s lived emotional experience at the analytic centre, or is the child primarily a dependent variable responding to adult behaviour?

Due to this, it was decided to make iterative refinements (Sukhera, 2022) to the review question. Instead of only including children's expressions, studies depicting the child's experience through voices around them were included, as they are the only sources depicting the experience of the child.

2.4 Revised literature search question

Q2: What does research tell us about children's daily separation when attending childcare settings?

The review question was changed to reflect the children's experiences of separation being sought through non-direct means. The literature search terms remained the same. Although the revised parameters provided the same amount of database retrievals (n=180), snowballing within the new parameters provided more relevant results (n=43). The new review question retrieved 62 relevant papers, of which 27 were critically appraised. This left 10 studies which met the inclusion criteria which are discussed below (See PRISMA Graph – Appendix A).

2.4.1 Revised inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 4: Revised inclusion and exclusion criteria for search 2

Inclusion	**Exclusion**	**Rationale**
Question 1 search		
1. Publication date	Papers published before 2008	Although there is rich historical exploration of

Year of publication 2008-2025		separation, the studies should be related to current practice and childcare settings. 2008 brought the first EYFS framework which shaped EY provision.
2. Location Studies conducted worldwide, within education or childcare settings.	Clinic based research	Separation is a worldwide experience for CYP and all cultural voices are of interest. Education or childcare settings give a more naturalistic view of the phenomena.
3. Participants Studies include young children (0-5). Perspective of child gathered through adults (staff, professionals or teachers), child voice or observation.	Studies based on behavioural, quantitative data without qualitative view gathering. Children above 5 years old (due to wanting the experience of the first significant daily separations).	I want to include all available information about the child's separation which can give us insight into their experience.

4. Study focus Studies were included if they explored children's daily separation experience.	Separation anxiety as a disorder, long term concern or mental health condition Long term separation such as bereavement, adoption or hospital stays	I wanted to concentrate on the daily, normative experience in a non-pathologising way.
5. Study type Peer-reviewed journals and doctoral theses.	Articles, magazines or books	Quality assurance

It is important to note here, that one of the papers harvested through reference list reading was Xu (2006). Although this falls outside of the date bracket, Xu's study showed great relevance to the current research, considering through interview and observation, the transition experience of young children. I therefore chose to keep this study within the literature review. After its finding, I re-searched for any relevant material between 2006-2008 but did not find any other studies to add.

2.5 Narrative review

2.5.1 Introduction

As outlined in chapter one, there is a wide range of research available whereby children's experiences of separation is understood through key adult's perspective, or observation. As seen in the literature search, direct child voice concerning separation has not yet been sought, however their indirect perspective can still be understood through adults around

them or observable experience. All the research explores how children experience separation, from the perspective of the researcher, or adults around the child. The daily separation experience explored in the current research is that of parents briefly leaving their young children (pre-school age) at a childcare or EY childcare setting within the working day, and includes the separation itself, with some papers further exploring themes of separation throughout the day. School aged children are not studied at all within this selection, as the only papers found were discussing children's views on the setting environment, not the process of being left.

2.5.2 Literature overview and appraisal

2.5.2.1 Aims and methodology

The studies included in this narrative review reflect varied aims, but all centre on understanding the emotional and relational dimensions of infants' and toddlers' transitions into Early Childcare Education and Care (ECEC). Some offered clearly defined research questions, such as Gath (2024), who synthesised international case study data to examine infants' social and emotional experiences across the first year of ECEC, and Klette and Killen (2018), who investigated toddlers' behaviours during separations and reunions, alongside caregiver responses.

Several studies adopted inductive approaches, where research foci emerged from the data itself. For example, Datler et al. (2010; 2012) and Nakaoka (2014) used Tavistock or infant-observation methods to interpret children's lived experiences, often centring on cases where transitions were particularly challenging. Other studies drew on interpretive or phenomenological frameworks, such as Xu (2006) on toddlers' emotional reactions,

Mellenius et al. (2023) on parents' conceptualisations of first separations, and Golkhou (2024) on teachers' emotional support during transitions.

A smaller number of studies explored relational processes between parents, educators, and children more directly. Dolby et al. (2023) evaluated a professional development programme to support transitions, while White et al. (2023) examined the relational meanings ascribed to objects during transition moments.

Overall, methodologies were predominantly qualitative, ranging from infant observation and ethnography to phenomenography, enabling rich insights into subjective experience. While such approaches provide depth, their small samples and context-specific focus limit transferability. Nonetheless, taken together, these studies contribute a valuable evidence base on the complexities of early separation and transition.

2.5.2.2 Participants and sampling

Table 5: Participants and sampling of literature review papers

Study	***Children***	***Parents***	***School Staff***
Gath et al, 2024	10 (5-13 months)		
Klette and Killen, 2018	12 (13-15 months)	12 mothers	
Datler et al, 2012	1 (2 years, 2 months)		
Xu, 2006	8-12 children (18-30 months)	Most parents who came with children were mothers, as well as a few fathers and two grandmothers. No specific quotas listed.	3 (Headteacher and two assistants)

Datler et al, 2010	1 (1 year, 9 months)		
Dolby et al, 2023	20 (8-18 months)	20 (No mention of sex, although 'Mother' used in vignette.	5
Mellenius et al (2023)		21 (who have 10–24-month-old children) 18 mothers and 3 fathers	
Golkhou, 2024	7 children (0-3 years)		4 teachers
Nakaoka, 2014	2 (2-year-olds)		
White et al, 2023	3 (6 months)		

Recruitment information was inconsistently reported across the studies, limiting replicability and ethical transparency. Some papers provided clear procedures. For example, Klette and Killen (2018) recruited only children via public health nurses to focus on first time childcare entrants, while Mellenius et al. (2023) purposively recruited parents through health and ECEC channels with defined inclusion criteria, though self selection may have constrained diversity. Gath et al. (2024) required services to have an infant under one year about to start ECEC and parental consent for close observation, although selections were largely pragmatic. Golkhou (2024) explained the use of convenience and extreme instance sampling with reasons for inclusion and exclusion.

Other studies offered limited recruitment detail. Datler et al. (2012) and Datler et al. (2010), who described different children from what appeared to be the same cohort, noted that 11 toddlers were observed but provided no information on selection criteria, recruitment processes or non participation, leaving unclear how the focal child or wider cohort were identified. Minimal detail was also evident in Dolby et al. (2023), which involved 20 families

from one workplace nursery but did not address non participation or sample sufficiency, and in Nakaoka (2014) and White et al. (2023), where sampling rationale and inclusion criteria were only briefly mentioned. Xu (2006) described purposeful sampling but did not explain why specific children were included or how non participation was handled.

Taken together, while a small number of studies justified their recruitment approaches, most provided limited information, undermining transparency, rigour and ethical accountability within the evidence base.

Many studies were conducted in culturally specific contexts such as Finland, Japan and New Zealand, each with distinct norms around emotional expression, independence and early childhood care. In Nakaoka's (2014) Japanese study, staff practices were shaped by institutional norms encouraging swift, low emotion goodbyes, potentially clashing with children's needs. The Finnish sample in Mellenius et al. (2023) reflected cultural discourses around emotional containment and parental self regulation. This cultural specificity, combined with varied sampling, may obscure how separations are experienced and managed across different backgrounds.

Across the studies, the age range spanned from 3 months to 3 years, with most children under 2. These children were typically beginning their ECEC journey and experiencing their first prolonged separations from primary caregivers. This provides insight into early reactions to separation, but their young age makes accessing the child's perspective difficult. The transition from childcare to school settings was not documented, highlighting a gap in research on older children who are developmentally able to articulate their views.

2.5.2.3 Methods of data collection

Across the reviewed studies, data collection methods were often similar, with most relying heavily on observations and video recordings to capture children's behaviours and interactions during drop off and early settling periods. Observational approaches were central. Gath et al. (2024) observed 10 infants across five countries from their first day of ECEC, returning at intervals throughout the first year. Klette and Killen (2018) filmed 12 one year olds in Norwegian childcare centres, focusing on separation and reunion with their mothers. Shorter, intensive designs were also used. Xu (2006) observed arrival routines for four weeks during morning drop off, while Nakaoka (2014) conducted twice weekly participant observations of two toddlers transitioning into nursery care, drawing on her dual role as researcher and nursery worker. White et al. (2023) combined video recordings across three ECEC sites in Australia and New Zealand with interview data. Psychoanalytic observation was also evident: Datler (2012), using the Tavistock model, observed 11 children over six months but focused in depth on one case due to peer dynamics. Datler et al. (2010), working with the same cohort, concentrated on another child whose transition involved distress and withdrawal. Dolby et al. (2023) used a pre–post video design, recording 20 morning transitions across a 12 month period to analyse relational language and educator availability.

Alongside observational accounts, some studies incorporated interviews and questionnaires to access parental and practitioner perspectives. White et al. (2023) supplemented video data with interviews with parents and teachers, while Mellenius et al. (2023) conducted in depth interviews with parents during their toddlers' first days of ECEC, preceded by questionnaires. Golkhou (2024) used both observations and interviews with four ECEC teachers, who reflected on their emotional support strategies during

separations. Ethical considerations arise when researchers are also practitioners in the setting, as in Nakaoka (2014), raising questions about bias and influence. Even if such influence is unavoidable, researcher reflexivity should be explicitly addressed, which was rarely the case.

Mellenius et al. (2023) used semi structured interviews to explore caregivers' separation experiences, examining parental mentalisation and how parents conceptualised their child's emotional responses. Although focused on parents, the study offered insight into children's experiences through parental attunement and emotional adjustment, providing an indirect but valuable window into how children navigate separation.

2.5.2.4 Methods of analysis

Mellenius et al (2023) used transparent coding frameworks and checks for reliability, applying a detailed, multi-stage phenomenographic process using NVivo, peer review, and a codebook. Dolby et al (2023) used a coding framework with 75–90% inter-rater agreement and clear analytic steps, whilst Golkhou (2024) also demonstrated transparency, describing an eight-step abductive thematic analysis supported by illustrative tables.

Iterative and theory-informed strategies were also used. Datler et al. (2012) employed a multi-phase analytic approach to derive "patterns of experience," illustrating changes with worked examples. Gath et al. (2024) combined quantitative ratings of observation events with qualitative synthesis, consistent with an embedded case study design. Xu (2006) used domain, taxonomy, linguistic, and content analyses to generate themes, but the

reliance on the researcher's interpretations, given her embedded role, raised concerns about bias.

Other studies were less explicit about analytic rigour. Klette and Killen (2018) analysed video data through attachment theory, focusing on children's protest, despair, and detachment and carers' availability, but offered little detail on systematic coding or triangulation. Datler et al. (2010) relied on psychoanalytic interpretation of observation notes but omitted detail on coding or handling contradictory data.

The least transparent accounts were Nakaoka (2014) and White et al. (2023), both of which provided rich narrative or theoretical interpretations but did not outline analytic stages, coding decisions, or procedures for ensuring validity, limiting confidence in the rigour of their findings.

2.5.2.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is addressed to varying extents across the reviewed studies. Some studies, such as Klette and Killen (2018), Golkhou (2024), Nakaoka (2014), and Datler et al. (2010, 2012), demonstrate careful reflexive practice by acknowledging the potential influence of the researcher's presence, dual roles, or prior familiarity with the setting. They actively reflect on positionality, counter-transference, or interpretive bias, and in some cases, employ strategies such as seminars or recordings of their own reactions to critically examine their influence on observations. In contrast, other studies (Gath et al., 2024; Xu, 2006; Dolby et al., 2023; Mellenius et al., 2023; White et al., 2023) largely limit reflexivity to noting methodological constraints, logistical issues, or limits to generalisability, offering minimal discussion of how researcher involvement or assumptions might have shaped

data collection, participant behaviour, or interpretation. This variation highlights that while some studies show strong awareness of the researcher's influence, many offer only partial or minimal reflexive critique, leaving potential biases underexplored.

2.5.2.6 Ethics

Ethical considerations are addressed with varying thoroughness across the reviewed studies. Several studies, including Dolby et al. (2023), Gath et al. (2024), Mellenius et al. (2023), and Golkhou (2024), provide detailed reporting of ethical procedures, including institutional approval, informed consent, participant anonymity, data security, and adherence to professional guidelines. Klette and Killen (2018) and White et al. (2023) also report ethics approval and consent, though in less detail. In contrast, some studies, such as Datler et al. (2010, 2012) and Nakaoka (2014), offer only partial information, for example mentioning parental consent or pseudonymisation, but omit discussion of ethics-committee approval or how potential participant distress was managed. Xu (2006) similarly gives minimal ethical reflection, focusing instead on methodological issues. Overall, while several studies demonstrate robust ethical oversight, others provide limited transparency regarding ethical safeguards.

2.5.3 Extraction of themes, subthemes and patterns

A narrative review approach was adopted to explore and integrate findings across the selected literature (Pettigrew et al., 2009; Sukhera, 2023). Each of the ten papers was read in full, and key themes were initially identified from the first paper which was identified through the initial literature search. Subsequent papers were reviewed to examine the recurrence of these themes and to identify any additional or divergent ones.

This iterative, comparative process facilitated the construction of a thematic map, resulting in two overarching themes with multiple subthemes and patterns. Throughout the literature, I felt overarching theme of attunement was communicated, driven by adult behaviour, and affecting child experience. The following subthemes were identified as falling within the themes of attunement and misstunement.

2.5.4 Attunement principles

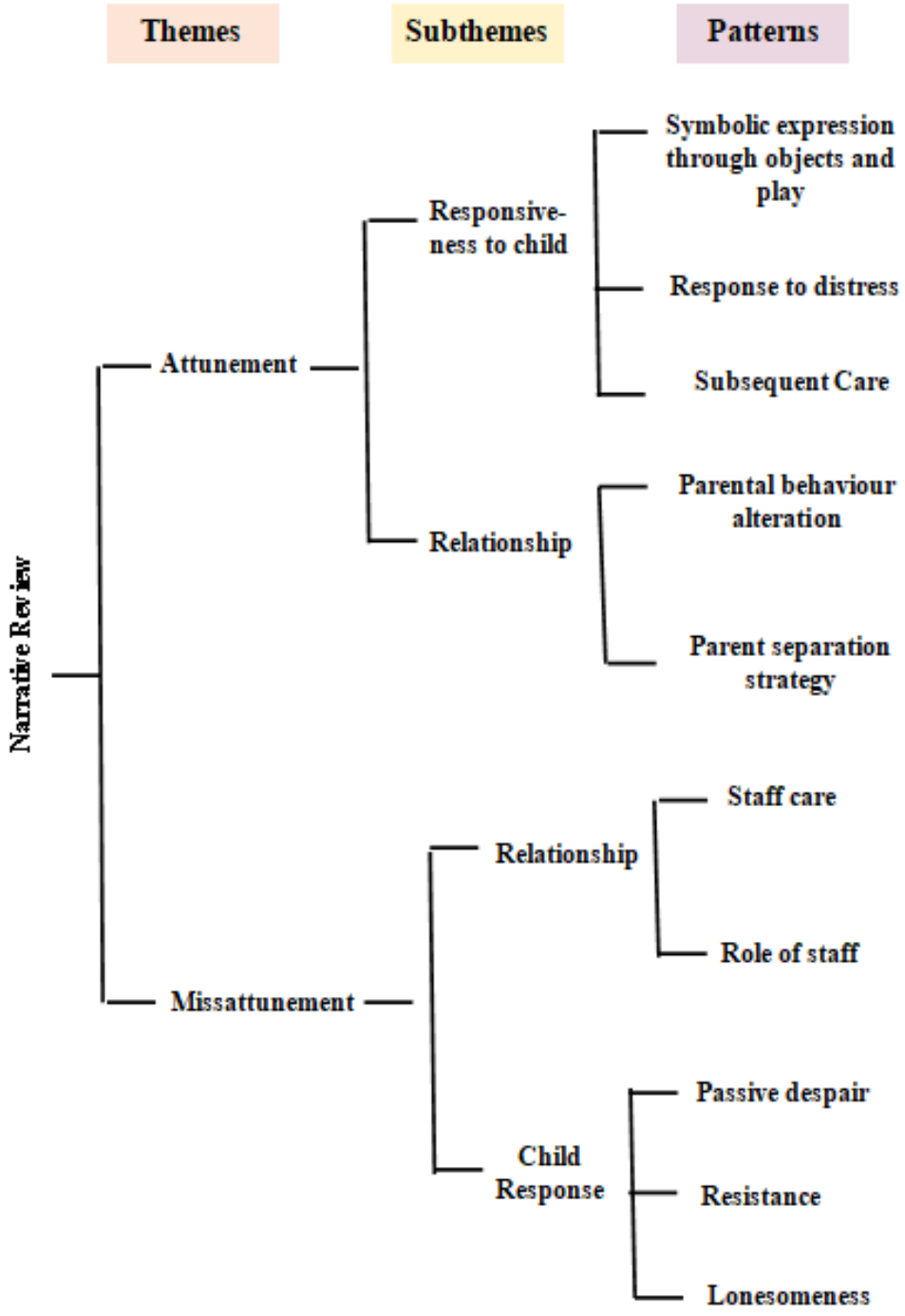
To ensure clarity around vocabulary, attunement and misattunement are defined within the current context. Attunement refers to a caregiver's emotional and behavioural responsiveness to an infant's cues, creating a sense of connection and shared understanding. As Stern (2018) describes, attunement enables the infant to experience their emotions as recognised and mirrored, supporting regulation, trust and secure attachment. Misattunement occurs when responses are inconsistent, delayed or incongruent with the child's emotional state, leading to distress or dysregulation. While brief, repairable misattunements are a normal part of relational development, repeated or prolonged misattunement can undermine security and the quality of the attachment relationship. In the context of separation, the child's experience is inherently relational: their response is shaped by the history of attunement and misattunement with primary caregivers, highlighting the importance of sensitive, responsive care during transitions. Within the literature, many studies describe adults as attuned or misattuned to the child, either meeting their needs for connection or missing them, contributing to the overarching themes explored below.

The following section uses a narrative review to explore the literature, focusing on the overarching themes of attunement and misattunement and the related subthemes and

patterns. These connections form a narrative of what the current evidence suggests about separation.

The terms themes, subthemes and patterns are used descriptively within the narrative review, referring to inductively developed conceptual groupings rather than a formal thematic analysis. This approach reflects the study's relativist, subjectivist epistemological stance and its psychosocial, psychodynamic foundations, in which meaning is understood as contingent, relational and co constructed through interpretive engagement with the literature.

Figure 2: Thematic Map



2.5.5 Attunement

Within the literature, the experience of children's separation was often framed through the child receiving attuned or misattuned care. This attunement can be viewed through adult's responsiveness to the child, and the relationships the child has with adults around them which facilitate this.

2.5.5.1 Responsiveness to child

2.5.5.1.1 Symbolic expression through objects and play

Across the literature, children were observed to use both symbolic objects and symbolic play as ways of expressing and processing separation, particularly when verbal language was limited due to developmental stage. Objects and play appeared to function as communicative bridges between home and school, enabling children to convey emotion, connection, and meaning non-verbally. Crucially, adult attunement to these symbolic forms of expression shaped how effectively children's experiences were recognised and responded to.

White et al. (2023), drawing on Merleau-Ponty, emphasise that objects are a "means to expression but not characteristically the outcome of expression" (p.115). Meaning resides not in the object itself, but in the embodied act, relationship, and lived experience it represents. This is illustrated in White et al. (2023), where a young child experiencing separation was observed to place "a bird to her mouth as she looks around the room and starts to softly cry…" (p.382). White interpreted the budgie as holding significance in the

transition, noting that it “not only provided a means of settling Ally into the new context, but it also became a vehicle for emotional and social reversibility between Ally and her teacher” (p.383). Similarly, a wooden object shared between Madeline and her father held symbolic meaning connected to their pre-separation play (White et al., 2023). Nakaoka (2014) also describes a child bringing a broken book “with a worried face” when “low-spirited” after separation (p.252), suggesting symbolic communication of emotional distress.

Symbolic play likewise offered insight into how children processed separation experiences. Nakaoka (2014) observed children repeatedly approaching and retreating from the observer, which was interpreted as playing with the coming and going of attachment figures. Further examples across the literature include children imitating adults, engaging in peek-a-boo, presenting toy mother-and-baby figures (Nakaoka, 2014; Xu, 2006), and producing scribbles that mirrored marks made at home (Xu, 2006). Datler et al. (2010) similarly interpreted a child’s repetitive play of filling holes as symbolically linked to filling the emotional emptiness created by separation.

Taken together, symbolic objects and symbolic play appear to provide children with a means to express and work through emotional difficulty, maintain connections with home, and communicate meaning in the absence of verbal language. These expressions create opportunities for adults to attune to children’s internal experiences and respond relationally.

However, across the literature, interpretations of symbolic behaviours were made almost entirely by adult observers, with little opportunity for direct confirmation or triangulation

with children's own perspectives. This raises concerns about adult-centric interpretations overshadowing children's own meaning-making, particularly given the power imbalance inherent in adult–child research relationships. Interpretations therefore need to be held tentatively, especially for younger children without developed language skills.

Additionally, while some studies describe moments where children actively involve the researcher or adult in symbolic interactions, such as sharing a scribble or offering a toy (Xu, 2006), these relational dynamics are rarely examined reflexively. Limited attention is given to how the adult's presence, responsiveness, or potential misattunement may have shaped the symbolic expression itself. Given that meaning is likely co-constructed within these interactions, greater reflexive consideration is needed regarding whose understanding is being privileged and how attunement influences both expression and interpretation.

2.5.5.1.2 Response to distress

Many of the children within the literature seemed to find separating from their parents a distressing experience and showed this openly. Gath et al (2024) found a negative correlation between the length of time in a centre on the child's first day and their affect throughout. Children were described to cry "relentlessly" (Golkhou, 2024; p17) and "Vigorously" (White et al, 2023; p384), not wanting to separate from their caregivers. This distress was often instantaneous, accompanied by behavioural attempts at reconnecting, such as one child "screaming out, putting her hand on the doorknob" (Nakaoka, 2014; p254) and another stretching "his hand towards the door" (Golkhou, 2024; p18) , although some children didn't show overt distress at first, their day continued to "…become more

negative and increasingly characterized by crying." (Gath et al, 2024; p95). Observers noted feeling the children's distress through noticing "…a feeling of deep sadness" (Datler et al, 2010; p78) within themselves, with some separation being difficult to observe (Nakaoka, 2014). This reflexivity around their internal experience and what this may be surfacing from the child's unconscious was seemingly considered when faced with difficult emotions but not when exploring positive experiences within the setting. This is hence why the pattern of distress is within the attunement theme. A natural response to separation, the open distress of the children within the literature seemed to allow more attunement to their needs rather than children who were more passively distressed, possibly due to the emotional impact on the staff members triggering an empathy response.

There were instances of positive affect, with occurrences increasing across the first year (Gath et al, 2024), with some children participating in a lively manner within their setting (Datler et al, 2010) and smiling and laughing (Gath et al, 2024). However, with findings such as Gath et al (2024) observing a child to have "...either neutral expressions or…joy and happiness" (p97) it is unclear if a reduction in distress was a true representation of increased positive affect or a reconciliation with their situation, performatively demonstrating more palliative emotions.

Although most studies concur that separation often results in observable distress, the degree and nature of this varies. For instance, while Gath et al. (2024) noted a steady increase in positive affect across time with children of 5-13 months, Xu (2006) reported that some toddlers (18-30 months) adjusted rapidly to separation within just a few sessions. This may reflect differences in transition practices or perhaps age-related

differences. It should be noted that there is no mention of rationale for inclusion of participants within Xu's study (2006), making methodological transparency limited, however limited information is provided by Gath et al (2024) who included children under 1 years old starting ECEC.

2.5.5.1.3 Subsequent care

Staff were often described as providing comfort to children when they showed distress, showing responsiveness and attunement. In Golkhou's research, staff described how they provided comfort to the distressed children, "…For calming down the children, we can sing for them like 'twinkle, twinkle, little star…', also we can take them to the playroom, sit beside them, read books or play on the floor." (Golkhou, 2024, p17). Golkhou (2024) recognised 5 themes connected to distraction (starting a friendly conversation with the child/changing place/singing/reading books or playing) within their observation and interview-based study in a Finnish kindergarten. This means of comforting could be due to the children being between 0 to 3, and so perceptively less able to sooth through understanding. Studies with comparatively older children (around 2/3) used more physical soothing techniques such as embracing (Datler et al, 2010) rubbing their stomach (White et al, 2023), using soothing tones (Gath et al, 2024) and "using [their] body and motion as a point of relational connection and engagement that would feel calm and perhaps safe" (White et al, 2023; p385). Staff would also make conversation, give complements (Golkhou, 2024), and place young children in positions to enable communication (Gath et al, 2024).

Alternatively, White et al (2023) proposed that sometimes staff's responsiveness was aimed at reducing crying, suggesting "…unease at the infant's emotional spiral." (p388)

connecting to Nakaoka's feeling that "…a space for sadness and longing had been restricted" in their setting (2014; p253). It is unclear here, the intent behind staff's support, and if this silences the children's distress, or genuinely soothes. If the former, the responsiveness would constitute true attunement, as authentic attunement involves soothing by recognising and allowing emotional expression within a shared affective space, rather than suppressing it to ease adult discomfort.

2.5.5.2 Parental relationship with child

2.5.5.2.1 Parental behaviour alteration

Although a lone theme within Mellenius's study (2023), I felt as though it was an important theme to understand the child's experience through the direct influence of parental behaviour. Here, parents attempted to be attuned to their child's needs by altering their own behaviour, often in hopes of lowering their child's distress. The true attunement of this act is discussed below. This is the only mention of a conscious attempt to 'read' a child's emotion when separating and make conscious steps to influence it, brining relevant and unique data.

Mellenius et al (2023) focused on parental mentalisation (the ability to see their child as a psychologically independent being) and reflective functioning during the separation of caregiver and toddler. The aim was to understand how they prepare for the upcoming separation process in light of both of their emotional needs. Some parents spoke of the distress they felt when leaving their child, crying for half an hour. One parent likened it to severing the umbilical cord and fears of their child attaching to others. Parents also spoke of guilt, feeling as though "…separation should be neutral and calm." (p299) and "…[their

child] could feel rejected at that moment as if she's abandoned…" (p302), predicting the fear of the child in the unknown. The self-selection bias of the parents could be a factor in the themes of distress, attracting those who struggle with the separation most, giving a skewed representation.

Some parents chose to hide their emotion from their child, saying "…I'm very cheerful and smile…I create confidence in him…" (Mellenius et al, 2023; p299) and "…It's easier for me to leave when it looks like I'm feeling happy,…" (Mellenius et al, 2023; p303). Perhaps here, parents hoped that their positivity would act as a signal to the child that there is nothing to be afraid or upset about, hiding their true emotion in an attempt to control the child's. Here, although parents viewed their expressed emotion as the predominant communication, it could be questioned whether any countertransference perceived by the child from the parent would instead allow them to sense the parent's true emotion of fear or sadness. The consideration of the impact of countertransference within the child's relationships is a gap in the majority of the research which could perhaps provide further insight into the undercurrents of emotions affecting child separation experience.

Children could be mirroring the same behaviour of their PC when seemingly adjusting; showing happiness or confidence outwardly but inwardly experiencing difficulty. With such young children, this is difficult to understand concretely. This is a complex interplay between the parent's expression and the child's, both wanting to present in a palatable way to each other. This could be seen as a form of attunement, attempting to pre-empt and gauge the emotional state of one another. It could also be a missattunement, whereby

the emotions experienced are somehow rejected or seen as something to be altered, missing the connection possible if both parties were honest about their loss.

Mellenius et al. (2023) is unique in foregrounding parental psychological processes in light of perceived emotional experience of the child, yet the homogeneity of the sample being mainly mothers or normative family structures (e.g., no same-sex parents, foster carers), could influence the emotional dynamics of separation in distinct ways.

2.5.5.2.2 Parent separation strategy

Parents tried to remain in close proximity to their children whilst allowing them to explore, considering positioning to invite others to interact and ease the pain of separation (Mellenius et al, 2023; White et al, 2023). Having parents approach and greet available staff in Dolby et al's study (2023) supported the forming of a secure base for children to feel safe and held in mind. Here, communication with staff such as "Are you ready mummy for me to take charge of Kira and keep her safe until you come back this afternoon?" "Yes…Angela is here and is going to keep you safe" (Dolby et al, 2023; p584), was thought to support the child's understanding of separation and catered to the individual needs of the child. There is a possibility that witnessing attuned interaction could create a sense of safety for a child and perhaps an increased willingness to interact and explore themselves. However, the staff and time cost of this process was significant and would be challenging to implement in most under resourced settings. Parents who spoke to staff were seen to influence the ease of which their child engaged in activities (Xu, 2006) and gain valuable insight into the setting experiences of their child (White et al, 2023). Perhaps witnessing their parent connecting relationally to staff builds a sense of trust in the children that those around them are capable of fostering the bonds they need to feel safe (Xu,

2006; Dolby et al, 2023). It could also model the social skills needed for them to approach and initiate interaction with others. This was further seen in the experiences of very young children, who could see their parent interacting with staff and toys, involving the children before leaving (White et al, 2023). This attunement with the space and adults helped the children to become active participants and feel comfortable enough to play.

2.5.6 Misattunement

Within the literature, the experience of children's separation was often framed through the child receiving attuned or misattuned care. This misattunement can be viewed through the relationships adults have with the children and the child's responses to them, often missing the emotional experience or not responding to it. The impact of this unresponsiveness is discussed in relation to how children subsequently emotionally cope away from their PC.

2.5.6.1 Staff relationship with child

2.5.6.1.1 Staff care

At times, the research found staff to find competing demands challenging within the setting, which was seen to affect the attunement of care and subsequent responsiveness of staff. Nakaoka (2014) reflected that "…it would have been a frustrating and anxious time." (p252) for the child receiving less care, symbolised in an event whereby a child "…spent one and a half hours crying at the manager's feet, while the latter continued with paperwork in the office." (Nakaoka, 2014; p256). Some of the extracts such as this one are powerful to read, with other children "…encountering little cordiality and warmth" (Datler et al, 2010; p74) throughout their day and becoming lost. With under resourced

settings and funding and staffing challenges, it is important to hear the experience of these children and consider the impact of unresponsive care.

To note here, Nakaoka's study (2014) reports the children included stood out to them due to their separation experiences, but inclusion criteria beyond this, and reasons for other's non-participation, is not mentioned. Furthermore, there is no explicit mention of informed consent or formal ethical approval. Although in my view, understanding these individualistic experiences is still of worth, perhaps the extent of difficulty experienced by these children was noteworthy and therefore focussed on, but unusual. These experiences still add to the overall story of the children within childcare settings and how attuned or misattuned care can influence them.

2.5.6.1.2 Role of staff

Seemingly, part of the emotionally unresponsive and misattuned care within some studies could be linked to staff's beliefs around setting rules (Xu, 2006). Within one case study, Valentine, a child greatly struggling with separation, is exploring his environment, he is met with consistent reminders to tidy away, not break anything and behavioural corrections (Datler et al, 2010). Within this study, it is similarly unclear how the child was chosen for the case study, and although emotional to read, may not reflect the common experience of most children. Staff were reported to instil their belief systems around when to be firm and flexible (Golkhou et al, 2024; p17) and when parents should leave. Nakaoka (2014) found one parent to leave by "…slipping out of the door…" as to not prolong the separation experience under advice from the manager (p254), with Xu (2006) similarly finding teachers to feel quick greetings and goodbyes to be better for adjustment. Xu found this to be a different outlook to the parents in the study (sometimes leaving 5-20

minutes for their child to settle), which may mean that parents are likely to listen to professionals, even against their best judgement to be more attuned to their child's needs. This could further reflect a role of staff to manage the emotional load of multiple separations through reducing the children's space and time to express; creating order through rule enforcement and lessening perceived distress. This could signal staff overwhelm over the weight of being attuned to many distressed children and parents, attempting to protect themselves from empathy fatigue.

2.5.6.2 Child Response

Children were seen to respond to misattuned care in a variety of ways detailed below.

2.5.6.2.1 Passive Despair

Some children found the separation experience challenging but showed their distress in a passive manner. These were often emotional signals that were not recognised by the adults within the setting and seemed to be an outcome of their open and expressive distress being missed, leading to a more passive and undirected despair. Datler et al (2010) described a child's facial expression as serious and their arms to "droop loosely by the sides of [their] body" (p73), whilst later "…gazes about himself aimlessly, not taking in much of his environment" (p74). These children seem to be passively showing their despair at being left at nursery, losing strength, focus and presence with the world around them. Datler describes this child as "…lacking strength and being lost" (Datler et al, 2010; p75). Nakaoka (2014) recognised this passive despair in the weak and delicate voice a child was using, showing a dull and flat expression and at times assuming the foetal position. Klette and Killen (2018) found the children to be predominantly passive and silent, with faces expressionless.

Evident in this subtheme, is how easily children's subtle expressions of distress were missed by adults. Many of the studies appeared to focus more on overt behaviours such as crying or resistance, meaning that quiet, withdrawn responses may have been interpreted as signs of coping. This raises concerns about how children's internalised emotions are recognised and responded to in early years settings. The behaviours described (drooping limbs, distant gazes, and low energy) could easily be mistaken for compliance or adjustment, particularly in busy environments where adult attention is stretched. This highlights a gap in both research and practice, where the absence of visible distress may be wrongly assumed to indicate emotional readiness. Although some observers reflected on their own emotional reactions to what they witnessed (Datler et al, 2010; Nakaoka, 2014), it is unclear how these insights informed their interpretations or translated into responsive care, lacking reflexivity. Greater sensitivity is needed in recognising passive despair, so that these quiet forms of communication are not overlooked or misunderstood, leading to missattunement.

2.5.6.2.2 Resistance

At times, children were seen to resist their separation, showing signs of anger or defiance. Children were also seen to resist staff care, perhaps showing their desire for the parental connection. Some children were, however, seen to reject this support by stepping back and turning away (Nakaoka, 2014; Golkhou, 2024). Nakaoka hypothesised that "The pain of being rejected, which was originally felt by Alison in relation to her parents, was now being projected onto teachers…" (Nakaoka, 2014; p255). It could be that children are playing out their feelings of parental rejection through the staff relationship, transferring their feelings of hurt onto another, and regaining a sense of control.

Klette and Killen (2018) observed a child to refuse to be put down, keeping her arms stiff at her sides, with Datler et al (2010) and Dolby et al (2023), similarly finding a child to become stiff, resisting the separation process behaviourally. Resistance behaviours such as physical stiffness (Klette & Killen, 2018) and avoidance (Golkhou, 2024) suggest that for some children, separation evokes not only sadness but also anger and loss of autonomy.

Other children showed resistance through attempting to escape from their setting (Datler et al, 2010), moving out of the way when being fed (Gath et al, 2024), and having altercations with other children (Datler et al, 2010; Nakaoka, 2014). These behaviours could be seen as demonstrations of defiance against a separation process the children do not wish for and potential anger at the experience. Another form of resistance against separation was seen in proximity seeking. Often, parents were present for settling in days, or at the start of the day. Here, children were seen to remain close and resist separation. Researchers noticed children to cling to their caregiver (Klette and Killen, 2018; Datler et al, 2010)), nestle into them (Gath et al, 2024) and return to their safe base from exploration (Datler et al, 2010). Although a normal response to parental separation, this behaviour was often seen with children who struggled to settle within their setting and received unresponsive staff care. This proximity seeking could be due to parents separating too soon, following staff rules (and their perceived role expectations) instead of child attunement.

2.5.6.2.3 Lonesomeness

Connected to the experiences of passive despair and resistance is the common theme of being alone for many children. Nakaoka (2014) observed a child to remove themselves

when in passive despair, "…look dispirited and inanimate…" whilst "…keeping away from others." (p255). Other children were away from others due to being left alone by adults, noting "…feelings of powerlessness and loneliness" arising (Datler et al, 2010; p73). Children who were emotionally struggling with separation within their setting were often seen to play alone (Datler, 2010; p76). This seemed to be a pattern arising if passive despair was not noticed or responded to, leading the child to isolate themselves or be isolated; experiencing their feelings alone. Peer interaction was a reported aid to this, finding children's mood to lift when a peer is nearby (Gath et al, 2024; Xu, 2006). Children were seen to experience joyful moments of play (Gath et al, 2024, Datler et al, 2012) and could learn about separation through witnessing other's experience (Dolby et al, 2023). Peer interaction seems to be a protective factor to being alone, however the inconsistency of this was perhaps difficult for some children, as bids for connection were met with disappointment when the child did not respond (Datler et al, 2012). Furthermore, more peers within a setting also bring more competition for adult attention, sometimes meaning connection, and bids to communicate about separation were missed due to competing attentional demands (Nakaoka, 2014). Dolby et al's study (2023) documents a specific programme (Baby Playspace Learning) which facilitates space and attunement for children to be passed from PC to staff care. Although producing seemingly positive results, this experimental environment perhaps doesn't mirror most naturalistic settings and so provides more positive outcomes than most.

2.6 Summary

The literature offers valuable insight into the emotional experience of the separating child and how this is shaped by the level of attunement, or missattunement, provided by

parents and staff. Separation emerges as a complex emotional process, with distress expressed in both overt and subtle ways. Children may turn to objects or play as a means of processing the experience. The weight of separation is carried by both child and parent, with some parents altering their emotional expression to attempt to ease the experience. The relationship between staff and parent further influences the child's response, as some adults offer comfort while others provide rules and boundaries. Staff occupy a multifaceted role in the child's world, at times a source of soothing, at other times perceived as rejecting, reflecting their own varying levels of responsiveness. Observational and interview data together create a rich, if complex, picture of the child's world as seen through the eyes of the adults around them. To return to the question posed earlier: is the research focussing on the child's lived emotional experience at the analytic centre, or is the child primarily a dependent variable responding to adult behaviour? Overall, the current literature seems mixed. I view the current landscape to focus primarily on the phenomenon of transition into a childcare setting. This often involves adult voice to explore what the separation was like for the child, often using observational analysis as part of the picture. Due to adults often providing the lens for which these experiences are analysed, the child's experience understandably becomes dependent on their perspective, blurring the line between where one experience begins and another ends. Although both parties' experience is an important factor given the relational nature of separation, I believe this focus reduces the experience of the child at the analytic centre and instead analyses outside variables as an attempt to presume child viewpoint. This highlights the gap in research which would involve children directly in analysing their experience, giving space for expression through their lens and voice.

2.7 Critique of literature and rationale for research

Despite valuable insights from existing studies, a significant gap remains in understanding children's separation experiences through their own voices. Further research is needed to explore how children make sense of these moments when given adequate time and space to process and express them. While observation offers an important lens into children's experiences, the reviewed literature suggests that adults in early years settings often overlook subtle indicators of distress, and parents typically gain only fragmentary insight during drop off. It is therefore crucial to foreground the perspectives of young children, a group rarely afforded the opportunity to articulate their experiences directly.

The diversity of methodological approaches in the literature, ranging from structured observation to psychoanalytically informed narrative inquiry, has produced a rich but complex evidence base. Synthesising these findings requires attention to epistemological alignment. Phenomenologically informed studies (e.g., White et al., 2023) privilege subjective interpretation, whereas behaviourally oriented studies (e.g., Xu, 2006) emphasise observable indicators, raising questions about whose meanings are prioritised and how effectively each approach captures the child's lived experience. My study seeks to privilege subjective experience within two case studies, enabling a richer exploration of children's voices and ensuring their perspectives are heard in an attuned manner, consistent with processes identified in successful separations.

A further gap concerns later stages of separation, such as full time schooling, where children are developmentally able to communicate their experiences more clearly. Although many children now attend childcare or nursery before school due to parental

working patterns, each new separation environment brings not only a fresh parting but a potential reawakening of earlier experiences. Later separations may therefore be as significant as first ones. Reception provides a context in which separation remains meaningful while children's language skills allow greater accessibility of voice.

Another limitation in existing work is the lack of critical reflection on methods used to interpret children's symbolic expressions. Observational insights are often recorded in field notes or reflective journals without video data, peer debriefing or other strategies for triangulation, reducing the trustworthiness of interpretations. This is particularly relevant in psychoanalytic or phenomenological studies where meaning making is inherently subjective. A key risk is that the adult's emotional response becomes the dominant interpretive lens rather than the child's behaviour within its relational and contextual frame. In my study, I intend to address this by triangulating data sources when exploring children's views to support adult interpretation. I will also create a child friendly space that enables symbolic, verbal and relational forms of expression, supporting multimodal communication and striving for attuned engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview of research chapter

This chapter outlines the research methodology, starting with the study's aims and central research question. It then discusses the chosen design and methodological approach, including the underlying epistemological and ontological perspectives. The chapter goes on to detail the procedures for participant recruitment, methods of data collection and analysis, and concludes with a reflection on reflexivity and the trustworthiness of the study, alongside consideration of its ethical dimensions and implications.

The data analysis will use Bowlby's terms to describe observed relational behaviour (e.g., the child's protest in separation), the Mahler terms to describe the developmental striving for autonomy (e.g., the movement toward individuation), and the Klein/Bion terms to interpret the internal psychic meaning of that behaviour (e.g., the defensive function of splitting or the movement toward increased integration). This approach aims to provide a comprehensive psychoanalytic investigation of separation experiences and the developing sense of self.

3.2 Research question

How do children experience daily separation when starting school?

The main aim of the research was to understand the separation experience of a child from their PC into an education setting, directly from the child's perspective using

appropriate tools to elicit their voice. Whilst previous research has gained insight into this event, it has relied on adult observation and interpretation and has not involved the child's direct voice within the process. The study aims to provide children with a space to explore their personal experience of separation from their PC when starting school, ensuring the worth of their communication is valued and listened to. It is hoped the research will provide direct insight into children's world and the usefulness of observation, drawings and play to explore child views. The data is analysed through a psychosocial lens, with findings used to understand more about the experience of children when separating from their caregivers and how this can be considered within practice to provide best possible support and care.

3.3 Methodological orientation

3.3.1 Ontology

Consideration of my ontological stance is central to determining how this research was approached, from its overall design to the way data is interpreted (Blaikie & Priest, 2019). Ontology refers to the philosophical study of the nature of reality, and within research, an ontological position reflects the researcher's beliefs about what exists in the human world and what can be known about it (Mertens, 2019; Moon & Blackman, 2014). This study is concerned with children's lived experiences, particularly their experiences of separation, and recognises that these experiences cannot be reduced to a single, universally shared reality. A positivist perspective would wish to gain one objective reality of what separation is like for children, however this study adopts a relativist ontological stance. Relativism asserts that there are multiple, socially and individually constructed realities, each shaped

by a person's perceptions, relationships, and social context (Willig, 2013; Rassokha, 2022).

From this perspective, the phenomenon of separation cannot be understood as an objective, fixed event that exists independently of human experience. Rather, it is inherently contingent upon the perception of relationships; separation gains meaning only within the relational and emotional contexts in which it is experienced. A relativist view aligns with the psychodynamic thinking employed in this study as they both acknowledge that the researcher and participant cannot be entirely separate from one another, as the research encounter itself becomes a co-constructed space in which meaning is shaped by the dynamic interplay between both parties. Psychodynamic observation, as employed in this study, explicitly embraces this intersubjective reality, attending not only to the participant's verbal and non-verbal communication but also to the emotional and relational processes that arise between the participant and myself as the researcher.

While the existence of separation is recognised, psychodynamic theory views its meaning as rooted in each child's unconscious processes, early attachments, and internal object relations (Klein, 1946; Scharff et al, 2013; Fonagy et al., 2018). Separation is not merely an external event, but a complex internal experience shaped by emotional conflicts and relational histories, often beyond conscious awareness, and one whose meaning will differ for every child depending on their unique context and relational world. This study therefore values the diverse, emotionally meaningful realities children construct around separation, acknowledging that meaning is co-created within the research relationship. Rather than seeking a single objective truth, the research aims to explore these subjective worlds shaped by unique histories and relational contexts.

3.3.2 Epistemology

Whilst ontology is concerned with beliefs regarding the nature of reality, epistemology relates to how knowledge about that reality can be acquired and understood (Carter & Little, 2007). In research, an epistemological stance shapes how the researcher approaches the process of knowing and the methodological choices they make (Mertens, 2019; Moon & Blackman, 2014). This study adopted a subjectivist epistemology, which holds that what we understand as “truth” is entirely dependent on individual experience. Subjectivism positions meaning as arising from the personal and internal world of the individual, with reality interpreted through symbolic and linguistic systems in ways that are coherent to the person making sense of an event (Crotty, 1998; Pratt, 1998). As Pratt (1998, p. 24) observes, “we see the world as we are; that which we have inside, we see outside,” emphasising the impossibility of separating the observer from the observed, or the mind from the world (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

From this perspective, knowledge is not an objective commodity to be discovered, but is actively shaped by an individual’s inner world, history, relationships, and current emotional state. This makes the subjectivist approach particularly compatible with psychodynamic thinking, which similarly acknowledges that all understanding is mediated by unconscious processes, relational dynamics, and projection. In line with this, the present research seeks to understand children’s personal experiences through a psychodynamic lens, using projective methods to access symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions of meaning-making. Such methods are consistent with subjectivism, as they embrace the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant,

and value the unique, internally derived interpretations each child brings to the research encounter.

3.3.3 The ontology and epistemology of psychosocial research

This study's relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology align closely with psychosocial principles. A relativist stance assumes that reality is multiple and context-dependent, shaped by relationships and social environments rather than existing as a fixed truth (Willig, 2013). Similarly, subjectivism holds that knowledge is co-constructed through individual experience and cannot be separated from the researcher's perspective (Crotty, 1998; Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). Psychosocial research extends these ideas by recognising that meaning is formed not only through conscious thought but also through unconscious processes and relational dynamics. This approach views participants as defended subjects which recognises that people manage and defend against painful emotions, and that these defences shape what they share in research contexts (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). It further acknowledges that the research encounter itself influences what is shared and how it is understood. By adopting this position, this study foregrounds complexity, emotional depth, and the interplay between inner worlds and social contexts, ensuring that interpretations remain sensitive to both manifest content, such as what is explicitly observed or verbalised, and latent content, such as the underlying emotions, anxieties, and defensive processes that may not be directly expressed.

3.4 Research purpose

3.4.1 Exploratory

According to Stebbins (2025), exploratory research design is a systematic approach used when a phenomenon is not well understood, under-researched, or conceptually unclear. Rather than starting with a fixed hypothesis, exploratory studies are open-ended, flexible, and discovery-oriented. This research adopted an exploratory design to gain insight into children's personal experiences and meanings associated with separation. Drawing on a psychodynamic lens, the study sought to explore the subjective realities of participants, recognising that these are shaped by internal worlds, relational histories, and the research encounter itself. The use of projective methods was intended to offer an engaging and emotionally accessible way for children to express their perceptions and feelings around separation, allowing symbolic and unconscious dimensions to emerge alongside verbal accounts. Given the subjectivist epistemological stance, no specific hypotheses regarding potential themes were formulated in advance. Instead, the research was inductive, prioritising the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant and allowing patterns and themes to emerge from the unique perspectives of the children involved.

3.4.2 Qualitative Research

The research question focused on gaining rich, in-depth data about children's personal experiences and meanings associated with separation, which required the collection of qualitative data. A qualitative design was consistent with the researcher's relativist ontological and subjectivist epistemological stance, emphasising the value of participants' unique, constructed realities. Qualitative research is understood as an umbrella term encompassing a range of approaches that involve the systematic collection, organisation, description, and interpretation of verbal, visual, and symbolic data (Denzin & Lincoln,

2011). Unlike a positivist stance which uses quantitative methods, prioritising predetermined variables and statistical relationships (Bryman, 2016), qualitative approaches are particularly suited to exploring questions of experience, meaning, and perspective, seeking to understand participants' interpretations of events (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The current research adopted a qualitative approach to allow for the construction of themes relating to children's individual interpretations of separation, as expressed through both verbal accounts and projective methods. In line with Tracy's (2024) principles of qualitative research, the study aimed to foreground the voices of participants, interpret the emotional and relational aspects of their experiences, and provide insights that could inform more attuned support for children facing separation

3.4.3 Researcher values

According to Creswell (2013), a researcher's values, beliefs, and philosophical worldview significantly influence the design and conduct of social research. In this study, my own assumptions shaped decisions regarding the research focus, data collection methods, and analytical approach. Central to the motivation for this work was the intention to amplify the perspectives of young children, a group frequently underrepresented in existing research.

Within the Educational Psychology Doctorate training course, a module involving nursery observations was conducted. This involved observing a nursery child for 10 weeks, in which it was evident the setting and the children within it, were struggling with the emotional impact of separation, and the distress that it often accompanied, was instilling. Within that experience, the curiosity around what the true thoughts and feelings of the children were, was born. During these observations, although the developmental journey

of my focus child was of interest, I found my attention repeatedly drawn to other children within the setting who appeared distressed by separation. Each week, there were children who would position themselves beside me, hold my hand, and/or cry in my proximity following separation from their caregivers. These experiences were particularly striking because, within the Tavistock observation method, the observer attempts to remain a largely non-participatory presence. The observer's role is to witness rather than intervene, minimising their influence on events occurring within the setting (Bick, 1987). Consequently, although I did not actively comfort children, I represented a consistent and physically still presence within what was often a busy and emotionally demanding environment.

I was deeply moved by these encounters. Alongside feelings of sadness and concern for the children, I became increasingly curious about what their behaviour might be communicating. It appeared that some children openly expressed the emotional impact of separation through crying, proximity-seeking, and visible distress. However, I also noticed children who appeared quieter, more withdrawn, or seemingly settled. This led me to question whether overtly distressed children were the only children experiencing the emotional impact of separation, or whether some children were managing similar feelings in less visible ways. I became aware that adults within the setting often had significant competing demands on their attention and were supporting many children simultaneously. As a result, children's emotional experiences of separation did not always appear to be the focus of exploration or discussion.

These observations became formative in the development of the current research. Rather than relying solely on adult observations of children's behaviour, I became interested in

creating opportunities for children to communicate something of their own experience. The apparent significance of separation for many children, coupled with the absence of direct exploration of their perspectives, led me to consider how children might make sense of separation if they were provided with an attuned and developmentally appropriate space to express themselves. This curiosity ultimately developed into the central research question of the current study.

A further influence on the current study was my growing reflection on the observer role itself. Whilst I recognise the value of Tavistock observation in encouraging close attention to children's behaviour, relationships, and emotional communication, I became increasingly uncomfortable with the expectation that the observer should remain a largely neutral or "ghost-like" presence when confronted with visible distress. During observations, there were occasions where children sought proximity during moments of sadness or vulnerability, yet the observer role required restraint in responding. This created an ethical tension between preserving the integrity of the observation and responding to the emotional needs of children. Although I understand the methodological rationale for minimising researcher influence, I left the experience questioning whether complete observational neutrality is always compatible with relational and ethical responsibilities towards children. These reflections influenced the design of the present study. Whilst observation remained an important component of data collection, I also wanted children to experience me as a responsive and relational adult through drawing and play sessions, enabling their emotional experiences to be explored within a space where communication could be acknowledged rather than simply observed.

Recognising the influence of personal experiences on research topic selection, direct child involvement throughout the study was essential. Child distress and upset is often recounted, although mainly short lived, with parental worry and upset being common at the beginning of the process. Fitting with some literature which purports children to often become emotional in a safe space (Robertson and Robertson, 1989), I remember being separated from my parents at a later age when visiting friend's houses, sometimes crying upon my parent's arrival due to a subconscious release of emotion which I had inadvertently hidden until their return. I hope giving a safe space will allow for expression of whatever emotion the child feels at that time.

Contemporary legislation and policy continue to emphasise the critical importance of involving children and young people in decisions that affect them, reinforcing their rights to be heard and respected. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UNCRC] UN General Assembly, 1989) remains the foundational international framework, with ongoing efforts to implement its principles more fully in practice. Recent updates in UK policy, such as the Children and Families Act (2014) and the revised SEND Code of Practice (2015), explicitly advocate for meaningful participation of children and young people in shaping their education, health, and social care services. Despite these advances, research reveals persistent challenges in ensuring children's direct voices are consistently included, especially among younger children and those with communication difficulties (Coyne and Harder, 2011). The underrepresentation of children's perspectives risks perpetuating adult-centric views that may not fully capture children's lived experiences or needs (Clark, 2005). Prioritising children's own accounts, therefore, is vital for promoting their agency and improving the relevance and responsiveness of policies

and interventions (Lansdown, 2019). Creating accessible and developmentally appropriate spaces for children to express themselves is essential, aligning with ethical obligations in supporting children's empowerment as active social actors (Shier, 2001; Alderson & Morrow, 2020).

3.5 Research design

The following section details how the study was conducted, including participant recruitment, inclusion criteria and methods rationale for observation, drawing and play.

3.5.1 Sample

Participants were recruited using convenience sampling, a non-probability approach in which individuals are selected primarily due to ease of access, such as location, existing networks, or practical availability (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The current study involved two children, reflecting a case study methodology (Merriam, 1998), using the researcher's local authority (LA) school in which an existing relationship is already formed. In qualitative research, sample size is not typically determined by the need for statistical generalisation; instead, emphasis is placed on the depth and detail of the data collected and its alignment with the study's objectives (Barkhuizen, 2014). This focused approach allows for a richer exploration and in-depth analysis of the participants' experiences within the chosen context. Due to the desire for aforementioned depth, a case study design allows for this intensive 'deep-dive' into participant's lives. According to Adams et al. (2022), a case study explores a phenomenon within its surrounding context to develop a holistic description of that phenomenon. Due to the highly subjective nature of separation and its naturalistic occurrence, two case studies were chosen to capture the whole event

(or as much as can be obtained), accessing the nuances of which builds a child's complex experience. I chose two case studies as I believe there is no one truth to understand, but instead an insight into multiple children's realities. With the limited time, two case studies provided comparative scope whilst allowing time for depth and detail. Previous case studies using observation within the field of separation have been common (Datler et al, 2012; Datler et al, 2010; Nakaoka, 2014), allowing researchers to intensely study a child's experience, detailing the subtleties of what can only be noticed if examined intently. This method also allows for time to triangulate information from multiple sources, thereby enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena and the contextual factors that shape it.

Table 6: Exclusion and inclusion criteria for participation.

Inclusion criteria	**Exclusion criteria**	**Justification**
No experiences of significant or prolonged separation from their primary caregiver.	History of frequent and/or extended separations from their primary caregiver.	Due to the themes of separation within this study, this ensures a reduction of likelihood of harm.
Age expected English language levels/typical conversation skills.	Delayed receptive or expressive English language use.	Due to the discussion element of narrating a drawing and communicating within play, I will need to sustain a conversation around their thoughts and feelings.
Attending reception on a full-time timetable.	Children attending on a part time timetable or have reasons for which	The research requires the children to participate consistently over 4 weeks.

	attendance will be knowingly inconsistent.	

3.5.2 Recruitment process

After ethical approval was granted on the 1st April 2025, I reached out to an LA school for which I have an established relationship from the 24/25 academic year (On 2nd April 2025). Within this scoping email to the EY SENDCo (Special educational needs co-ordinator), I outlined the study, detailing the purpose, aim, expectations of the setting and debriefing process. I asked if they would be interested in hosting the research and offered a discussion regarding details. I also included the participant information sheet for further detail. On the 4th April, the SENDCo responded, asking for an in-person discussion and expressing interest. On the 23rd April, a meeting was held, in which we discussed the SENDCo's concerns around additional work for his staff and wanting to ensure this would be no extra demand on their time within the first term. After our discussion, the SENDCo expressed that their concerns were appeased and sought to approve the study via senior leadership before final confirmation. On 5th May 2025, the consent form was returned and confirmation of access was obtained.

Following this, the SENDCo informed me of a 'Stay and Play' session on 14th July for which the new reception class of students for the 25/26 academic year would be attending. This would be a chance for parents to visit the setting with their children and meet staff. I was invited to disseminate information (see appendix E and G) regarding my study and answer any questions parents may have. In doing so, I discussed my study with many parents, some of whom have children already attending the setting's nursery, with others

starting the placement new. I was able to discuss my study with both demographics, disseminating leaflets, offering information and answering questions. My email was on the bottom of the leaflet if they were interested (See appendix G). Within these scoping conversations, one parent signed the consent form straight away, with many expressing interest but wanting to consider their child's participation further. On 21st July, parents of another child sent consent (appendix F) for them to take part. Before confirming participation, I asked the parents for additional information such as date of birth and confirmed inclusion criteria stated in the participant information sheet (competent language level/separation experiences/nursery experience). At the start of term, I asked the parents once more if they would still like their child to take part and gave them an option to withdraw. See section 3.9.1 for more detail on gaining consent/assent.

3.5.3 School context

This study was conducted within a mainstream primary school in my Local Authority. I selected this school through convenience sampling due to an established professional relationship that had developed during my first year of doctoral placement. By the time I approached the school regarding participation, I had been working alongside staff for approximately one academic year in my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. During this time, I had undertaken consultation, assessment, and collaborative work with the school and had developed a positive working relationship with the SENDCo. I felt that this existing relationship supported trust and confidence in me as a researcher and practitioner, and increased the likelihood that the school would feel comfortable accommodating the practical requirements of the study within their busy Reception environment.

Although I had previously discussed attachment-related themes with staff through consultation work, I was not aware of any specific attachment-based policy, training programme, or separation-focused practice operating within the school. Therefore, I did not select the school because it represented a particularly attachment-aware setting. Instead, I felt it would provide a naturalistic environment in which to explore children's everyday experiences of separation as they entered Reception.

Prior to beginning data collection, I spent time within the Reception classes building rapport with the children and familiarising myself with the setting. During this period, I also gained a greater understanding of the messages and beliefs surrounding separation that existed within the school culture. Although staff perspectives were not a focus of the current research, I became aware of recurring narratives around how separation should be managed. Staff often spoke about their perception that separations in nursery settings were sometimes overly accommodated and that children entering Reception needed support to adapt to more rapid transitions. This frequently translated into a preference for parents to separate confidently, quickly, and consistently, even when children were visibly distressed.

As I spent time in the classrooms, I began reflecting on the assumptions underpinning these practices. I gained the impression that there was a belief that prolonged attention to a child's distress could amplify emotional responses, whereas distraction and swift engagement in classroom activities would support adjustment. Alongside this, I observed the considerable pressures placed on Reception staff to balance children's emotional needs with the increasing academic demands of the curriculum. Activities such as phonics and structured learning were often prioritised early in the school day, leaving

limited opportunity to remain with children who were struggling emotionally following separation.

These observations are not presented as findings and were not formally analysed within the study. However, I believe they provide important contextual information about the environment in which children's separation experiences occurred. As this research adopts a psychosocial perspective, children's experiences of separation cannot be understood solely as individual or family phenomena, but must also be considered within the relational, cultural, and organisational systems in which they take place. The school context therefore formed an important backdrop to the experiences explored within this study.

3.5.4 Participants

The two participants taking part in the study are referred to by pseudonyms throughout. There is one girl named Lucy and one boy named Oscar. Lucy's Mother was present at the stay and play and was the main separating caregiver every day. Oscar's Mothers were both present on the stay and play day, with Mother 2 being the main separating caregiver.

Table 7: Participant details

Pseudonym	**Age**	**Separating parent/s**	**Family context**	**Childcare History**
Lucy	4 years	Usually mother, although on one observed	Lucy lives with her mother, father and older sister. Her sister	Previously attended a childminder

		occasion a family friend/neighbour completed the drop-off.	was already attending the participating school, meaning Lucy was familiar with the school environment before starting Reception.	setting before then the nursery attached to the participating school.
Oscar	4 years, 1 month	Either Mother 1 or Mother 1 and 2 jointly.	Oscar lives at home with his mothers and little sister.	Started nursery at 1 year old (the week he turned one) and has been attending ever since, 4 days a week.

3.6 Data collection

Table 8: Data collection process

Phase	Timing	Activity
1. Rapport Building	Week 1 (informal process notes)	Acting as an additional adult (being available to the children and helping them to explore their environment to build trust and familiarity within parent session and first independent child session (2 hours).

2. Observation	In classroom (First 45 mins)	Following Tavistock observation model to observe separation.
3. Post-Obs Notes	Immediate (15 mins)	Brief process notes on pertinent feelings and events.
4. Drawing Task	In separate space (Up to 20 mins)	Directive prompt regarding separation; scaffolding language with non-directive and explorative questions.
5. Play Session	In separate space (Up to 40 mins)	Active participation following the child's lead.
6. Final Reflection	Post-Session	Detailed process notes after the child is back in class.
Stages 2-6 repeated over three consecutive weeks, once a week for each child.		

3.6.1 Rapport building

Within this study, I joined the week prior to data collection to build rapport and familiarity with the children. I acted as an additional adult, interacting with and supporting the children. The aim was to assimilate the children to my presence and help their comfortability with me so they had greater motivation to engage. I took field notes of this time which added to the experiences of the children included, however there were no formal sessions or observations with the children in an attempt to allow transition without any major changes to their environment.

3.6.2 Observation

I observed both children separately on consecutive days, beginning once the child arrived at their setting for the first 45 minutes. After this time, I had 15 minutes to write brief process notes to document pertinent feelings and observations. This process hopes to capture the pertinent information as Freud suggested (Freud, 1920/1961; Adamo and Rustin, 2018) but keeps the researcher present within the current interactions and relationship.

I used the Tavistock model of observation (Bick, 1987), initially developed as part of infant observation training at the Tavistock Clinic which places emphasis on close, detailed attention to the child's actions, interactions, and environment, while also tracking the observer's own emotional responses (Bick, 1987). This method is not intended to produce immediate interpretations but rather to allow themes, patterns, and unconscious processes to emerge through later reflection. The observer aims to remain a neutral presence, offering minimal intervention so as to preserve the natural flow of the child's behaviour within their setting. Anna Freud's perspective, as noted by Manna Friedmann (as cited in Adamo and Rustin, 2018), recommends to "Make a note of anything you would be inclined to tell a friend, either because it charmed you, or it was funny, and amused you, or it was irritating and angered you…" (p7). Although observers cannot avoid responding at times, they should not initiate interactions or games. The observation involved brief written notes taken immediately afterwards to capture as much verbatim action and dialogue as possible, alongside environmental context.

Following each observation, time was allocated for reflective processing before any analytic conclusions are drawn. This reflective phase is essential in the Tavistock tradition, as it allows the observer to distinguish between what belongs to the child and what may

be a projection of the observer's own feelings or assumptions (Rustin, 2006). A central tenet of psychoanalytic practice is that through exploring unconscious mental processes, particularly through the dynamics of transference and countertransference, the analyst plays an active role in perceiving and interpreting the child's inner world. The formulation of hypotheses occurs continuously as the case develops, with meaning emerging in the analyst's mind and is evaluated through ongoing interactions with the child. Discussions in supervision further supported this differentiation and helped to explore psychoanalytic theory.

3.6.3 Drawings

In the current study, a projective drawing task was used as a part of the psychodynamic data to gain insight into the child's emotional experience. The child was invited to join me in a separate room within their setting after the observation, with the choice of having a familiar staff member present or coming alone. The consideration of what I would do if a child said no is discussed within the ethics section. The room contained a variety of play materials and drawing supplies. After initial settling in, the child was given the instruction: "Draw a picture of when Mummy/Daddy brings you to school and then leaves." No further directions were provided. The children were given time to draw and talk about their illustration with multiple sheets of white A4 paper, colouring pens and pencils. For Oscar, this lasted from a few seconds to 5 minutes, increasing over time. For Lucy, the time she spent drawing was much longer, from 15 minutes to nearly taking up the whole session (around 35 minutes).

Incorporating children's drawings alongside their verbal narratives has been a valued method of exploring views and experiences (Coates and Coates, 2006; Brennan, 2024).

This approach allows the researcher to attend both to the child's drawing process and the content they produce. The researcher supports the child's engagement by offering language scaffolding and responding to questions or comments as they naturally arise. In line with Coates and Coates' approach (2006), the researcher's contributions are intended to be facilitative rather than directive: prompting, encouraging, and engaging in social talk to extend the child's visual and verbal exploration, while reinforcing confidence and validating their efforts. During the drawing activity, I made brief notes of the child's verbalizations, with more detailed process observations recorded afterwards to preserve the natural relational dynamic.

Projective drawings have been identified as valuable tools for understanding children's inner states, allowing the researcher to observe symbolic expression, themes, and emotional content (Malchiodi, 2012). I adopted an observational and reflective approach, narrating or commenting on the child's drawing rather than asking direct "why" questions, in line with Malchiodi's recommendations. For example, statements such as, "I see a person looking out of the window" or "I see a large yellow circle with blue wavy lines" allows the child to talk about their creation without pressure. I also used gentle speculation, such as "I wonder what that person is feeling?" to encourage reflection while acknowledging that the meaning of the drawing is ultimately known only to the child.

I also asked open-ended questions to explore the drawing's content, including prompts such as: "What is this a drawing of?" and "What would they say to each other?". Brief notes of the child's verbalizations will be taken during the activity, with more detailed process observations recorded afterward to capture relational interactions and thematic content.

Observations included attention to unusual, emphasised, or potentially emotionally significant features, including the presence of violent imagery, which can reflect both the child's exploration of power and the ways in which they differentiate themselves from others. Overall, this approach integrates observation, reflection, and indirect facilitation to allow the child's drawing to serve as a rich source of psychoanalytic and psychosocial data for the study. The three drawings each child did in each session were kept for analysis.

3.6.4 Play

Following the drawing task, the child was invited to engage in play, providing a further avenue for exploring their internal experience. Developmental theorists have suggested that play bridges the gap between concrete experience and abstract thought, allowing children to communicate feelings in symbolic and non-verbal ways (Piaget, 2013; Landreth, 2012). Winnicott (1974) conceptualised play as occurring within a "potential space," an intermediate area between the child's inner reality and the external world. This space allows children to safely experiment with feelings, ideas, and relationships, supporting emotional processing in a manageable and creative form. In Winnicott's view (1974), play is essential for the development of the self, as it provides a medium through which children can test and integrate their experiences, explore anxieties, and engage with reality at a tolerable level. He emphasised that reality can only be fully engaged with if it is mediated through play, enabling the child to transform and tolerate difficult experiences through symbolic enactment and creativity (Bonaminio, 2022).

In line with these principles, play in the current study provides a structured and predictable environment, informed by Prendiville and Parson et al.'s (2021) recommendations for the

setup of expressive tools and toys, including puppets, figures, vehicles, arts and crafts materials, and moulding clay. Sessions were child-led and lasted up to 40 minutes. 3 play sessions were conducted with each child to identify patterns in expression, recurring themes, and my countertransference responses. I adopted a reflective and non-directive stance, in line with Winnicott's emphasis on attuned, responsive observation, narrating or commenting on the child's play rather than asking direct questions (Coates, 2006; Malchiodi, 2012).

This approach situates play as both a medium for emotional expression and a source of psychoanalytic insight. By observing how the child engages with materials, transforms reality into symbolic representation, and enacts scenarios within the potential space. The aim was to gain a nuanced understanding of the child's inner world. Winnicott's perspective underlines that such creative engagement is not simply a form of entertainment, but a vital mechanism through which children process experiences, explore relationships, and develop resilience in the face of emotional challenges. Play thus becomes a bridge between internal experience and external reality, offering rich qualitative data for understanding children's responses to difficult or emotionally charged events.

To engage in the play, the child stayed in the same room they have completed the drawing. There was a consistent array of toys for them to play with which they could explore freely. I actively played with them within this session, following their lead and direction. After this, I returned them to their classroom before writing my process notes. Attention was given to transference and countertransference within the play space and body language such as shifts in posture, gaze direction, and rhythm of activity, which can hold meaning in

psychoanalytic interpretation. Three sessions were provided for each child as this is hoped to gather a more accurate picture of their views and experiences instead of taking a single snapshot. It also gives insight into any change over the first month. When speaking within my service to practitioners who use play with young children, they advised at least three sessions as the child may need regular time to process their thoughts and feelings within the space, and therefore for the practitioner to gain insight. Three sessions further allow gathering of rich data, even if the child doesn't engage in all aspects of the sessions every time.

3.6.5 Summary of triangulation

In the current study, triangulating young children's experiences of separation is to be achieved through a combination of non-interactive observation, projective drawing, and interactive therapeutic play, each offering a complementary perspective on the child's emotional experience. First, a Tavistock observation was conducted, in which the researcher observes the child without direct interaction, allowing unconscious processes and relational patterns to emerge naturally within the child's behaviour (Winnicott, 1974). Second, the child was invited to complete a directive drawing focused on separation, providing a symbolic medium to express feelings that may be difficult to articulate verbally (Malchiodi, 2012). Finally, a child-led, interactive therapeutic play session was conducted, incorporating a range of expressive tools and toys as recommended by Prendiville and Parson (2021), to allow additional themes, emotions, and relational dynamics to surface in a more spontaneous, creative context. By triangulating these three complementary methods, the study aims to identify recurring themes and patterns across modalities,

providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of the child's emotional experience of separation.

3.6.6 Ending

To commemorate the ending of our time together, I gave the children a thank you card and a small plant when visiting the week after our final meeting. I reiterated that we would not see each other again for sessions, but thanked them for spending time with me. I also thanked parents for allowing their involvement and said that I would contact them when I had analysed the data to offer a space to discuss the findings and how the separation experience was for them. Finally, I said goodbye to the classroom staff and thanked them for allowing me to join them.

As contracted within the first scoping conversations, I created a webinar from my study findings for the school, detailing the current literature, an overview of separation, and any recommendations I would give following my study. A few months after involvement, I gave a recorded digital copy to the school and offered meeting slots for the parents. Both parents took up this offer, whereby we discussed their child's (and their own) separation experiences and my interpretations, providing the drawings they had done throughout to illustrate this.

3.7 Data analysis

3.7.1 Psychosocial data analysis - PIPS

This study adopted a psychoanalytically informed psychosocial (PIPS) approach to data analysis, as conceptualised by Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 2012). Psychosocial research views experience as shaped by the dynamic interplay between inner

psychological worlds and external social contexts, operating at both conscious and unconscious levels (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Rather than treating participants as fully understandable beings, this perspective recognises individuals as defended subjects, whose narratives may conceal or distort aspects of experience due to unconscious processes (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). Meaning is therefore understood as co-constructed within the research relationship, influenced by relational dynamics, emotions, and context. This approach aligns closely with the aims and methods of the present study (Tavistock observation, projective drawings, and play) because these techniques allow symbolic, relational, and emotional dimensions of experience to surface (Bick, 1987; Winnicott, 1974). By attending to both manifest and latent content, and incorporating researcher reflexivity, the analysis seeks to capture the complexity of children's lived experiences of separation, moving beyond surface description to explore underlying processes and meanings such as transference and countertransference.

3.7.2 The method of psychosocial research

Holloway and Jefferson's (2000) approach is framed as guidance, not a strictly defined method, as how data analysis is undertaken may differ depending on the depth of psychoanalysis the researcher reaches.

Holloway and Jefferson (2012) have six principles by which they suggest when undertaking psychosocial research analysis. These are:

1. Use free-associative, participant-led data collection.

2. Field notes complement the primary data by providing insights into the emotional tone and contextual atmosphere that may not be fully conveyed through audio recordings alone.
3. Attend to both manifest (spoken) and latent (unspoken, unconscious) content. This incorporates the ‘Gestalt’ approach which looks at the ‘whole’ of the experience, not just spoken. This encompasses phrasing, ordering of how experience is shared, silences, countertransference/ researcher reflections and physical data such as body language.
4. Iterative immersion in the data.
5. Pen portraits are used as interpretive summaries that capture the researcher’s overall impressions of each participant, drawing on interview material and incorporating both explicit content and underlying emotional or unconscious elements.
6. Pen portraits are employed during the interpretation phase to maintain analytical grounding and prevent over-interpretation, ensuring that findings stay closely connected to participants and the original research context (Clarke et al., 2008).

3.7.3 Adapted method

For the current study, the following is adapted:

1. Data collection is primarily participant-led, with observation and play being entirely child-directed. For the drawing activity, a projective prompt was offered to initiate the task, but the children had the freedom to draw anything they choose afterwards.

2. Process notes from Tavistock observations and play sessions served as field notes, capturing relational dynamics and emotional tone that may not be evident in surface behaviours. Drawings were examined and annotated using a gestalt approach, considering the overall composition and atmosphere alongside symbolic elements that may reflect unconscious processes.

3. This remains consistent with the original guidance.

4. I revisited observation notes, drawings, and play narratives. I created a ‘story’ devised from the varied data which incorporates all mediums, revisiting this repeatedly to create iterative reflection, moving between data, theory, and reflexive notes to construct themes.

5. Instead of creating individual pen portraits, which are typically used to summarise interview-based impressions, this study adopts session-level gestalt summaries. These will integrate process notes from Tavistock observations, play sessions, and projective drawings to capture the overall emotional tone, relational dynamics, and symbolic content of each session. This approach maintains the psychosocial principle of attending to both manifest and latent meaning while ensuring the analysis reflects the multi-modal nature of the data and the participant-led design of the study.

6. To remain grounded and avoid over-interpretation, session-level gestalt summaries are developed. These summaries help maintain a holistic view of the child’s experience and ensure interpretations are anchored in the relational and contextual dynamics of each session, and over time.

3.7.4 Psychosocial analysis process example

The following is an overview of the process taken to analyse the data, with image excerpts available in Appendix L.

- To start to familiarise myself with the data, I first dictated the process notes I had written during and after data collection (Figure 10).
- I read the data many times, thinking about the events within each session. I thought about which sections would fit into ‘event codes’ which made it easier for me to consider the nuances within each event. For example, from figure 11, I decided that Lucy’s “Missing pieces” and the interaction with the other child were pertinent events to consider.
- I also went through the drawings at this time and annotated the photocopy to add notes of what the child said, my interpretations, thoughts, and feelings (Figure 12).
- At this point, although I could see the significance of what each child was experiencing and the individual excerpts but was struggling to see them as a whole entity/journey and how they related to each other, as well as their meaning in segments. I therefore created a ‘booklet’ for each child, writing the coded excerpts in short summaries, with a different colour for my own reflections and feelings. The images were interwoven into the narrative and gave me a more tangible perspective over the full story (Figure 13).
- I revisited these booklets regularly throughout data analysis and beyond, reading their story and the relationships between what they had expressed to me. I noticed what these brought up for me emotionally and used this reflection to further consider the experience for the children. I also brought in tentative psychodynamic

principles and theories which may explain their process, putting these on post it notes for consideration.

- I brought my thoughts to supervision, talking through what felt significant to me and my reflections so far. This helped me to deepen my thinking and gain perspective about what the data brings up for others and what I may have been overlooking.
- When starting to write my thoughts more formally, I first wrote the 'story' of each child descriptively, explaining their experience through the data (Figure 14 and 15). This stage allowed me to paint a narrative of the child's experience using the data, ensuring my story and interpretations were grounded in their experience. From here, I then started to develop the interpretation, considering not just what the data says on the surface, but how psychoanalytic study can help us to understand what was going on underneath.
- After revisiting the data repeatedly, I felt the narrative and sequential element was an important feature to retain, but each stage was interpreted to explore the psychodynamic underpinnings to the behaviour and how they linked to the loss of separation (Figure 16,17).
- I was then finally able to capture the story of Lucy and Oscar's separation (as best as I can), interweaving the data narrative, and interpretations.

3.7.5 Other methods considered

Other methods were considered such as RTA (reflexive thematic analysis – Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019, 2021) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et

al, 2021) for data analysis. RTA offers a systematic approach to thematic analysis, but it does not attend to unconscious processes or relational dynamics central to this study. Furthermore, although RTA is flexible, it was developed primarily for the analysis of verbal or textual data. The present study draws on observations, play-based interactions, and drawings, where meaning is often conveyed symbolically or relationally rather than verbally. A psychosocial framework allows these non-verbal communications to be understood as expressions of the child's internal world, rather than as data requiring translation into purely semantic themes. IPA focuses on exploring lived experience and meaning making (Smith et al., 2021) but assumes participants can articulate their experiences clearly and consciously. Given that this study involves young children and seeks to explore unconscious processes through observation, play, and projective drawings, IPA was not deemed suitable. A psychosocial approach was therefore adopted to explore the complexity of children's experiences, consciously and unconsciously.

3.8 Ethical considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines from the BPS (2021) and HCPC (2024), prioritising participants' wellbeing, autonomy, and confidentiality throughout recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Ethical approval was granted by the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC) **(**see Appendix N), with further details provided below.

3.8.1 Consent and assent

Upon receiving ethical approval, I sought permission from the SENDCo of the participating primary school to conduct the study as detailed in section 3.5.2. Following this, I obtained consent from parents within the stay and play session by disseminating a leaflet which overviews the study. I was on site to answer any questions and ensure the parents are fully informed. When they showed interest, an opportunity for further discussion was provided and consent forms given (See appendix F). Resources or support available post-participation was also discussed. In the case of multiple consent forms being returned that meet the criteria, two participants would have been selected randomly using a name generator. Parents were reminded of their right to withdraw consent at any point prior to data analysis, and opportunities to ask questions were provided throughout the study.

Assent is understood as a relational process in which the child's behaviours and the responses of adults jointly indicate the child's willingness to engage in the research. While young children may not possess the legal capacity or developmental maturity to provide formal informed consent, research guided by a participatory rights framework requires that children's agreement/assent is sought. Prior to the activity, I spoke to each child to explain what the activity involves and invited them to decide whether they wished to take part. There was a visual sheet used with the verbal explanation to increase their understanding (See Appendix H). If the child is hesitant or says no, this was dealt with tentatively. I attempted connection where the child is (e.g., playing with them in the classroom) to increase feelings of safety, before encouraging them with reassurance and interest in expressing why they have hesitation. They were also explicitly told that if they wish to stop at any time or return to the classroom, they can do. If, after gentle

encouragement, they still did not wish to engage, I would have guided them back to the classroom, but this was not necessary as both children engaged.

3.8.2 Ethical Considerations of Research within an Early Years Classroom

Conducting research within an Early Years classroom presents unique ethical considerations, as the researcher is situated within a social environment involving many children beyond those formally participating in the study. Although only two children were recruited as participants, observations took place within a shared classroom environment in which peers and staff naturally formed part of the children's daily experiences. I therefore needed to consider not only the consent and wellbeing of participants, but also how my presence and activities might affect other children within the setting.

Prior to data collection, I spent time within both Reception classes building familiarity with the children and staff. My presence was explained to the children as an additional adult who would be spending time in the classroom, helping out, and occasionally talking and playing with some children. Given the developmental age of the participants and their peers, I aimed to be a familiar, consistent, and approachable presence rather than providing complex explanations about the research process. This period of familiarisation also allowed the children to become comfortable with my presence before formal data collection began.

A further ethical consideration concerned the involvement of peers during observations and play sessions. As the children's experiences of separation occurred within a relational environment, interactions with peers formed an important part of their lived experience. However, these children had not been recruited as participants and I did not have parental

consent to collect data about them. When peers interacted with participants during data collection, I therefore considered them to be part of the participant's social environment rather than participants in their own right. Any notes and analysis remained focused upon the participating child and information relating to peers was only included where necessary to understand the participant's experience.

This issue arose most notably when Oscar invited Peer 1 into the play space during an individual session. At the time, I reflected that Oscar's invitation was itself meaningful and could be understood as part of his ongoing assent and participation process. Oscar appeared willing to engage with the session on the condition that Peer 1 could be present. Rather than viewing Peer 1's presence as interference, I considered it to be an important aspect of how Oscar wished to experience the space. Consequently, I allowed Peer 1 to join whilst ensuring that my observations and subsequent analysis remained focused on Oscar's behaviour, experiences, and responses. Peer 1 was not treated as a participant in the research and no independent data was collected about him.

At the same time, I remained mindful of my ethical responsibilities towards Peer 1 and other children who entered the space. Although they were not participants, I did not feel it would be appropriate to ignore them or refuse interaction if they spoke to me. I therefore responded in a warm, respectful, and developmentally appropriate manner whenever children approached me, whilst avoiding directing attention towards their experiences. My primary focus remained on the participating child whilst maintaining an ethic of care towards all children present.

There were also occasions when children wanted to join a session but had not been invited by the participant. In these situations, I attempted to balance the participant's

ownership of the space with the wellbeing of their peers. For example, if a child asked to join a session intended for Oscar alone, I would acknowledge the request positively whilst maintaining the boundary of the session, saying something along the lines of, "That would be lovely, but today this is Oscar's time on his own with me. Thank you for asking and I will see you later." This approach allowed me to remain responsive and respectful whilst protecting the integrity of the research process. Rather than attempting to eliminate peer interactions, I sought to respond flexibly and ethically to children's relational needs whilst ensuring that participation, data collection, and analysis remained centred on the children whose consent and assent had been obtained.

3.8.3 Withdrawal

Research suggests that few children actively decline participation (McWhirter et al., 2000; Pridmore & Bendelow, 1995), which may partly reflect the school context, where participation in activities is often assumed and children may feel reluctant to refuse (Pridmore & Bendelow, 1995), possibly due to power imbalances. This setting can also lead children to disclose more than they are comfortable with (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999) or to provide responses they perceive as ‘correct’ rather than reflecting their true feelings or opinions (Horstman et al., 2008; Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999). To address this, I used attunement to focus on the child’s emotional state (Kennedy, Landor and Todd, 2010), offering breaks or stopping the activity if needed. Verbal communications of assent were carefully observed, being aware of the child’s potential need to withdraw throughout the session and ensuring parents know they can remove the children from the study if they so wish. For children, this would most probably be a behavioural communication deciphered by myself or other staff members. For parents, they saw me every morning at

drop off and also had my email to express their wishes verbally. This approach ensures that the child's comfort and autonomy are prioritised throughout participation. Within my doctoral research course, we are taught about using attunement and have video learning sessions to recognise its use. I am therefore confident in my ability to remain attuned.

3.8.4 Avoidance of harm

The projective drawing task is a technique that encourages unconscious thoughts and feelings to surface and be projected onto the page, allowing children to express emotions, including distress, in a manner similar to therapeutic play. The study will require containment, as I may need to 'hold' or support children while they are expressing themselves (Bion, 1985). Emotional themes may emerge during these sessions, and the researcher will provide a safe and supportive environment in which children can explore and express these feelings. Sessions will take place within the school setting, and children will have the option to have a familiar staff member present if desired (See distress protocol, Appendix J).

Expressing emotion in response to the exploration of separation is a natural and healthy psychological reaction. From my perspective as an educational practitioner, it is important to communicate with children and explore upsetting themes within the containing space of relationships. The emotions displayed are already present within the child; the sessions merely provide space for these feelings to be voiced. I see value in offering a setting where children can express emotions while being listened to and emotionally 'held' by a trained professional. This parallels the findings of Bowlby, Robertson and Rosenbluth (1952), who observed that medical staff sometimes restricted access to children to avoid causing upset. In fact, children's crying often indicated that they felt safe enough to

express internal distress, rather than being harmed by adult presence. Similarly, in this study, any distress shown reflects emotions that already exist within the child rather than new harm caused by myself.

I recognise that I am not providing long-term support. I have considered how this may be experienced if the children struggle with their separation and following participation, resources on managing separation and emotional containment will be shared with staff and parents through a webinar after the research has been analysed. These materials will be written in a non-pathologising way, emphasising that experiencing distress around separation is normal, while also providing guidance and signposting for situations where carers perceive distress as excessive.

3.8.4.1 Managing Unconscious Material and Avoidance of Interpretive harm

In psychosocial research, interpretations often involve latent meanings and unconscious processes, which require careful handling to prevent harm. To avoid interpretive harm, all interpretations remain grounded in the data and supported by multiple sources (observation notes, play narratives, and drawings), rather than relying on isolated details. Interpretations are framed tentatively, acknowledging their status as researcher constructions rather than definitive truths. Reflexive practices, including supervision and the use of a reflective diary, will be employed to monitor the influence of my own assumptions and emotional responses, ensuring these do not distort participants' meanings. Language used in reporting will be respectful and non-pathologising, and anonymity will be maintained to protect dignity. Finally, interpretations will focus on understanding experiences within the research context, avoiding therapeutic overreach or diagnostic assumptions, in line with ethical principles of care and responsibility.

3.8.5 Confidentiality and anonymity

Throughout dissemination, the setting and participants information was anonymised, with participants being referred to by pseudonyms. This ensures confidentiality and respect for the privacy of those the school and families involved. All information was stored according to the LA governance procedures and data protection policies. Parents were informed that the study results will be used within a university thesis.

3.9 Researcher rigour and trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the concept of trustworthiness is used to evaluate the rigour and credibility of a study. Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the findings are reliable and meaningful for the population under investigation (Angen, 2000). This study draws on Yardley's (2000) framework for 'good' qualitative research to explore and evaluate the trustworthiness. As an important value within research, I have followed the framework structure.

3.9.1 Sensitivity to context

Sensitivity to context requires recognising the social, developmental, and environmental factors that shape children's experiences and influence data collection (Yardley, 2000). In this study, attention to context extends beyond the physical and social environment to the child's inner emotional world, in line with a psychodynamic perspective. Conducting research within a school setting necessitates mindfulness of its routines, the presence of other children, and the needs of staff; sessions are designed to minimise disruption and ensure respect for the wider school environment. This includes being communicative around timings that disrupt daily routine through taking the children for sessions and

resource needs such as booking private rooms within the setting. Further contextual considerations include having a familiar staff member present during sessions and providing three sessions so the children could build comfort and engage at their own pace. By attending to both manifest and latent content in the Gestalt style (Holloway and Jefferson, 2012), the study ensured that interpretations remain grounded in the child's lived and felt experience, while maintaining sensitivity to the broader school context and community. Through the Tavistock observation model (Bick, 1987), I took note of transference and countertransference experiences from the children and setting to add personal reflections as additional data within the rich information involving the children.

3.9.2 Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2000) highlights the use of data and analysis 'triangulation' to develop a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of a research topic. In this study, an in-depth insight into each child's separation experience will be pursued through a combination of observation, drawing, and play. These methods are designed to be child-centred and developmentally appropriate, ensuring that each child's perspective is authentically represented. Triangulating across these different data sources allow patterns and themes to be corroborated, enhancing the credibility and depth of the findings. Moreover, the study adopted a psychodynamic lens, paying attention to children's emotional expression, non-verbal cues, and relational dynamics, which further enriches the interpretation of the data. Prolonged engagement across multiple sessions enabled me to build rapport, observe shifts in behaviour and expression, and capture a nuanced understanding of each child's experience over time. Although triangulation will support credibility of data, I do not wish to overshadow the child's own meaning making.

Holding these interpretations tentatively and checking back with the child's own narrations will be important for accuracy of voice.

3.9.3 Transparency and Coherence

Transparency in psychosocial research involves clearly articulating the interpretive steps taken and acknowledging the researcher's influence on meaning-making (Hollway & Jefferson, 2012). In this study, transparency is achieved by detailing the procedures for data collection and analysis, alongside reflexive accounts of my positionality and emotional responses. Rather than aiming for replicability, coherence is maintained by showing how interpretations were grounded in the data and informed by psychosocial principles, including attention to unconscious dynamics and relational context. My role as a trainee Educational Psychologist, and the values I bring to working with children, are explicitly acknowledged. Supervision was used to monitor how empathy and concern shaped my engagement, ensuring these were contained to allow participants' experiences to emerge authentically. Instead of coding frameworks alone, transparency is demonstrated through interpretive notes, session-level gestalt summaries, and examples of how latent and manifest content informed theme development.

3.9.4 Impact and Importance

Within the Educational Psychologist (EP) role, practitioners are tasked with supporting the social, emotional, and mental health needs of children in educational settings. According to the SEND Code of Practice (2015), EPs play a role in "identifying the underlying causes of difficulties and advising on appropriate interventions and support." Similarly, the British Psychological Society highlights responsibilities such as "promoting resilience and working collaboratively with educational staff" (BPS DECP, 2020, p.45).

While the ‘Every Child Matters framework’ (DfES, 2003) is no longer statutory, its emphasis on holistic outcomes (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving) continues to underpin current educational priorities. These principles are echoed in more recent guidance, such as the Department for Education’s focus on mental health and wellbeing in schools (DfE, 2021), which recognises that emotionally supported children are more likely to thrive academically and socially compared with those experiencing distress.

Understanding and supporting children through experiences such as separation requires insight into their inner world to ensure their voice is heard. Understanding and supporting all children through experiences such as separation requires insight into their inner worlds and recognition of their emotional needs. This study acknowledges the universality of separation as a significant experience for all children and seeks to foreground their voices in ways that go beyond observable behaviour. Capturing children’s perspectives aligns with the EP’s role as outlined in the Code of Practice (2015) and reflects a commitment to holistic practice that values emotional wellbeing alongside learning. While EPs frequently work with SEND children, eliciting any child’s views remains challenging (Clark, 2005; Spyrou, 2011; Einarsdóttir, 2007), often leading to assumptions about their capacity to contribute meaningfully (Lundy, 2007). It is my view that separation, and the impact of how this sensitive period is managed is important for children of all needs. How well this is understood for all children can contribute to the management of emotional and behavioural support within the early years and beyond.

Developing methods that go beyond observation to actively involve children is essential to reduce adult preconceptions and power imbalances (Lundy, 2007). This study

illustrates the rich and meaningful data that can be gathered when children, particularly those whose voices are often overlooked, are truly listened to.

3.10 Summary

In this chapter, I have set out the methodological choices that shaped the study, drawing on my own values, training experiences, and philosophical commitments. By adopting a relativist and subjectivist stance, the research recognises that children's experiences of separation are multiple, relational, and emotionally constructed. This informed my decision to combine observation, drawing, and play; methods that respect children as active participants and allow their voices to emerge symbolically as well as verbally.

The use of psychosocial analysis alongside ongoing attention to ethics and trustworthiness, reflects my commitment to transparency and to holding the emotional realities of young children with care. The methodology has therefore been designed not only to elicit data, but also to create a safe space where children's perspectives are genuinely valued. The following chapter turns to the findings, which aim to convey the richness and complexity of these experiences.

4. Data analysis

4.1 Introduction to the data

Over the course of the four weeks of involvement, both children's experiences followed their own unique and entirely individual story, not only due to the richness of each session, but also the chronological processing of separation over time. The following stages have been abstracted from codes over all sessions but ultimately follow a chronological sequence of emotional processing throughout their first weeks at Reception. I present the individual data analysis for each child in stages to highlight this chronology and the patterns that emerged throughout. The order is therefore reflective of this process from start to finish. The current analysis used a psychosocial approach which entailed data gathering through observations, play and drawings to bring to life the richness of the children's experiences through their direct (verbal) and indirect (symbolic and psychodynamically interpreted) voice. The analysis is discussed in two parts, an interpretation of the child's experience, and personal reflections from myself. Both perspectives are considered from a psychodynamic lens to give a holistic view, separated to reduce enmeshment between experience. After the individual stories are explored, the patterns that both children share (although in nuanced ways) are discussed within themes. These themes are used within the discussion to understand how to support separation within schools.

4.2 Oscar

4.2.1 Synopsis

Oscar found separation intensely difficult, marked by painful anger and a struggle against the distance from his primary caregivers. His initial attempts at being emotionally open (displaying his sadness) and requesting comfort (with Peer 1) were often unsuccessful, leading him to rely on chaotic and destructive play as an escape and defense. He initially rejected staff and integration into the setting, perhaps as a form of protest or an unintended outcome of his authentic expression of anger and distress. Over time, however, the establishment of fragile peer and staff alliances (especially with the teaching assistant - TA) facilitated a process where he could work through his anger, allowing for increased engagement, connection, and enjoyment. While the fundamental pain of separation may have lingered, his capacity to cope and connect expanded significantly, especially evident within the container -contained space of the play environment.

4.2.2 Stage 1: Clinging and protest – Holding on to the lost object

The stage of the lost object refers to the physical loss of Oscar's PC, understood as the psychological loss of the perfect source of satisfaction from the "good parent" (Klein, 1940). Oscar's early separation experiences were marked by intense protest and distress. His repeated clinging to his mothers and refusal of staff intervention appeared less defiant than anxious, an attempt to maintain proximity. As with separation from his mothers, staying close was paramount, and he became increasingly distressed when this was threatened: "He then runs around, circling mother 2 and clings to her." His fixation on the dolls' house immediately after separation ("clinging to the symbol of home") echoes

Winnicott's notion of transitional objects (1951). The house seemed to function as a symbolic intermediary, preserving the presence and security of home in its absence. When closeness was no longer possible, he sought proximity to the only tangible reminder of home available in the strange situation (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Oscar also showed symbolic clinging in his play. He acted out his desire for connection when asking the monster trucks he drew to "Connect!" and link together, graphically depicting this wish for continued, unbreakable connection with his parents.

Clinging was interspersed with shouting, crying and running toward his mothers, perhaps a panicked response to realising he could not stop them from leaving. This mirrors the protest phase in Bowlby's theory of separation anxiety (1969). During his first observed separation, his teacher physically removed him from mother 2 to guide him inside. He shouted, "I want to walk!" while pushing backward, a desperate bid for control in a moment of powerlessness.

This first physical protest signified a shift from clinging to rejecting. It conveyed a message of: If I cannot have my mothers, I don't want anyone. His behaviour at this time created distance from staff. When he was escorted into the classroom by the teacher:

"He comes into the classroom and is crying and saying 'Mummy' but also showing anger. He doesn't respond to what the Teacher, TA and I are saying to him". "I notice that the staff then move away from him and focus on other children. I sense they may be feeling rejected."

This contrast suggests a gap between Oscar's internal needs and his external presentation. His outward display of anger may reflect reaction formation, a defense mechanism in which he expresses the opposite of his true, vulnerable feelings (Freud, 1936; Vaillant, 1992). This was seen throughout Oscar's classroom experience, such as within carpet time when he would remain silent if any questions were asked of him, or sit at the back of the classroom instead of with the others during carpet time. In these scenarios, the anger and withdrawal protect him from consciously experiencing the anxiety, fear, and need for closeness associated with separation, the opposite of clinging to his mother. By appearing hostile or rejecting, he maintains a sense of control and shields himself from the emotional pain of attachment loss. The response of withdrawal from staff could also be an unintentional reaction to Oscar's projections. Perhaps Oscar's own feelings of being rejected, by being left in the setting by his parents, was being projected onto the staff members, making them respond with further distance instead of going towards him in his time of need.

Oscar's anger can therefore be understood as a powerful form of communication. On the surface, it appeared to reject integration into the setting, yet it may also have expressed the pain of separation and perceived rejection from his parents. These feelings may have been too painful for Oscar to remain in contact with, leading him to project them into the relational space and onto the staff and subject (me). Through this stage, Oscar seems to be attempting to reverse the experience of being the one who is left or rejected and instead becomes the one who rejects. This shift may have offered him a sense of control and protection from vulnerability.

4.2.2.1 Personal reflections

My discomfort in this moment, feeling that “I didn’t want to leave him alone,” can be understood as countertransference (Heimann, 1950). I noticed a strong wish to stay close to Oscar and offer comfort, mirroring his own need to cling to mother 2 and his fear of separation. Rather than viewing this solely as my reaction, it offered insight into the pain Oscar may have been experiencing but could not express directly.

In this dynamic, I seemed to hold the desire for closeness while Oscar occupied a position of rejection. Before each session, I wondered whether he would join me. Although this could reflect my own anxieties about collecting data, I reminded myself that any response, including refusal, was meaningful and required attunement. Even after he had joined me two weeks in a row, I still feared he might reject entering the space, and by extension, me.

Given Oscar’s protest against separation and the rejection that accompanied it, it is possible I was holding his fears of being left and his wish for closeness. Perhaps he did enjoy our time together, as later confirmed by his parents, but feared that like his mother, I might leave or reject him. This fear may have been carried by me in my weekly hope for connection, paired with the worry that he might withdraw at any moment. Separation may have felt sudden and unpredictable for Oscar in the first weeks of reception.

4.2.3 Stage 2: Chaos as a Defense Against Loss

The stage of Chaos as a Defense Against Loss refers to Oscar’s attempt to escape painful reality through distraction. To manage the overwhelming anxiety and helplessness of separation, he often engaged in high-energy, noisy, chaotic play with myself and peers. This hedonistic activity seemed to protect him from sitting with the sadness and loss he

felt in the setting without his mothers. Sequences such as flinging puppets, loudly knocking over the abacus, and repeatedly spinning with Peer 1 can be understood as manic defences (Klein, 1940), where powerful, controlling action substitutes for unbearable feelings of helplessness and loss. By flooding the environment with movement and noise, Oscar avoided the stillness that might evoke the reality of his mother's absence. When he shouted "I'm angry!" after knocking over two abacuses, this verbal expression appeared to reveal the depth of his rage at being left. His oscillation between manic excitement and angry outbursts signals an unconscious struggle to manage depressive feelings (Klein, 1935, 1940). Within the depressive position, the child begins to integrate good and bad aspects of the object, allowing the reality of loss to be felt. Here, chaos becomes an escape from this depressive pain through action rather than emotional experience. In Kleinian theory, the object refers to an emotionally significant person as internalised in early development; in this context, the mother represents the primary object whose absence is experienced as loss.

When first asked to draw his separation, Oscar complied briefly but quickly returned to the gems he had collected, suggesting partial engagement. His drawing was executed with fast, forceful pencil movements, pressing so hard the lead broke, followed by smearing red paint from earlier work. These actions appear to express anger, simultaneously complying with the task while signalling unhappiness and emotional intensity. Rather than depicting the separation directly, the destructive, chaotic marks may symbolise his rejection of expectation and externalise feelings too overwhelming to verbalise. The pencil, paint and paper become containers for unprocessed anger, frustration and loss (Klein, 1996; Bion, 1962), with the red paint further symbolising

emotional intensity. In this way, Oscar's chaos may represent the beginnings of processing his feelings, consistent with Winnicott's (1974) notion of the potential space where children negotiate painful emotions through play.

Figure 3: Drawing 1, Oscar

After the first session, Oscar continued to use chaos in his creations and play. He began incorporating traditionally "disgusting" or contaminating objects, often linked to projecting unwanted internal feelings onto something external. His offering of "brown strawberries, poo and wee" to a teacher character in the second play session held a tension between a caring act (feeding) and something repellent: "Oscar offered the character brown strawberries, poo and wee to eat. He then throws a bike on the character...". Feeding in play is often associated with nurturance and connection (Winnicott, 1974), suggesting a wish to engage. Yet the choice of disgusting symbols turned the interaction into an expression of anger, frustration or control, projecting difficult feelings outward while

keeping his ‘good’ figures, his family and himself, protected (Freud, 1905/2017; Klein, 1935). This blend of care and aggression reflects the complexity of his emotional experience. It may also signal a defensive pattern, suppressing anger toward his PCs and displacing it into chaotic, messy play. This allowed Oscar to manage conflicting feelings of wanting connection while also protecting himself and those he cares about.

Figure 5: Painting of a castle (Session 2)

Within the same session, Oscar drew a castle within his play time. Here, Oscar tells me:

“...that poos live in the castle. When I ask how they feel, he says they're feeling stinky. He then says that he is drawing a rock next to his castle. He says that the people are feeling sad and that he doesn't know why. I ask if he is there, and he says he is the prince of the castle. He then says, “we will get peer 1 in 20 minutes.”

As Oscar painted, he began with individual elements (the castle, the rock) and gradually layered and smudged them together. The theme of disgust remained present through the inclusion of poos inside the castle, perhaps testing whether adults could tolerate his messy or chaotic emotions without turning away. This may reflect Oscar's tentative exploration of whether others could hold his emerging vulnerability. He also mentioned sadness, even if he could not explain or voice its cause.

Chaos also appeared through refusal, hiding and repeatedly running out of the room—his own way of managing the "coming and going" sequence. "He then runs out of the room and back... Again, moments later, he returns..." This behaviour may have helped him gain control over the painful dynamics of separation and reunion. Such patterns allowed Oscar to manage separation anxiety, maintain connection to significant adults, and gradually process painful affect on his own terms (Bion, 1962; Winnicott, 1974). From this perspective, leaving and returning becomes a symbolic regulatory process, offering a safe way to experience and integrate difficult emotions. This links to Freud's concept of repetition compulsion (1920/1961; Levy, 2000), where individuals unconsciously repeat past experiences to gain mastery, reverse the ending or regain control.

His attempt to control separation symbolically through play may signal a desire for order within chaos. Alongside chaotic expression, Oscar also used creative techniques to defend against it. The castle and nearby rock functioned as impenetrable structures; protective yet trapping. The sadness is held inside the castle, unseen by others, yet something Oscar must tolerate when "inside." The castle may symbolise his own defences, containing and protecting his sadness. Jung (1968) describes such protective structures as inner psychic spaces designed to hold difficult emotions, comparing castles

to mandalas (symbols of the inner self). A castle can represent a stronghold of the ego, offering both security and isolation. After drawing it, Oscar identified himself as the prince, a figure with some authority but still ruled by a king or queen, perhaps symbolising his wish for autonomy while recognising the presence of an ultimate authority (his parents or teachers).

4.2.3.1 Personal reflections

My own embodied experience was pronounced after this session. On a familiar and well-cycled route home, I found myself making a wrong turn twice, feeling “overwhelmed with foggy thoughts.” This sense of mental disorganisation felt connected to my experience with Oscar, as though I had taken on some of his perceived chaos within my own thoughts. It was as if I was experiencing incoherent thinking that prevented me from being fully present in my daily activity. This may reflect what Oscar was also feeling: a muddle of overwhelming emotion, intensified by the chaotic play. Although confusing for him, this state may have defensively protected him from being present in the setting and from feeling the more coherent but difficult emotions surrounding separation.

4.2.4 Stage 3: Splitting and Emerging Trust

The stage of splitting and emerging trust draws on Klein’s (1946) concept of splitting as a defensive process, through which Oscar protects himself from emotional pain by dividing caregivers and significant others into “good” and “bad” objects. This allows him to preserve an attachment relationship even when care feels imperfect. By maintaining an internalised “all-good” image of the caregiver, distressing aspects of the experience

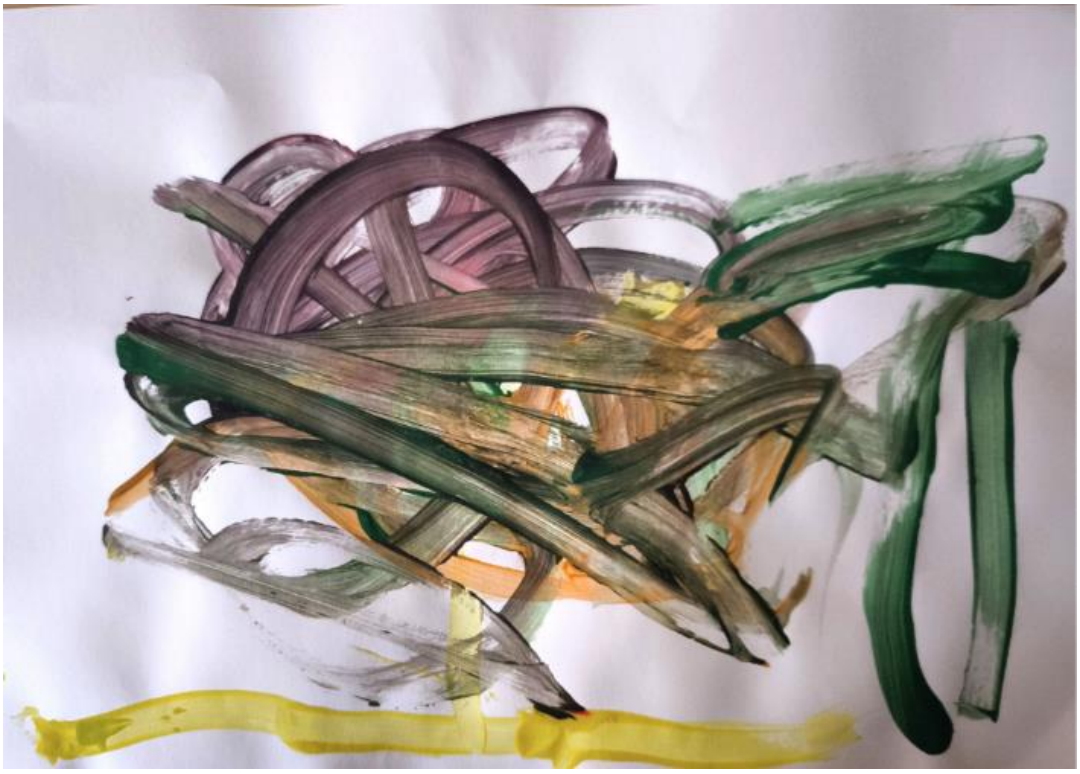
can be projected onto another figure or context, such as school. This links to the earlier loss of the perfect source of satisfaction and his wish to preserve the good object internally.

Oscar may have rejected school because it removed him from his mothers. The setting became the cause of his distress, sparing him from seeing his mothers as the ones who left. Holding that reality may have been too painful, leading him to displace anger and loss onto the school environment instead.

This dynamic appeared in Oscar's play, suggesting the use of splitting (Klein, 1946). Staff, as the figures who enforced separation, were unconsciously positioned as "bad objects," becoming targets for rejection and symbolic retaliation. This was reflected in his paintings, which preserved the safety of his family unit, and in the classroom through his rejection of staff support and directing anger toward them rather than his mothers. Through this process, Oscar maintained an internal sense of his primary caregiver as "all good," while directing painful affect away from the attachment relationship.

"He told me he was painting a punk cat museum... they eat teachers and that I am a teacher. He seemed amused... He said that they don't eat mummies though and don't eat Oscars or little sisters."

Figure 4: Painting 2 – Oscar's 'Punk Cat Museum'



Oscar's symbolic fantasy play also demonstrated splitting, with teachers being destroyed, allowing him to remain safe in his secure space with his idealised/'good' family (mummies and little sisters).

Amidst the splitting of home and school, Oscar gradually sought connections, initially showing emerging trust with Peer 1. However, these alliances were fragile. He explored Peer 1 as a potential secondary attachment figure, enjoying physical play with him and seeking connection during carpet time. He appeared to enjoy this relationship, but soon found that his tests of trust were not met. When he asked Peer 1 to read to him, he was met with the accusation of being a "Baby!". Although boisterous play was accepted, his vulnerability was rejected, reinforcing his pattern of retreating into destruction. Oscar

continued to make bids to include Peer 1 in his play space, but as his defenses toward adults lessened and engagement became more accessible, his connection to Peer 1 also diminished. Peer 1 was unable to meet Oscar where he needed to at the time. This shift became clear when, after inviting Peer 1 into the play space again, their desires diverged. Peer 1 sought the same fleeting physical play they had always shared, while Oscar gravitated toward calmer and more grounded activities such as puzzles and drawing. Oscar was allowing himself to be present in the space, perhaps due to lowered anxiety and increased trust in those around him, enabling him to integrate. My reflections detailed below illuminated this shift.

This crucial shift was demonstrated when Oscar began to share narratives about home with his TA and accept her attention, signaling the gradual emergence of a secondary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). I could sense Oscar's nascent capacity to trust and share, expanding his relational security outside of his core family unit. This moment was significant and tender between Oscar and the TA, with him inviting her to play after this moment, and finding it painful when she does not join him:

"Oscar then stacks blocks on top of each other in a precarious way. Oscar asks TA to come outside, but she is busy. He then walks outside and destroys his block tower. Oscar then bangs blocks together loudly."

This was further seen in our shared enjoyment, detailed in stage 4. Although Oscar was previously experiencing the stark splitting of feelings toward home and school, he has now allowed more warmth to be felt toward his school caregiver. Perhaps this is a sign

he is reaching a depressive position, accepting more of the good and bad within his TA (Klein, 1935,1940)

4.2.4.1 Personal reflections

In my earlier experiences with Peer 1 and Oscar, I often felt apprehensive about their interactions. This seemed to stem from a sense of danger linked to the chaotic nature of their play; I was unsure how far it might unravel or whether someone might get hurt. This may have been a form of countertransference, mirroring Oscar's own uncertainty about the safety of the environment as he tested boundaries. I held a tension between Oscar's outward enjoyment and my unease when the play became chaotic.

In this session, however, I felt a "frustration with Peer 1's presence in the play space." While Oscar requested painting or a puzzle, Peer 1 "frantically picked up items in the room and presented them to Oscar, seemingly in an attempt to engage him in an alternate task." I did not want to reject Peer 1, yet I felt Oscar's preference for a different kind of play was meaningful and offered more opportunity for connection. This frustration led me to hold the play space more firmly and keep my attention on Oscar's chosen task. Peer 1 eventually followed, joining us to complete the puzzle. This moment felt like a turning point for Oscar, a point at which he allowed himself to be present in the space, perhaps reflecting lowered anxiety and increased trust.

4.2.5 Stage 4: Change and the Capacity for Excitement

The stage of change and the capacity for excitement considers Oscar's symbolic expression of separation and his gradual ability to engage with the setting. He oscillated

between acknowledging and avoiding his loss. In class, he physically withdrew: “His mouth slowly opens and he stares at another child... Oscar makes a face as if he just realized that he has been in a daze by blinking intently and closing his mouth.” Yet his second drawing showed a clear capacity for symbolic representation: placing himself “on top of a mountain… mummy is happy, I am sad because I miss her” (Drawing 2).

Jung viewed mountains as symbols of psychological elevation and separation, representing distance from ordinary relational life and the difficult path toward insight or integration (Jung, 1964). They can signify isolation and emotional remoteness while also indicating an attempt to gain perspective on inner conflict. In this sense, Oscar’s placement of himself on the mountain may symbolise both his felt distance from his mother and his effort to understand the painful experience from a position of safety. The mountain becomes a place where sadness can be acknowledged, but only at a remove, suggesting the emotional material was not yet tolerable at closer proximity.

Figure 6: Drawing 2, Oscar

Oscar's act of hiding his drawing by piling pencils on top ("He pushes the pencils and pens on the table on top of this drawing and encourages me to push them with him…") represented a moment where vulnerability (acknowledging sadness) coexisted with avoidance (concealing it). It felt like a move away from the exposed emotional material he had just created. This captured his developing capacity for symbolisation: he could represent his pain, but could not yet stay with it.

By hiding the drawing, Oscar may have used the projective medium of the paper to express emotions he could not bear to revisit. Winnicott (1971) noted that children often create something emotionally charged and then destroy, cover, or alter it when it feels too raw. It is also significant that Oscar asked me to help him cover the drawing. He allowed me to witness his feelings, but only briefly, exercising autonomy over how long they

remained visible. The joint concealment may indicate a shift toward allowing others to help him manage and contain difficult emotions.

Over time, his closeness to reality appeared to increase. In his final drawing, he placed himself inside “Reception” while smiling, suggesting a tentative acceptance of his new environment. His refusal to draw separation (“I don’t want to draw that”) shows the pain still lingered, yet his ability to shift to building with rice (“I’ve made a sand castle!”) and to engage enthusiastically with the setting reflects psychological movement toward adaptive functioning, even if partly through avoidance. As with his earlier castle drawing, the rice castle may symbolise a protective structure to contain difficult feelings. Unlike the earlier impenetrable fortress, the rice, unstable and permeable, suggests a gradual shift toward a less rigid, more flexible emotional defence.

Figure 7: Drawing 3 – Oscar

From a Jungian perspective, constructions in materials such as sand and rice are symbolic expressions of unconscious and affective material emerging toward consciousness. In Jung's view, symbols bring to light what cannot yet be held in words, serving as living images of inner processes. The rice sandcastle is an impermanent, manipulable structure, which may symbolise both agency and control over his environment and a safe way to engage with the feelings of loss indirectly.

His creative expressions during the final session were notably more ordered, with increased blank space and controlled placement of materials. This contrasts with earlier sessions characterized by chaotic, overlapping designs, which may have reflected internal fragmentation and anxiety. The presence of blank space could symbolize Oscar's ability to tolerate absence and emptiness without resorting to manic filling, a shift toward integration and the capacity for thought (Bion, 1962).

Oscar's question to me within this last play session (*"*Your favourite colour is...green?") demonstrates an emerging curiosity about my internal world, which can be understood through a Kleinian lens (1935, 1940) as a sign of movement toward a depressive position. His ability to consider my perspective and ask questions suggests a growing capacity for mentalization and recognition of the other as separate yet connected. Furthermore, his comment "I'm going to give it to Mummy" introduces the maternal object into the play, indicating that Oscar could hold both myself and his mothers in mind simultaneously, a sign of object constancy (Mahler, 1975), due to forming a stable internal representation of the PC, and perhaps the depressive position, due to the ability to hold and engage with both relationships/objects mentally without the need to reject one (Klein, 1935, 1940). For Oscar, triangulation means he could engage with me without needing to deny, attack, or

defensively protect his relationship with his mother. Both relationships could exist at the same time in his mind and trust we can both exist without threat of prolonged loss. Perhaps as well, Oscar was showing a depressive position within himself, being able to exist within reception (as seen in his drawing) and be happy, whilst being happy when he is at home. This could signal an acceptance of both places holding happiness, without needing to lose one entirely, and in turn the reality that both places are holding him.

4.2.5.1 Personal reflections

By the final session, I observed a marked reduction in Oscar's avoidance, signalling a greater capacity for engagement, excitement and integration, consistent with Bion's (1962) idea of increased containment and tolerance of emotional experience. His play became more reciprocal and relational, suggesting a shift from defensive withdrawal toward more authentic connection. As I noted, "I feel this is the most intimately myself and Oscar have played. Not only is he close in proximity, he is also giving more eye contact and smiles." Oscar's physical closeness and sustained eye contact indicated a lowering of his defences and a move toward what Winnicott (1974) described as playing in the presence of another, reflecting trust and the capacity for shared reality. This intimacy suggests he was beginning to experience me as a reliable object, able to hold his emotional states without intrusion or abandonment.

On an affective level, I felt deeply moved by Oscar's enjoyment. His "squeals of excitement" when puzzle pieces fit together evoked warmth and emotional closeness not previously reached. This mutual pleasure may reflect the emergence of a third space (Benjamin, 2014), where both participants experience recognition and co-created

meaning. It suggests Oscar was beginning to experience play as a safe, shared activity rather than a defensive one.

Moments of ambivalence remained. While completing the puzzle, Oscar shifted between collaborative language such as “we” and prohibitive statements like “don’t touch.” This tension may represent an early negotiation of boundaries and autonomy within a growing relationship, with Oscar asserting control to manage anxieties about enmeshment while still seeking closeness.

4.2.6 Interpretative Summary

Oscar’s journey illustrates the tension between holding on and letting go, navigated through a complex interplay of transitional objects, chaotic defenses, splitting, and fragile relational experiments. His play and drawings reveal fluctuations between avoidance and emerging symbolisation, a process shaped by the relational field we co-constructed. My own feelings of anxiety and disorientation were valuable to understanding Oscar’s experience, acting as emotional data that illuminated the complexities of his struggle with separation. His ultimate shift toward acceptance demonstrates a crucial developmental progression from protest to tentative integration.

4.3 Lucy

4.3.1 Synopsis

Lucy’s inner world of separation loss was expressed firstly through projection onto others, then as she became more aware of her loss, within symbolic activities like drawing and crafting, and through a conscious effort to understand her differences and similarities with

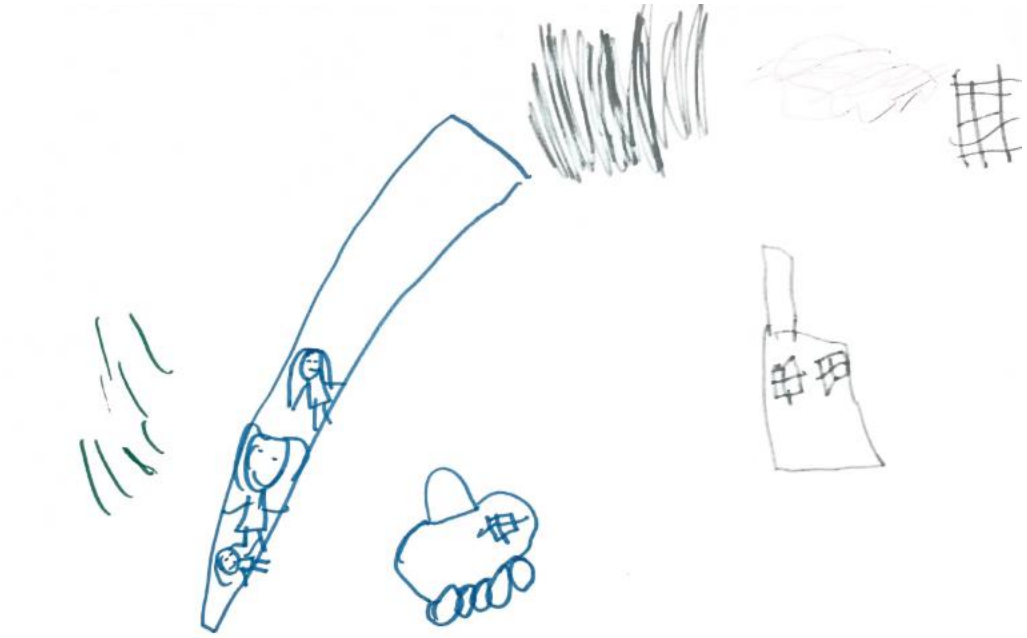
her family. She sought to control the internal uncertainty of separation through external order and structure, eventually creating a symbolic bridge back to her family to cope with the feeling of being ‘trapped.’

4.3.2 Stage 1: The Projected Feeling

Projected feelings are emotions that a person rejects due to them being uncomfortable/not wanted. Due to the negative experience, the person subconsciously defends against them by projecting them outward and not feeling them. These can then be ‘picked up’ (through transference into the space and the feeling of countertransference, Heimann, 1950) by others as their own feelings, giving insight into the defended subject’s inner experience. The projected feeling was a theme due to the beginning of Lucy’s separation experience being predominantly projected outward onto others (e.g., the subject, me or her sister). Lucy’s internal world was mainly visible through small signs of anxiety (blank expression/chewing her tongue) and my experience of her transference within the space. As time went on, her ownership of these feelings increased through discussions when drawing, but little more outward emotion was seen.

Lucy’s initial presentation was characterized by a smooth, almost perfunctory, acceptance of separation. The adults framed the transition with insistent positivity ("I have someone who is very excited to be here!"), creating a relational field in which only ‘good’ feelings were acknowledged and socially validated. Within this context, Lucy mirrored the expected cheerfulness, but her first drawing revealed an important defensive process: she displaced her own anxiety and negative affect onto her sister and peers through projection.

Figure 8: Drawing 1 - Lucy



Her use of the drawing activity provided a projective space where she demonstrated her projection of feelings onto others: “Me and mummy are feeling good, but [sister] is feeling nervous... some children are crying and they are sad.” (Drawing 1), choosing her sister’s first day instead of her own.

The use of projection in Drawing 1 (Freud, 1914/1962) illustrates that perhaps Lucy was not yet able to consciously tolerate or express her own distress. Instead, she adopted what might be described as the ‘good’ or compliant self, the version of herself that would meet the expectations of the adults around her. This could serve a protective function; by disowning uncomfortable feelings, she preserves relational harmony and maintains a sense of safety within the environment. At the same time, it shows the cost of this defense, as her internal experience remains largely hidden, accessible only through subtle cues

such as a blank expression, tongue chewing, or the countertransference experience of myself as the researcher.

Winnicott's idea of the true self and false self (1965, 1974) helps make sense of Lucy's "good" or compliant self. The false self develops as a kind of protective strategy when children sense that their real feelings might not be accepted, letting them keep a sense of safety and maintain relationships. In Lucy's case, the compliant self seemed to help her respond to the adults' constant positivity, allowing her to go along with what was expected without showing her own distress.

Lucy was also possibly able to learn the most effective way of being in the setting through vicariously learning from her peers, seeing that dysregulated displays of distress were not going to provide her with relational closeness ("The TA tells her to sit repeatedly. The child stands by the door, looks at the TA and cries."). When other children came into the setting distressed, Lucy was witness to their uncontained emotion, often being re-directed to learning tasks instead of comforted. For example, when crying during carpet time, a child was asked an academic question, and when displaying upset in her voice the teacher said: "Say it with your happy voice". Lucy could be seen to rock back and forth and blow out her cheeks during this episode, demonstrating an attempt to self soothe and contain her response to the child's upset, whilst hearing the message that enthusiastic academic engagement will provide more positivity than displaying distress.

Lucy's drawings demonstrate this potential rejection of emotion, putting the negative feelings onto others while presenting herself as cheerful, almost like she is holding her anxiety at a distance. Lucy demonstrates this through the behavioural coping strategies

she has learnt to regulate herself when feeling overwhelmed. She shared: “I feel like I need to go to the toilet or wash my face. My tummy feels funny...sometimes I want to put my hands over my ears”. When I pointed out the distress of another peer whilst watching a child’s difficult separation, Lucy shared “I feel the same”. I felt this confirmed that her inner feelings were comparable to the outward distress of others, but regulated through other means of self-soothing. This isn’t just about being well-behaved or ‘good’, but perhaps a subtle way of managing the tension between how she feels inside and what the environment expects of her, showing how she balances maintaining connection with adults while keeping her own difficult feelings suppressed. Perhaps within the emotional moment, Lucy could suppress these feelings, and yet when the projective medium of the drawing was present, her emotions were displayed. Although this suppression was mainly successful for Lucy, the difficult emotions will often be externalised through unconscious projection. This emotion was detected within my countertransference experience, which is detailed below.

4.3.2.1 Personal reflections

The projected feeling impacted me through its effect on my embodied experience and thoughts. Firstly, the systemic pressure was evident in my own internal reaction during separation when Lucy’s mother called her back after separating: “I had the feeling of 'don’t call her, it will stop the smoothness of her leaving!'”. This thought, counter to my usual relational stance, felt like a projective identification with the school’s position (Bion, 1962); a thought connected to the fear that any pause might fracture the carefully avoided separation loss. As seen within the dismissal or avoidance of separation distress within the system, the setting opted for perfunctory separations with quick, smooth transitions,

void of any distress or emotion. My desire for Lucy's separation to be 'smooth' within the moment may be vocalising the fear of the system, that any separation which is not 'smooth' would disrupt the calm control of the classroom. Lucy's slight "disgruntled tone" when saying goodbye hinted at an almost dismissive reaction to the emotion within the moment, perhaps another reflection of the environment she was in and the responses witnessed by the staff (responding to distress with comments such as: "stop now, you need to stop.", "X, shhh. You didn't do any crying yesterday").

In session 1, whilst Lucy sat in the book corner, feet knocking against each other, my notes read: "Lucy sits alone with her book whilst a child sits next to her and plays with toys" "I have a nervous excitement, slight butterflies feeling. I wonder if Lucy feels this as well". Reading this back, I wonder why I stated that she was alone, when she has a peer sitting next to her. Perhaps I was picking up on a feeling of loneliness from Lucy, a non-literal, but visceral feeling that affected the coherence of my process notes.

My feelings of anxious butterflies within the session suggested a transference of Lucy's own defended anxiety, later confirmed by her explanation of her internal world (Figure 9/10). Although unsure at the time if it was mine or hers, in drawing 3, Lucy states "Well...I have a funny feeling in my tummy because this is the first day". With this insight, I believe this moment of an uncertain 'funny feeling' was transference from Lucy, feeling the anxious uncertainty of the first day, with me feeling this for her within my first observation. The symbolism in her first drawing (and going forward) was a large hill she needed to climb to get to school, perhaps demonstrating the enormity of her journey, physically and emotionally, to get to school.

4.3.3 Stage 2: Internalisation and the Struggle for Internal Order

The theme of internalisation highlights the ability to contain one's emotions in an attempt to create order and stability. This creates an outwardly calmer expression and allows the individual to remain in control of the emotion through suppression. It can also save them from having to outwardly feel the vulnerability of the difficult emotion. The first signs of internalised emotion for Lucy were physical, as listed below. Gradually, signs of cognitive coping strategies emerged whereby Lucy created independent containment through the creation of order. This outward order seemed to soothe her internal need for normalcy and structure in a new and uncertain time. Without showing overt protest, Lucy managed her emotional tension through physical and cognitive self-regulation. Her blank expression, repeated chewing of her tongue and behavioural signals mentioned above suggested an effort to contain difficult affects, suppressing internal disquiet.

In her play, Lucy sought to impose structure and external order to manage her internal chaos. Her engagement with her environment was centered on rules, patterns, and categories.

"She tells me that she's making an AB pattern... but often finds that she cannot complete her pattern due to missing pieces... she expressed happiness when she could put her blocks down uniformly and match the length of the sides.".

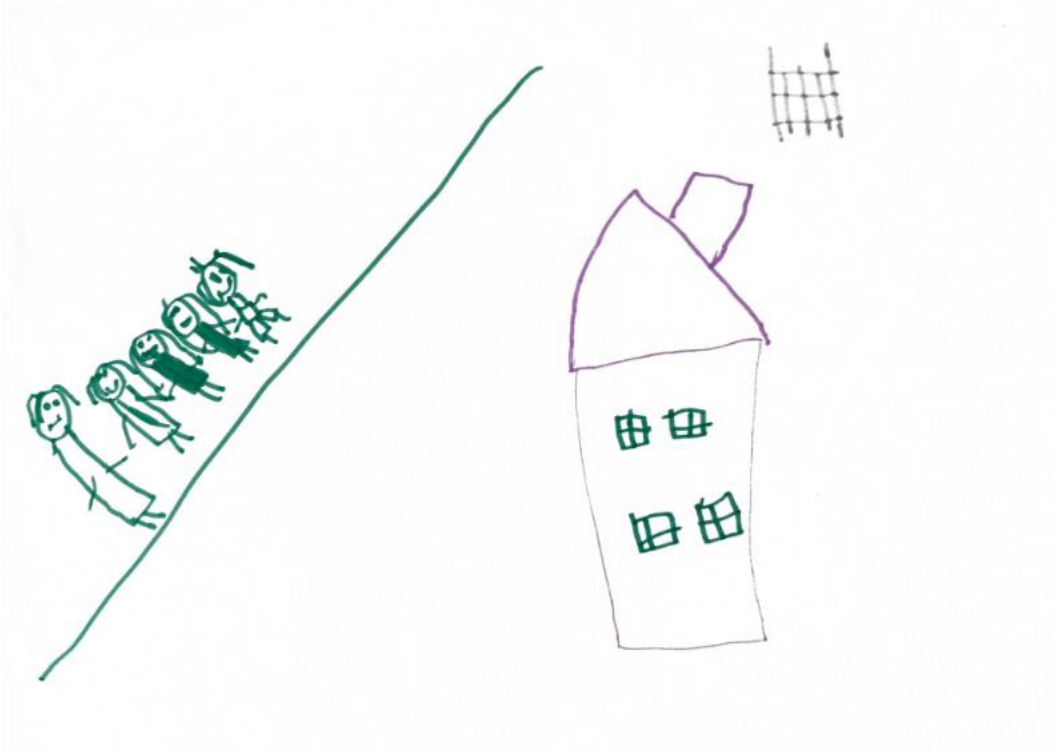
The frustration of the "missing pieces" in the puzzle activity resonated as a metaphor for the fragmentation and loss inherent in separation. Lucy's creation of uniform order through puzzles, crafts and self-generated games can be understood as an attempt to restore stability to her internal world. Drawing on Bion's (1962) concept of containment,

these structured activities may have allowed her to transform overwhelming emotion into something she could process within a trusting child–adult relationship. In this space, I could help her explore and make sense of these feelings. Winnicott's (1951, 1974) ideas of transitional phenomena and predictable spaces also help explain how her routines offered both refuge from classroom anxiety and a symbolic way to maintain connection to her family. The metaphor of "missing pieces" reflects internal gaps caused by separation, while her active organisation of these pieces represents an attempt to integrate absence and loss. Her increasing task rigidity created a predictable environment in which she could feel safe, returning to it as a refuge to visit her family mentally away from classroom sadness. This was also evident in her drawings, arranged with the same spacing and repeated features across all three sessions.

Within another aspect of her play, Lucy created a game with cards that had animals on them. Lucy commented that she "didn't think there were any rules" to the cards and so she will make them up, perhaps wanting to instill her own sense of rule and order. Within the game, myself or Lucy would pick up a pair of cards and decide if they were similar or not. These would then be put on a 'mystery pile' for later play. The person with the most cards at the end would win. I wondered if the 'mystery pile' would add an element of predictable surprise to the game, just as school has a structure and rules, but daily surprises. Perhaps the games rules created a sense of containment for the uncertainty of her new setting. Lucy is turning raw experience, uncertainty and battling with sameness and difference (discussed within the later theme), into conceptualised elements through rules. The "mystery pile" is a symbolic container, a place where unprocessed material can be held until she is ready to return to it.

Within this second session, Lucy commented that things are “tricky at first but they get easier and easier”. I wondered if this was an internalized mantra she used to cognitively process complex elements of her life such as separation. When she repeats rules and order, is she making it ‘easier and easier’ for herself to process the ‘tricky’ thing, creating understanding? Perhaps repetition also allowed Lucy to come closer to her emotional reality within drawing. After first projecting all emotion onto her sister, Lucy later draws her separation in session 2 a new perspective. Here, when asked how the people feel, she shares: “sometimes I'm a little bit in the middle. Sometimes I am a little nervous and sad and I feel all the feels in my body” (Drawing 2).

Figure 9: Drawing 2 – Lucy



Perhaps through creating repetition in her play, although a struggle at the start, creates clarity and order within her experience, allowing ‘all the feels’ to be gradually felt and accepted, becoming easier over time.

4.3.3.1 Personal reflections

This session was an impactful one for me. Lucy saying “I feel all the feels in my body” was such a simple yet profound way of expressing the depth of human experience. At her age, I did not have that level of awareness. The idea that my body could show me how I was feeling would have been unfamiliar, and I now feel that such awareness might have helped me meet my emotions with more kindness. Her acceptance that “things are tricky at first and then get easier” also offered a calm message in moments of hardship, including separation loss. I felt deeply moved by these reflections, as they held a self-awareness and maturity I would have benefitted from at that age. As children, adolescents and adults, we often try not to feel all the feels in our bodies, using suppression, avoidance or distraction to stay positive. These defenses can be helpful, yet the simplicity of Lucy’s insight stayed with me, holding hope that we can trust things will get easier and allow ourselves to feel what comes. This is why I chose to include her words in my title.

4.3.4 Stage 3: Mental Withdrawal and the Gate Trap

Within the emotional space of the classroom, Lucy seemed to find order and control in repetition, but also her ability to escape. Outwardly, Lucy could engage with the classroom learning well, and yet within the drawing/play space, she often phantasised about her life outside of school. Here, Lucy discusses her physical restriction through the ‘gate trap’, whilst developing her inner world of escapism.

Lucy drew a gate in every one of her drawings. One before her entrance into school, and then finally an additional gate just outside her classroom. The first gate seemed to be a significant threshold for her, stepping over it into a new environment. The second gate drawn was a different formation, comprising of circles, a bigger form than the previous. Increasingly throughout the sessions, Lucy seemingly uses mental withdrawal to cope with this feeling of being trapped, using memories and phantasy to escape (in the Kleinian sense of an unconscious symbolic scenario used to manage anxiety and express emotional reality; Klein 1932, Isaacs, 2018).

Lucy's gates were drawn before entering school on each drawing, and another appeared just outside her classroom in the final one. The first gate marked a significant threshold, representing her step away from the familiar security of home and attachment figures into a space of separation. From a Jungian perspective, gates often symbolise transitions into new psychological or developmental spaces (Jung, 1964), making this an apt metaphor for the emotional challenge she faced. The second gate, larger and composed of circles, was described by Lucy as a "gate trap," saying "I am going to draw the red gates which I haven't drawn before," highlighting her awareness of limits and her lack of control over leaving the setting. She explained that the teachers knew how to open it and that she could teach her sister, suggesting her sister functioned as both a literal and mental escape from a space where she experienced separation loss.

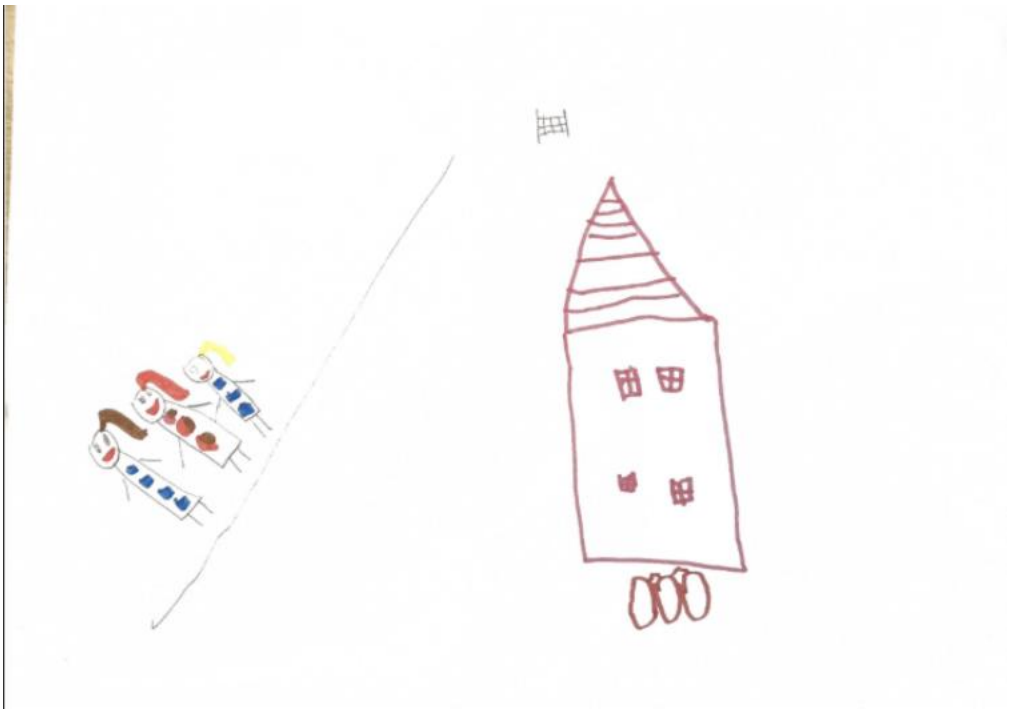
These gates acted as physical boundaries in her drawings, representing access and restriction. Through drawing and discussing them, Lucy externalised her feelings about being apart from her primary attachment figures, making visible her experience of constraint. The first gate symbolised the initial separation from home, while the second

captured her ongoing negotiation with the reality of classroom life, reflecting both environmental limits and her imaginative strategies for autonomy. From a psychodynamic perspective, this use of symbolic objects aligns with Winnicott's (1951) concept of transitional phenomena, in which children create symbolic representations to mediate the space between internal experience and external reality. This mirrors her earlier play with "missing pieces," perhaps processing the missing members of her family in daily school life. Previously she may have been trying to find her missing attachments; here she was symbolically processing her physical distance from them behind the gate trap.

Lucy's ultimate defense against the feeling of being trapped inside school and withstanding the loss of separation was mental withdrawal, a determined effort to remain psychologically connected to home. She achieved this by avoiding free play, preferring to engage in crafting (an activity associated with home) and detailing memories and stories of her family. Within the following quote, we can see the enormity of her feelings toward school was perhaps too much for Lucy, leading her to seek comfort in the memory of her mother's touch.

"I'm going to draw school really big." She then goes silent and sits still for a pause (doesn't draw school). *"We are all holding hands! Mummy has warm hands..."* (Drawing 3)

Figure 10: Drawing 3 – Lucy



Lucy's initial intention to draw the school "really big" suggests an attempt to engage with the external reality. The sudden pause and redirection can be understood as a moment where the expansive space of the school felt threatening, causing her to retreat mid-task back to the warmth and memory of her mother's touch. The shift away from school and toward maternal closeness can be understood as a defense (avoidant withdrawal, Klein, 1946) against the pain of separation. Rather than representing absence directly, Lucy replaces it with a phantasy of togetherness, temporarily undoing separation in her inner world. This fits well with object relations theory, where children use idealised internal objects to defend against loss and anxiety (Klein, 1946; Winnicott, 1974). In the absence of the caregiver, an internalised image of them as warm, available, and comforting can be drawn upon to regulate distress and preserve a sense of relational safety. The child can avoid the reality of their environment by mentally escaping to their comforting memory. In Lucy's drawing, the emphasis on togetherness and her mother's "warm hands"

suggests the use of such an idealised internal object to defend against the emotional pain of separation, allowing her to maintain closeness in phantasy when it cannot be experienced.

Within drawing 3, Lucy said: “The classroom is on its own even though there are lots of buildings around it.” This description may function as an unconscious metaphor for Lucy’s own experience: she is surrounded by peers and adults, yet often experiences a sense of aloneness or emotional isolation. The classroom can be seen as a symbolic representation of her internal world (Winnicott, 1974), where the proximity of others does not necessarily equate to emotional connection. Her perception of being “on its own” mirrors how she might feel in the relational space of the school, present, yet separated from attachment figures.

Furthermore, other than creating a relationship with me, there was no evidence of Lucy forming a secondary attachment with another member of staff. Lucy sometimes sought interaction: “Lucy goes over to the teacher and shows her drawing. The teacher suggests writing on it. Lucy turns away with a blank expression and returns to the writing table”, however the interactions were often functional and didn’t elicit closeness. Perhaps due to her vicarious experience of adults in the setting, Lucy did not seek closeness with them, or perhaps her strong connection to her family prohibited desire. Ultimately her strong relational ties remained predominantly outside of the home.

Lucy’s sense of isolation prompted her to create a phantasy resolution: a secret trap door where her sister could visit. This allowed her to manage the internal conflict of feeling alone, creating a symbolic bridge to her secure attachment figure while tentatively

accepting her physical separation. “There is a secret trap where there is a hole, and [sister] can visit me. I would love that” (Drawing 3). She moved between phantasy and reality, describing the trap as if it existed while acknowledging it as a wish. This reflects an intermediate position in which phantasy softens reality rather than denying it. She could recognise absence while imagining an alternative.

The use of the word trap is notable. Lucy had already spoken of the “gate trap,” a mechanism her sister could also operate. It may be that although she felt trapped in school, she was aware of her sister being similarly trapped elsewhere in the building, unseen and unreachable. She phantasised about escaping the gate trap while using a trap door to do so. What initially felt imposed and restrictive was transformed into a phantasy of regained agency. This suggests Lucy was reimagining an experience of powerlessness and protecting herself from overwhelm.

The enormity of school prompted a return to the comforting space of her mother’s contact, while the restriction of the gate trap prompted the creation of a secret door for her sister. Returning to the emotional safety of her family appears to be a dependable coping strategy for Lucy.

4.3.4.1 Personal reflections

It is difficult for me to connect with how I was feeling in this final session with Lucy. I was interested in her fantasies about her family and how she imagined being near them, but our play was limited. The only reciprocal interaction was the card game she had created in our first session, which she quickly dismissed as boring. She seemed discontented with any play and returned to talking about her family, telling me “[sister] is in her classroom.”

Although present as an interested researcher, I did not feel included as a relational partner. I became a listener for her desires and memories rather than someone she wanted for active play or connection. This may have blocked my own feelings from emerging, perhaps a form of countertransference, as Lucy chose the safety of her memories over engaging with her current emotions. Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971) describes a "potential space" between inner world and external reality where symbolic engagement occurs. Participation in this space is not always mutual; the child may keep the adult at a distance when fantasy and internal regulation feel private or protective. The adult's role can be to witness or hold the space until trust allows shared engagement. This helps explain the disconnect and Lucy's sense of boredom. My position may have been to provide emotional safety as a steady, containing figure, which muted my own emotional experience.

4.3.5 Stage 4: Processing Difference and Seeking Sameness

As part of her adjustment, Lucy actively processed the differences and similarities between her life and her family's, marking her new, independent experience (e.g., "Mummy and Daddy are going to a party together but me and [sister] are not going"). However, she consistently sought to reaffirm sameness with her primary caregiver, a need to maintain connection during loss (Bowlby, 1969).

She focused on shared physical traits ("Mummy's hair is long. She has the same hair as me") and symbolically merged her identity by drawing herself wearing her mother's party dress ("The dresses me and Mummy have on, they have flowers on. She has the same dress as me.") even though she was not attending the event (Drawing 3). Her desire to

pursue a helping job “like my Mummy” further cemented this effort to maintain an internal, continuous connection to her mother's identity, mitigating the emotional impact of the physical distance.

This phase seemingly links to Mahler’s separation individuation (1975), whereby a child becomes aware of their separate identity to their primary caregiver. Although an early stage in identity formation, perhaps Lucy is still coming to terms with the separate identities/lives her and her family lead, maintaining membership of the group and permanence of group identity through exploring physical indicators of sameness. It appears, although still playing with sameness to others, Lucy is slowly becoming more aware of her differences; her own feelings and internal world, and her own individuality. Instead of projecting this onto others, she can explore what she feels and who she is, through drawing.

Linking back to the animal card game, this was another exploration of sameness and difference for Lucy, which although revisited throughout the sessions, ended in her feeling bored and not carrying on with the game. Perhaps the boredom was a signal of a level of processing being achieved; she does not need to play this relationship out anymore.

4.3.5.1 Personal reflections

In the last session, Lucy came to the gate with her mum at the start of the day, saying, *“Suzie’s here!”*. Her mum gave her a squeeze and mentioned that Lucy had requested a half pony in her hair, as it had been like mine last week. Lucy smiled, kissed her mum, and leaned in, slightly embarrassed that she had told me her request. In that moment, I felt protective of Lucy, wanting to shield her from embarrassment. I was touched that I

had become someone she wished to resemble, which felt like an important relational signal and a sign of connection, especially with Lucy's exploration of sameness.

Given Lucy's evident fondness for her sister, I wondered if I symbolised a sisterly figure in her internal world, projecting aspects of this relationship onto me through projective identification (Klein, 1946, Bion 1962). Just as she imagines her sister visiting her through the "trapdoor," my presence in the room offered a real-life version of that protective function, holding a safe space in which she could explore her feelings and maintain a sense of connection to attachment figures. By taking on this role, I may have provided a symbolic extension of her sister's presence, allowing Lucy to experience connection and closeness despite physical separation.

4.3.6 Interpretative Summary

Lucy entered Reception navigating an environment that actively defended against the experience of separation by prioritizing outward positivity and compliance and leaving limited room for open loss. This left little space for her to process difficult emotions, which she managed through physical containment (chewing her tongue) and a structured, composed demeanor. Lucy's separation experience was seemingly one of emotional compartmentalization. Faced with a setting's expectations which demanded outward composure, she used sophisticated defense (imposing external structure and fantasy) to manage her loss. Her core struggle was negotiating the feeling of being "trapped" inside the school, which she eventually managed by using her drawing time as a projective canvas for processing loss and by creating a fantasy resolution to maintain connection.

Her adjustment was marked not by overt signs of loss lessening, but by the quiet, determined effort to build a symbolic, internal bridge back to the stability of home.

4.4 Shared and Different Experiences of Separation and Emotional Expression

In this section, I explore the similarities in how Oscar and Lucy experienced and expressed separation from their primary caregivers, highlighting common themes across their responses while acknowledging differences in expression and processing. Both children initially struggled to articulate their feelings verbally, relying on behavioral, symbolic, or imaginative means to communicate their experiences of loss. By examining these commonalities, the section aims to draw out patterns in emotional expression, coping strategies, and defensive processes, providing insight into how young children negotiate attachment-related separations in different ways.

4.4.1 Shared Processing of Separation: From Non-Verbal to Symbolic Expression

Both Oscar and Lucy felt the emotional impact of separation from their primary caregivers but initially struggled to express this verbally. Their early responses were non-verbal or symbolic, reflecting a gradual shift from unconscious emotional experience to conscious acknowledgment. This highlights the value of methods such as drawing or play, which allow children to process loss meaningfully (Yalom, 2002; Winnicott, 1974).

Oscar's early responses were behavioural. His first drawing was non-explicit and marked by force, such as breaking the pencil lead in Drawing 1, externalising anger and distress. He then moved into spatial symbolism in the second session, placing himself "on top of a mountain", conveying emotional and physical distance from his mothers and school. By

the third session, he drew himself alone inside Reception, tentatively acknowledging separation while avoiding direct engagement with the painful event, steadily moving toward more conscious symbolic representation, supported by the opportunity to externalise affect through drawing.

Lucy also struggled to verbalise her feelings, though her expression was symbolic and projected onto others. She initially described others' emotions rather than her own, saying, "Me and mummy are feeling good, but [sister] is feeling nervous… some children are crying and they are sad" (Drawing 1), and repeatedly drew herself with her family rather than the separation experience. School appeared only minimally, suggesting a defensive effort to maintain connection to attachment figures while avoiding separation-related sadness. Over time, she began verbalising her feelings: "I'm a bit in the middle. Sometimes I am a little nervous and sad… On the first day I was nervous and sometimes I am sad because I miss my mummy." She moved between this honest acknowledgment and fantasy-based containment, imagining her sister visiting through a trapdoor. This reflects her movement between engaging with loss and retreating to an internal safe space.

Across both children, there is a progression from non-verbal or behavioural expression to symbolic or verbal acknowledgment. Drawing, whether through spatial symbolism or imaginative phantasy, enabled Oscar and Lucy to externalise emotions safely while beginning to articulate them consciously. Their responses reveal the fragile and shifting nature of separation, as they moved *between connecting to the loss and defending against its emotional intensity.*

4.4.2 Shared Escapism: Chaos versus Internalising

Escapism emerged as a prominent defence against separation for both children, allowing them to manage the emotional intensity of being apart from primary caregivers. Both Oscar and Lucy often escaped from the immediate reality of separation, but in ways that reflected their individual coping styles.

Oscar's response was behavioural and externalised. Through chaotic play, he enacted distress physically, using aggressive or frenetic movements to symbolically represent anger, anxiety and resistance to the separation experience. This can be understood as a defence that enables him to discharge emotions that are too overwhelming to process internally (Freud, 1914/1962; Bion, 1962). Freud described this as acting out, the repetition of unmentalised emotional experience through action rather than reflection, functioning as protection from overwhelm. Oscar's physical engagement with objects provided a safe outlet and a degree of containment within the session, even as he struggled to consciously engage with the reality of separation. Over time, this form of escapism appeared to support emotional progression, allowing him to process feelings and gradually strengthen connections with others in the room.

Lucy's response was symbolic and internalised. She retreated into memories and narratives about her family, recounting nostalgic or imagined experiences as if replaying a comforting past. This symbolic escapism functioned as a defence against directly experiencing her own separation-related emotions, consistent with Klein's (1946) ideas on projection and internal object management. By immersing herself in these internal constructs, Lucy maintained a sense of continuity with her attachment figures but limited

her engagement with the reality of her current situation. Unlike Oscar, whose escapism contained an element of emotional processing, Lucy's approach appeared to stall integration, reinforcing a protective psychic space.

Despite these differences, the underlying pattern is shared. Both children sought refuge from the painful emotional reality of separation through altered experiences of space or action. These behaviours illustrate defensive strategies used to negotiate affective overwhelm, where Oscar's externalisation allowed for eventual engagement and Lucy's internalisation provided temporary emotional safety but did not necessarily support active processing.

4.4.3 Shared Rejection of Integration: Compliance Versus Protest

Both children demonstrated a rejection of emotional integration into the reception setting, yet their strategies were fundamentally different, reflecting distinct defensive styles in response to separation and transition.

Lucy's rejection was largely covert and expressed through compliance with environmental expectations. Although outwardly engaged in school and keen to learn, her play was limited. She moved quickly between activities and rarely played with others. This restriction of relational and spontaneous play suggested a psychological absence and a protective withholding of herself from full engagement with the setting. By focusing on academic compliance, Lucy satisfied external expectations while emotionally maintaining her core connection to family, symbolically rejecting the new group and affirming continuity with her attachment figures. Her functional integration masked an internal

resistance to fully experiencing separation, reflecting the tension between outward adaptation and inward defensive strategies (Winnicott, 1974).

Oscar's rejection of integration was more overt and active, manifesting as direct protest and behavioural resistance (Bowlby, 1969). He expressed immediate distress, clinging to mother 2 and to objects symbolising home, such as the doll's house. His anger and withdrawal were externalised and often directed toward staff, reflected in interactions where he was positioned at the side of the carpet or did not respond to questions or encouragement. His later admissions of fear, such as "He says no, and says he is scared to do it" and "Oscar says no that is scary," provided emotional context for his resistance. Oscar's behaviour can be understood as active protest against separation while attempting to maintain connection to attachment figures. His refusal to participate fully represented a protective effort to preserve emotional safety, using physical and relational boundaries to manage overwhelming affect. Although his behaviour appeared rejecting, it may have been a way of showing how strongly he needed closeness during separation.

While Lucy's strategy relied on internalised compliance and withholding, Oscar's relied on externalised protest and refusal. Both illustrate how children defend against the emotional demands of separation: one by withdrawing emotionally while appearing compliant, the other by expressing anger and asserting control through action. In each case, the child's pattern reflects the need to manage affect, maintain attachment security and negotiate the tension between presence and separation, highlighting the complex interplay of defence, attachment and emerging autonomy within the transitional school setting.

4.4.4 Shared Level of Outward Expression: Internalization vs. Externalization

Both children expressed their emotions, yet the key difference lay in the mode and intensity of their expression, reflecting distinct approaches to regulating distress. Lucy's expression was far less overt than Oscar's. Her difficulty appeared through subtle physical cues, such as her “often neutral... or slightly forlorn” expression and the anxious action of chewing her tongue. This suggests an internalisation of emotion to maintain composure. Her expressiveness became outwardly visible only within the safety of the sessions, where she could articulate sadness. Her comment, “I forgot to draw my face (Drawing 3),” may indicate a preoccupation with external relationships that led her to overlook her own immediate emotional state. From an object relations perspective, this reflects a way of managing difficult emotions while maintaining connection to important others (Klein, 1946). Winnicott (1965) would view this as part of a compliant or false self organisation, in which a child adapts to environmental demands and prioritises relational safety over spontaneous self-expression. Lucy’s omission of herself from the drawing can therefore be understood as a protective strategy that allowed her to cope with separation while keeping distress contained.

Oscar's expression was overt and behavioural, continuing well beyond the initial separation event. This ongoing externalisation made his distress publicly visible and dynamically integrated into his play. His movements and behaviour functioned as a communication system with relational significance, allowing him to test the stability of the relationship with me and possibly identify me as a temporary attachment figure. The trust built through this testing facilitated the expression of core anger in the second session, before his defences relaxed enough in the third session for him to show uninhibited

positive expression, such as “squealing with excitement.” Oscar's behavioural expression therefore served as a direct indicator of his emotional process. From an attachment perspective, these behaviours acted as signals of need, allowing him to test the reliability of the adult relationship (Bowlby, 1969). Through these behaviours, Oscar could regulate overwhelming emotions and gradually shift toward engagement and positive expression (Bion, 1962).

4.4.5 Shared Connecting to Others: Finding Secondary Attachment Figures

Oscar and Lucy both wanted to maintain connection and continuity with their primary caregivers. However, they differed markedly in how they established connections in school during the first weeks of separation. Lucy, entering the setting with prior attachments from nursery, engaged with peers during the transition session, but these connections often dissipated when she was placed in different classes. Although staff perceived her as sociable and positioned her as a buddy to new children (“TA tells a child who did not attend the transition days to go to Lucy and help her with the puzzle”), these interactions did not appear to foster meaningful connection (“He approaches and stands awkwardly next to her. They stand side by side quietly... They stand quietly again, facing the puzzle. Neither say anything”). Over time, Lucy’s relationships with peers remained relatively distant, seemingly secondary to her focus on successful learning. Her comment that staff were “quite kind” while teaching phonics suggests her engagement was primarily instrumental, aligned with the classroom’s emphasis on academic attainment. This may help explain why her relational experiences remained limited. From an attachment perspective, this pattern highlights her cautious approach to forming secondary

attachments, maintaining proximity to known attachment figures while gradually exploring peer relationships (Bowlby, 1969).

In contrast, Oscar formed secondary attachments quickly, most notably with Peer 1, a familiar child outside of Reception, while initially rejecting staff connection. Over time, he also developed a relationship with his teaching assistant, inviting comfort (“He allows her to rub his back whilst she tries to comfort him”), play (“Oscar asks TA to come outside”), and accepting rewards (“TA asks if he would like one or two stickers ... Oscar excitedly asks for two”). These relational experiences appear to have supported his integration into the setting, as reflected in his third drawing, which showed greater relational confidence and engagement.

4.4.6 Similarities and Differences in Personal Response to the Children

4.4.6.1 Closeness and its Limits

The main similarity in my experience was my strong interest in both children. I felt close to them, but in different ways and at different times. With Lucy, I felt an immediate closeness, finding connection easy because she was willing to let me in. She allowed access to her inner world quickly, and I gained insight into her thoughts early on. Although this relationship felt easier, it also had limits. It was reflective and full of thoughtful conversation, yet remained somewhat distant because Lucy did not yet hold relational space for others beyond her family. By the end of our time together, I felt the relationship had reached its usefulness for her, functioning more as a space for sharing than for building something new.

With Oscar, the experience was almost the opposite. At the start, I felt overwhelmed by his play and expression, sensing a risk to closeness and anticipating rejection. Over time, I recognised the privilege of being in his space and realised he was communicating a great deal, simply in a more raw and unfiltered form. As the weeks progressed, I felt a growing closeness and understanding that emerged only through extended time together. In our final session, I was left with the sense that our connection was only just beginning, and I regretted not having more time with him.

4.4.6.2 The Self as a Vessel

For both Oscar and Lucy, the psychodynamic nature of the research and the insight gained from reflecting on my own emotional experience were pivotal. Although both children communicated richly through words and behaviour, the emotional experience of being with them in the research space felt equally important. Witnessing Oscar's anger and feeling anxious distress, and witnessing Lucy's composure and feeling sadness, deepened my understanding of their internal worlds. This created a curiosity not only about what was spoken but also about what was unspoken or not consciously felt. I can never fully know the inner world of another, or even my own, but the power of countertransference (Heimann, 1950) is something I will carry forward in my career. It offered a meaningful source of connection and understanding for which I am grateful.

4.4.6.3 Reflections on the Inner Child

Looking back to my own childhood, there is both sameness and difference to consider. As a young girl, I would have compared myself somewhat to Lucy. I enjoyed creating and was drawn to conformity and meeting teacher expectations. Although I doubt I was as

emotionally composed or articulate as Lucy, her outlook felt familiar. Oscar, on the other hand, expressed himself far more overtly. He was honest with his emotions and seemed unconcerned with pleasing adults or the consequences of his self-directed behaviour. This contrasted with my own self-perception and brought a sense of unease and unpredictability, but also interest and admiration. There was a clear juxtaposition for me between Oscar's honesty and rebelliousness and Lucy's composure and compliance. I felt safe in the familiarity of Lucy and intrigued by the bravery of Oscar. Perhaps this is something for me to explore further in my own self-discovery, but both children possess qualities I admire, and I am sure my younger self could have learned from them.

4.5 Conclusion

Lucy and Oscar's early experiences of separation in reception offer insight into the personal and varied ways children navigate temporary loss. Both showed pronounced emotional responses to being apart from their primary attachment figures, yet the ways they processed and expressed these feelings were markedly different. Oscar's experience was behavioural and externalised, communicating distress through active play, protest and relational testing. Lucy's responses were more subtle, internalised and symbolic, expressed through memory, fantasy and carefully controlled interactions.

Despite these differences, a shared thread emerges. Both children sought ways to maintain connection and continuity with their primary caregivers while negotiating the demands of a new environment. Their experiences show that separation is not simply a practical adjustment but a relational process in which the child must reconcile the reality of loss with the possibility of new attachments and experiences. Each child's approach,

whether through external expression, imaginative engagement or selective social connection, represents a meaningful strategy for navigating the emotional challenges of this transition.

These findings have broader implications for supporting children in early education settings. They highlight the importance of recognising both overt and subtle emotional cues, providing opportunities for safe expression and acknowledging that the integration of new social and learning experiences inevitably intersects with each child's internal world and attachment needs. Lucy and Oscar's experiences illustrate that the first weeks of school are not only a logistical transition but a psychological journey in which children negotiate identity, security and connection within a new relational landscape. Most importantly, this data shows that when given the opportunity, children have a great deal to say about what separation is like for them, and as adults, we need to listen.

5. Discussion

5.1 Introduction

The aim of the current research was to understand the daily separation experiences of reception aged children. The space for children to discuss this experience has not been explored in research before, which this study aimed to rectify. This chapter begins by considering the novel findings within the current research and how these are similar and different to existing literature. The findings illustrated contrasting journeys: Oscar's struggle with separation involved feelings of loss and anger toward his primary caregiver, expressed through defensive rejection of school staff and chaotic play, gradually shifting toward acceptance of connection and inclusion. In contrast, Lucy's experience was characterised by defensive projection of loss, rapid conformity to the setting, and withdrawal into predictable activities as a means of maintaining a sense of connection to her family, including the creation of fantasies to cope with absence. Similarities and differences between these experiences are explored, alongside initial implications for education professionals and educational psychology practice.

Next, we revisit the study's innovative methodological approach, which combined Tavistock-style observation, child-led free play sessions, and projective drawing tasks, offering new insights into triangulating child voice. These data sources were analysed through a psychosocial lens, drawing on psychodynamic theory to interpret both conscious and unconscious processes and to provide deeper insight into the experience of separation. This chapter also considers critical reflections on using PIPS as an analytic framework and the suitability of observation, play, and drawing as data collection methods.

Finally, recommendations for future research and the dissemination strategy are presented.

5.2 Key findings

How do children experience daily separation when starting school?

The results of the current study demonstrate that regardless of behavioral presentation and perceived visible distress, children can feel a considerable sense of loss and difficulty when separating from their PC. Both children in the current study experienced comparatively different separation journeys, both with experience of separation when attending nursery and childcare settings and still being emotionally affected by the transition to school. Furthermore, given the differing presentations, the current study shows the value in providing space and time for *all* children to express their feelings around separation and how using child-friendly and creative techniques such as drawing and play can provide valuable processing space and non-verbal avenues for expression.

There are features of the experience useful to highlight in understanding separation, but also the unique and profound moment separation is for all children, and hearing their individual stories is important for not only adult understanding, but also valuable processing for that child.

5.2.1 Answering the research question in relation to data, theory and literature

The following section first highlights findings in relation to the research question, exploring how children experience daily separation. It then details the novel findings uncovered through the data, and how these findings relate to the existing literature. Theoretical implications are considered, with more practical and explicit strategies outlined in the following section.

5.2.1.1 Children process their experience of separation loss differently.

To answer the research question and compare my findings to the literature, I will first talk to the themes within: Shared Processing of Separation: From Non-Verbal to Symbolic Expression. Although in different ways, with Oscar expressing distress outwardly and Lucy more privately, the current research has found varied presentations of loss. This theme contributes a novel lens to understanding children's experience of daily separation, suggesting that passive, quiet, or compliant presentations can mask significant internal loss. Whereas previous research has tended to interpret blankness as passive despair (Datler et al, 2010), the current study indicates that it may also function as a protective, relationally-mediated mode of coping, especially in emotionally constraining environments. In other words, the child's internal world may remain highly active and affectively charged (as shown within Lucy's drawings), even when outward expressions appear muted. Attending closely to how each child expressed (or did not express) their separation-related feelings provides insight into the emotional and relational work involved in the daily experience of being left.

Within Oscar's resistance, it is clear that children's separation distress is not isolated; it is felt through the relational space and the observing adult, an aspect that is

under-acknowledged in the current literature. Within my findings, Oscar demonstrated his loss in the form of clinging and protest, frequently crying and physically holding on to his mother during the separation. These behaviours mirror what is described in the existing literature, where active distress, crying, and bodily proximity are well-documented responses to early separations (Golkhou, 2024; Datler et al., 2010; White et al., 2021; Nakaoka, 2014). Similar to observations by Gath et al. (2024), Oscar's distress was most intense at drop-off, though unlike some of the children in their study, his emotional activation did not escalate across the day during the early separations. Notably, my own emotional response to witnessing this distress felt significant, echoing the experiences of Datler et al. (2010) and Nakaoka (2014), who also described the emotional strain and "painful" quality of observing children struggle through these moments (p.254).

In contrast, Lucy's experience of separation involved a quieter, more inward form of loss, marked by sadness but without overt protest. Rather than actively clinging or crying, she managed her emotional discomfort through the creation of routines and internal structures, retreating into comforting thoughts. At times, both children appeared to shift into a subtle, withdrawn state, a "trance-like" stillness, with an open mouth and a temporary disengagement from the relational or learning environment. This behaviour closely resembles descriptions of "absent minded" or blank expressions found across the literature. Datler et al. (2010) depicts a child "staring blankly ahead of himself" (p.77), while Klette and Killen (2019) note similar flat, vacant expressions among children experiencing separation. Nakaoka (2014) also observed a "dull and flat" affective presentation (p.251).

Both children reflected this pattern, though it held particular relevance for Lucy because she seldom expressed her distress outwardly. This raises the possibility that her passivity was not simply temperament or coping preference, but potentially a form of conformity to classroom emotional norms; a response shaped by expectations around “being good,” staying regulated, or not displaying strong emotion. This aligns with literature suggesting that, in environments with limited emotional holding, children may adopt a passive or expressionless state as an adaptive protection against the risk of emotional exposure (e.g., Datler et al., 2010). Such withdrawal, then, may represent not resignation but a defensive strategy to preserve emotional safety in a setting where expression may be unacknowledged or even discouraged.

5.2.1.1.1 Implications for the field

Implications for EY education and EP practice are substantial. A child who appears calm, quiet, or “settled” at separation may, in fact, be communicating overwhelm or loss through withdrawal of attention, reduced presence, or a subtly “absent” state. For practitioners, this emphasises the importance of reading beyond behaviour and attending to moments of quiet disengagement as potential indicators of unexpressed distress. For EPs working with schools, these findings underscore the need to support staff in developing relationally sensitive interpretations of children’s behaviour during transitions. Rather than relying on externalised signs of struggle, adults can cultivate awareness of these quieter signals and offer attuned relational support, helping children return from withdrawal into co-regulated engagement with their environment. Furthermore, some children may defend against their more vulnerable emotional experiences by expressing alternative emotions that feel more manageable or socially acceptable. For example, Oscar presented with more overt

behavioural anger than sadness, despite verbally acknowledging both. It may therefore be helpful for staff to bear in mind that the emotion displayed can function as a defense against a more vulnerable underlying feeling, and that recognising this may support a deeper understanding of the child's emotional experience.

5.2.1.2 Children resist their separations through escapism.

Within this finding, I will mainly refer to the findings within the shared theme of: Escapism: Chaos versus Internalizing. The following theme suggests that children experience separation as a difficult event which they do not want to happen, causing resistance. Rather than viewing these behaviours as oppositional, these unique findings suggest that they may function as protective strategies through which children negotiate their transition away from their caregiver and create an internal world of escape and safety.

Across the separation literature, resistance is a commonly observed pattern, often emerging as physical refusal, tension, or moments of conflict with others (Klette & Killen, 2019; Datler et al., 2010; Dolby et al., 2023). These behaviours are frequently framed as struggle or defiance, marking the child's difficulty in accepting separation. The current study aligns with these interpretations to an extent, as resistance was present for both children, though manifested differently.

Importantly, the findings of this study suggest that resistance can occur both externally, through physical protest or refusal to engage, and internally, through mental withdrawal and reduced relational presence. This internal form of resistance resonates with the current data when mentioning themes such as the "gate trap", where Lucy enters the physical space of the setting but retains a psychological closeness to the caregiver,

limiting their emotional availability to the environment. This highlights a more subtle dimension of resistance not always captured in behaviour-focused analyses: withdrawal into memory, fantasy, or internalised relational spaces as a means of managing the separation.

Recognising these patterns expands existing understandings of resistance. While much of the literature foregrounds overt, chaotic, or disruptive responses, the current study contributes a nuanced interpretation of quieter resistance as equally meaningful. Where overt protest expresses the child's struggle visibly, internal withdrawal may reflect a different but related protective process, one aimed at maintaining emotional continuity with the caregiver or shielding the child from the demands of an unfamiliar relational environment.

This reframing positions resistance not as disobedience but as a developmentally understandable defense against loss and uncertainty. The variation in how resistance appeared across the two children further reinforces that such behaviours are deeply shaped by individual differences, relational histories, and the emotional culture of the setting. Some children externalise their struggle; others retreat inward. Both responses communicate a need for relational safety.

5.2.1.2.1 Implications for the field

Implications for EY practice and Educational Psychology are that when resistance is interpreted narrowly as non-compliance, opportunities for relational understanding are lost. A child who refuses to join activities may be signaling fear rather than defiance; a child who mentally withdraws may be coping with loss rather than disengaging from

learning. Supporting practitioners to recognise the protective function of these behaviours can shift responses away from behavioural correction and towards co-regulation, relational support, and the creation of emotionally containing transitions. In this way, resistance becomes not a barrier to participation but an important indicator of how the child is experiencing separation. Understanding it through a relational lens enables more attuned, compassionate, and developmentally sensitive responses.

5.2.1.3 Children express their separation experience symbolically.

This theme speaks to another way in which children experience daily separation: through symbolisation and creative expression. Symbolic play, crafting, and imaginative activity appeared to offer both children alternative avenues for processing the emotional complexities of parting from their caregiver and entering the EY setting. In contrast to the limited methods used in the literature, the current study used creative relational and psychological bridges, supporting the child's movement between home and school.

A notable contribution of this study is the insight that symbolisation may look different depending on the child's preferred medium of expression. For some children, this may emerge in overtly symbolic play sequences; for others, it may be located in crafting, or quieter imaginative spaces. This challenges the idea that symbolic work must appear as clear symbolic play in order to be meaningful. Particularly when considering its use with older children or those with more internally oriented coping styles, creative outlets may become more discursive or representational rather than physically enacted.

This finding also highlights the importance of developmentally sensitive opportunities for symbolisation within EYFS settings. While younger children may benefit from access to

transitional objects or simple connecting–disconnecting play materials, older children may require more self-directed play to process separation in ways that feel congruent with their developmental stage and emotional style. The opportunity for creative expression appears especially significant, providing a safe relational distance in which children can explore feelings that may be too intense to express directly.

In contrast to some of the younger children described in the literature, transitional objects were less prominent in this study. This may reflect developmental shifts, as older children are more likely to use internalised symbols or play-based representations rather than concrete objects to manage separation. However, symbolic expression remained clearly present, aligning with the rich tradition of psychoanalytic and developmental work showing that play serves as a medium through which children explore loss, connection, absence, and return.

The literature documents a range of symbolic behaviours during separation such as games of presence and absence or repetitive connecting and disconnecting (e.g., Nakaoka, 2014; Datler et al., 2010). The current study partially reflected these patterns, particularly in moments where themes of proximity, movement, and re-connection appeared in the children's self-directed activity. At times, creative engagement appeared to function as a means of holding the caregiver psychologically close while simultaneously negotiating the demands of the setting.

5.2.1.3.1 Implications for the field

This theme has valuable implications for Early Years and Educational Psychology practice. Symbolisation offers a route for children to process the emotional load of

separation without needing to articulate their experience verbally or show overt distress. When practitioners recognise these creative expressions as relational communications rather than mere play, they become attuned to the child's emotional process and better able to support it. EPs can play a key role in helping settings understand the symbolic dimensions of play and creativity, ensuring that daily routines allow space for children to externalise and transform their separation experience through manageable, imaginative forms. The psychodynamic framework provides meaningful depth in understanding the complex communications within play. These theories are not commonly taught within all Educational Psychology courses, meaning additional/expanded curriculum focuses may be necessary.

This theme suggests that symbolisation and creative activity are central to how children cope with the loss and uncertainty in daily separation. Through engaging creatively, children generate continuity between home and school and can process some of the meaning of the transition. At this stage of development, perhaps children need this to be in a relational space, processing their experience in the presence of a containing adult as to feel safe with without overwhelm or dysregulation.

5.2.1.4 Children experience separation within a relational space

This theme offers insight into how children's experience of daily separation is shaped by relationships, and how those relationships can either support or complicate the child's emotional adjustment. Peer interaction emerged as a nuanced and often fragile aspect of the separation process, capable of offering connection and shared understanding, but also capable of heightening distress when mismatched or emotionally uncontained.

Relationships to staff also highlighted how the classroom ethos regarding expression of loss can, at times, hinder open processing. The current research highlights how the children's defense mechanisms against feeling loss can be closely linked to the relationships around them. A symbiotic interplay previously undiscovered.

Across the literature, peer connections have been described as potential sources of comfort: opportunities for mood lifting (Gath et al., 2024) and vicarious learning about separation (Dolby et al., 2023). Yet these benefits rely heavily on attunement. When peers fail to meet the child's emotional state (or when the interaction is chaotic, over-stimulating, or emotionally mismatched) researchers have noted that the experience can feel painful or isolating (Datler et al., 2015; Datler et al., 2010; Nakaoka, 2014). The findings of the present study resonate strongly with this tension. The children's peer interactions frequently reflected moments of reach and retreat, desire for connection intertwined with defence against overwhelming emotion. For Oscar, he used Peer 1 as a defence against his feelings of loss, distracting himself in the chaos of play to avoid his experience of separation.

In the literature, peer relationships seemed to offer short-lived relief from the emotional weight of separation (Datler et al, 2015). Where this connection was familiar or regulating, peers served as a temporary buffer to loss. However, in the current study, consistent with the literature, when peer interaction did not meet the child's relational expectations connection broke down quickly, such as when Oscar and Peer 1 became less aligned and he instead sought interaction with the wider setting. The speed with which these relationships shifted highlights the underlying emotional instability of the separation

period: peers could be comforting, but they could also disrupt the child's access to attuned support.

A further insight emerging from this theme concerns the impact of staff relationships. Existing research has identified that when staff respond to children's sadness with premature cheer, distraction, or task-oriented focus, children may experience this as misattunement or emotional dismissal (Nakaoka, 2014; Datler et al., 2010). This restricts the child's opportunity to express loss and can exacerbate withdrawal or defensiveness. The findings suggest similar dynamics were present here when Lucy's adult interactions centred around if she was excited, and not how she generally felt. From this, Lucy showed signs of emotional distress (chewing tongue and rocking on the carpet) but did not overtly show the sadness that she expressed within her drawings. Instead, Lucy mirrored the defense against separation loss demonstrated within her classroom, by not outwardly acknowledging or reacting to it within the moment.

5.2.1.4.1 Implications for the field

If schools prioritise learning, routine, or "getting on with the day" over allowing emotional expression, children may turn to peers for regulation they cannot find in the adult relationship or suppress it altogether. Without the scaffolding of attuned adult presence, interactions can lead to dysregulation, or disconnection. Interactions during separation appear highly sensitive to the emotional climate of the classroom. They can mirror the child's defensive strategies (such as withdrawal, or seeking chaotic excitement) and may amplify or soothe the uncertainties of transition depending on how well the emotional environment holds these processes. For EP practice, this points to the importance of

supporting staff to provide not only behavioural guidance but emotional containment, helping staff to foster supportive relationships in developmentally helpful ways. It allows practitioners to read these interactions more sensitively and respond in ways that protect emotional safety.

5.3 Reflections on methodology

5.3.1 Direct involvement

A key distinction between this study and much of the existing literature lies in the way children's perspectives were accessed. Previous research has relied entirely on adult observation and researcher interpretation (Datler et al., 2010, 2015; Nakaoka, 2014; Xu, 2006; White et al., 2021; Dolby et al., 2023; Gath et al., 2024; Golkhou, 2024; Mellenius et al., 2023; Klette and Killen, 2018), whereas this study foregrounds children's direct verbal contributions alongside projective methods. While both approaches illuminate conscious and unconscious processes, the depth of insight afforded by active child involvement is striking. Projective drawings provided a symbolic medium through which children could externalise aspects of their inner world, enabling the articulation of loss while revealing the complexity of their emotional experience. This dual access to conscious expression and latent meaning clarifies what children may be aware of, and when, during the separation process. Such understanding is critical for informing timely, attuned adult responses and guiding developmentally appropriate support.

A key strength of this study was the use of triangulation across observation notes, play narratives and projective drawings, enabling a multi-modal understanding of children's experiences. This approach resonates with participatory frameworks such as the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), which advocate combining diverse methods to capture

children's perspectives. While Mosaic methods often focus on event or space-based view gathering, the current study extends this principle to the emotional domain, using projective techniques to access latent meaning alongside verbal and behavioural expression. This adaptation enhances depth and credibility, reducing reliance on a single modality and grounding interpretations in multiple forms of evidence. For young children, this is essential, as creative methods allow natural, playful expression rather than overreliance on language or coherent narrative. Expanding our perception of voice expands children's ability to communicate their experiences.

The methodological approach was responsive to the child, prioritising agency and attunement throughout data collection. Observation and play sessions were entirely child-led, allowing participants to explore and express their experiences in verbal and non-verbal ways. While projective drawing introduced a degree of researcher direction, it was implemented through a child-friendly prompt that encouraged creativity without imposing rigid structure. This balance ensured that children retained control over the process while being offered symbolic tools to externalise their inner worlds. Such responsiveness aligns with psychosocial principles of co-construction and relational ethics, recognising the defended subject and valuing the child's perspective as central to meaning-making (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013; Winnicott, 1974). The benefit is a method that meets the child in a space of structure and freedom. It allows creative autonomy in representing personal experience while offering a familiar and accessible means of engagement. Schools have ready access to play and drawing resources, making this method widely accessible for those seeking to understand children's voices.

5.3.2 Participant group

The current study further extends the understanding of separation past the early experiences foregrounded in previous research. In the previous literature, the age range spanned from newborns (Golkhou, 2024) up to 2-3 years (Golkhou, 2024; Nakaoka, 2014; Datler et al, 2010, 2025) with all others falling in between. Although capturing children's first separation experiences, it gave little insight into how this experience is processed when the child is old enough to express themselves more coherently and what this is like when separation is a daily, routine occurrence.

Unlike research that positions children as passive subjects, this study adopts a participatory ethos, doing research with children, not to them, through methods that invite agency and symbolic expression (play and projective drawing). This approach aligns with psychosocial principles of co-construction and reflexivity.

By exploring perspectives of children who are old enough to express themselves verbally *and* symbolically, this study offers insight into how coping strategies evolve beyond preverbal behaviours, revealing nuanced patterns of projection, fantasy, and relational negotiation. Understanding how children consciously and unconsciously manage daily separations provides educators and psychologists with a richer basis for attuned support, enabling interventions that respect both developmental stage and emotional complexity.

5.3.3 Participant Involvement

Across the reviewed studies, children's symbolic expressions, such as using objects or play to process separation, were interpreted only by adults, with little opportunity for triangulation or confirmation from the child's perspective (White et al., 2021; Nakaoka, 2014; Xu, 2006; Datler et al., 2010). Although these interpretations offer valuable insights,

they risk privileging adult assumptions over children's own meaning-making, especially given the power imbalance in adult–child research relationships. This highlighted a significant gap that the current study set out to address by creating space for children to clarify, expand on, and contribute to the interpretation of their own experiences.

Methodologically, most previous research relied heavily on observation (Gath et al., 2024; Klette and Killen, 2018; Datler et al., 2010, 2015; Xu, 2006; Nakaoka, 2014), sometimes supported by video recordings (White et al., 2021; Dolby et al., 2023) or adult-framed interpretations (Mellenius et al., 2023; Golkhou, 2024). While these approaches provide valuable behavioural insights, they offer limited access to children's subjective and symbolic meaning-making, particularly when verbal language is still emerging. Few studies used multi-modal or participatory methods that invite children to actively shape how their experiences are represented, which risks prioritising observable behaviour over internal processes and limits exploration of unconscious dynamics.

In response to these gaps, the current study introduced a more participatory and child-responsive approach. By combining observation with creative, projective, and child-led techniques, and by drawing on a Gestalt lens to support meaning-making, the study enabled children to express and clarify their experiences directly. This approach balanced the need for adult guidance at a young age with a commitment to children's agency and their right to be involved in research and have their voices heard, both literally and figuratively. This shift represents a meaningful methodological and ethical contribution, offering a richer and more valid account of children's lived experiences.

5.3.4 Researcher role

The absence of robust reflexivity represented a significant gap in the evidence base. Although some studies acknowledged researcher influence and emotional responses (e.g., Nakaoka, 2014; Datler et al., 2010, 2015; Golkhou, 2024), many offered only minimal critique of how positionality or unconscious dynamics shaped data collection and interpretation (Gath et al., 2024; Xu, 2006; Dolby et al., 2023; Mellenius et al., 2023; White et al., 2021). For this reason, the current study focused on researcher reflection, considering how the dynamic gives insight into child experience, but also creates an ethical boundary between the known experience of the researcher and interpreted experience of the child.

5.4 Implications of the findings

The following implications section builds upon the theoretical implications outlined above by suggesting practical recommendations those working with the EYFS stages could implement to support young children with separation.

5.4.1 Educational psychology practice

An important implication for Educational Psychology practice is the need for practitioners to understand the depth and significance of this stage for young children and the complexity of the emotional processing involved. EPs are often called into Early Years settings to support staff with emotional regulation and behaviour. When visiting children, EPs can highlight the importance of separation and consider how it may shape adjustment. The current research also shows that even when children have previous experience of separation, such as at nursery, they may still find separation difficult when starting school.

EPs frequently conduct observations to understand what may be happening for a child before offering advice. This study demonstrates the value of observation, but also shows how the Tavistock model can provide a deeper level of insight than behavioural observations focused on minute-to-minute note taking. When practitioners become attuned to the child and use their emotional responses as data, the countertransference that emerges can offer meaningful information about the child's internal experience. Although the Tavistock model is commonly taught at the Tavistock Institute, it is less widely used elsewhere, suggesting value in broader adoption. Within the local authority I will work in post-qualification, I intend to share this approach, presenting to the staff team and offering resources to support discussions about separation with schools.

Due to the young age of children in the EYFS, it is often assumed they cannot meaningfully discuss events in their lives, leading practitioners to rely solely on observation. This study highlights the richness of therapeutic methods such as play sessions and drawing. These approaches enabled meaningful child participation, allowing for discussion, clarification and emotional expression. They also provided EPs with the information needed to develop recommendations for support. If we are to write reports about what would help a child feel supported, we should first give them the opportunity to feel supported and advocate for future support from others.

As outlined in the following section, emotional-based school avoidance is increasing in the UK. Many children choose to remain at home with their parents due to distress and anxiety within the school environment. Within my own practice as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, I have frequently encountered children and young people presenting with emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) whose narratives contain themes

remarkably similar to those identified within the current study. During consultations, both children and parents often describe school attendance as involving significant distress associated with leaving, or remaining separate from, attachment figures. These experiences may occur for a variety of reasons, including concerns regarding parental wellbeing, unmet needs within the educational environment, experiences of anxiety, or difficulties feeling emotionally safe and understood within school. However, a recurring theme is the child's desire to remain close to their caregiver and the emotional challenge of separation.

Reflecting on these experiences, I am struck by how often parents describe earlier difficulties with separation during nursery, Reception, or other educational transitions. Whilst the current study cannot establish any direct relationship between early separation experiences and later school attendance difficulties, it raises questions regarding whether early experiences of separation may continue to hold emotional significance for some children across development. It is possible that for certain children, repeated experiences of separation that feel insufficiently understood, supported, or emotionally processed may contribute to later anxieties about being away from attachment figures.

From a psychosocial perspective, this invites consideration of how schools communicate to children that they can be safely "held in mind" during periods of separation. The current findings suggest that children experience separation as a deeply relational process. Future research may therefore benefit from exploring whether children's early experiences of school-based separation have any bearing on their later experiences of school attendance, belonging, and emotionally based school avoidance. Although such links remain speculative, they represent an area worthy of further investigation.

5.4.2 Education professional practice

Education professionals who are present during children's separations have consistent opportunities to support children in coping with feelings of loss. The emotional impact of managing this with a cohort who have limited regulation skills can be significant, risking empathy fatigue and reducing the responsiveness available to children. Greater awareness of the impact of separation, and the importance of helping children process it, could strengthen emotional literacy, reduce behavioural expressions of distress and create calmer classrooms in the long term. Incorporating explicit teaching into the curriculum through role play, discussions and stories can offer children a structured way to understand and process their feelings.

Staff often experience pressure to manage behaviour and maintain order. If, during the first weeks of school, the focus shifted away from academic expectations and toward acknowledging separation and teaching children how to talk about it, this could reduce pressure on staff and create space for emotional learning. This would allow staff to explore creative activities that help children express and process the experience of starting school. For this to be sustainable, it would need to be embedded within the school ethos so that emotional space is protected rather than sacrificed for academic targets. Although bodies such as Ofsted have increased their focus on emotional readiness, belonging and relationships (Department for Education and Ofsted, 2025), schools may still feel pressure to meet academic standards and would require support to balance these priorities.

Allowing space for emotions would benefit children's development of regulation, but in underfunded settings with limited resources, staff may feel overwhelmed by the visible

distress that emerges. Training, such as the follow up webinar I delivered (see Appendix M), can help staff understand what their own overwhelm may signal, including the role of countertransference. This can support staff in conceptualising what is happening in their classrooms and understanding their role in separation dynamics. EPs are well placed to facilitate such training, bringing psychological theory to the forefront and strengthening staff's reflective capacity.

Peer connection was a buffer to separation loss in both the literature and the current study. This can be a valuable tool for classroom support, offering opportunities for children to bond during the settling period. Such connection can provide comfort when staff are occupied elsewhere and can also teach empathy and compassion. When children witness peers in distress after separation, they can be encouraged to offer comfort, building relational skills and providing alternative sources of support.

For some children, the complexities of loss may explain resistance to routine or engagement, as seen with Oscar. His separation loss manifested in overt distress, anger toward staff and object-directed frustration. If staff understand that loss may present as upset, anger or resistance, children's behaviour can be better understood and more effectively supported. Timetables in the first term could include explicit opportunities for peer bonding, free play and scaffolded social skills sessions.

Conversely, some children may appear settled while still experiencing internal distress. Knowing that children can mask their feelings can remind staff to check in with all pupils. All children need space, comfort and monitoring in the early weeks, regardless of outward presentation. Staff may also benefit from additional training and support during this period to manage the emotional intensity of the environment. EPs can offer training on play

based approaches to processing separation and provide supervisory spaces for staff to reflect on techniques, challenges and emotional responses. In doing so, the system attends not only to children's experiences but also to staff wellbeing, increasing the likelihood of sustainable support.

5.5 Critical considerations

While issues of generalisability arise in qualitative work, they were not the aim of this study. Working from a subjectivist ontological stance, the intention was not to produce findings applicable across populations but to illuminate the depth and nuance of two children's lived experiences of separation. Although shared themes may offer wider insight into how separation is navigated, the value of this research lies in the richness of the individual narratives. These stories stand as meaningful accounts in their own right, contributing nuanced understanding rather than generalisable claims.

The time frame of the study was limited to the first month of reception. It captured initial experiences of separation and short term processing but offered little insight into how children adjust beyond this period. Longer term follow up would provide valuable information for staff and EPs about ongoing processing of daily separation and the support that may be needed over time.

Researcher interpretation, while central to the methodology, may be viewed as a limitation. My emotional responses and processing were used as valuable data, yet they inevitably shaped analysis and interpretation. Distinguishing what belongs to the researcher and what belongs to the child is a core psychological skill, offering depth but carrying the risk of misinterpretation. These interpretations must be held tentatively and grounded in the data, which I ensured through supervisory support.

Practically, although the children were in different classes, they attended the same school. This created a shared systemic ethos around separation that influenced both children's experiences. While these practices may reflect common approaches across schools, the setting's specific response shaped the children's journeys. Including cases from multiple settings may have offered insight into the influence of school culture. A larger participant group may also have provided greater demographic and experiential variety.

As a trainee Educational Psychologist, my training includes psychodynamic practice, and I undertook personal psychodynamic therapy during the research process. However, my expertise is limited compared to a psychodynamic play therapist. The interpretations offered reflect my training, supported by supervision from a trained play therapist and my own engagement with relevant theory. Nonetheless, a more experienced practitioner might have drawn additional connections.

A related limitation concerns the inherent ambiguity of non verbal and symbolic data such as drawings and play narratives. These methods offer rich access to unconscious processes but rely on interpretation and lack the clarity of verbal accounts. Projective techniques do not provide fixed meanings; interpretations depend on context, patterns across sessions and reflexive engagement. This introduces the risk of over interpretation, as meanings cannot be verified directly with participants, particularly when unconscious dynamics are central. It was therefore important to listen closely to the children, verbally and otherwise, ask curious questions where appropriate and remain attuned to their communication as a whole. As psychodynamic processes are not always fully expressible through language, creative outlets can offer valuable avenues for understanding (Stevens, 1996).

5.6 Dissemination

As part of the agreement with the participating setting, a follow-up visit was conducted to share findings and discuss implications for practice. This included delivering a short, informative webinar for staff, outlining key insights from the study, explaining the emotional processes involved in daily separation, and offering practical considerations for supporting children during these transitions. I also held drop-in sessions whereby the staff could reflect on themes within the webinar and their own experiences of supporting separation within classrooms. In addition, individual meetings will be held with the parents of Oscar and Lucy to present case-specific findings and provide an opportunity for questions and discussion.

Following completion of the study, I created a pre-recorded webinar for the participating school. The webinar provided an overview of the literature regarding separation, a summary of the study findings, and practical considerations for supporting children through separation experiences. In addition, I offered drop-in sessions for staff members who wished to discuss the findings further, reflect on their own experiences of supporting separation, or consider implications for practice within their setting.

My intention was that the webinar would provide a flexible resource which staff could access in their own time, whilst the drop-in sessions would create a reflective space to explore the findings collaboratively. However, in practice, engagement was more limited than I had anticipated. Due to competing demands within the school and the timing of dissemination, staff were not provided with protected time to engage with either the webinar or the follow-up discussions. As a result, whilst some staff members

acknowledged the resource and engaged in brief informal conversations, there were few opportunities for more sustained reflection on the findings.

The informal discussions that did take place were nonetheless informative. Some staff members reflected on how much children's presentations had changed since the beginning of Reception, commenting that children who had initially been distressed were now settled and no longer crying at separation. Others spoke about separation as a process that children naturally move through over time, viewing distress as something that generally resolves through increased exposure to the school environment. These conversations highlighted a tendency to focus on observable adjustment and behavioural indicators of settling, rather than on children's ongoing emotional experiences of separation.

Reflecting on this process, I was struck by how difficult it can be for educational professionals to find time and space to engage in deeper thinking about emotional processes, particularly within the context of increasing curricular, administrative, and pastoral demands. Rather than viewing the limited engagement as a criticism of the school or staff, I understand it as reflective of the wider educational context in which schools are required to balance competing priorities. The experience reinforced one of the central arguments of the current thesis: that separation is often understood primarily as a transition to be managed successfully rather than as an emotional process worthy of sustained exploration in its own right.

This dissemination experience has implications for my future practice as an Educational Psychologist. Whilst I continue to believe that creating reflective spaces around

separation is important, I recognise that schools may require more structured opportunities and protected time to engage with such discussions. Future dissemination activities may therefore benefit from being embedded within existing professional development structures, consultation processes, or staff meetings, rather than relying upon voluntary engagement. More broadly, the experience highlighted the importance of considering not only what knowledge is shared, but also the practical and organisational conditions required for meaningful reflection and change to occur.

Beyond the research setting, dissemination will extend to professional networks. The webinar will also be presented in person to colleagues within the local authority educational psychology service. This session will focus on the relevance of the findings for professional practice, exploring how they can inform strategies to amplify children's voices in educational contexts and enhance relational approaches to transition support.

Academic dissemination will include the preparation of a peer-reviewed paper to highlight the importance of this topic and showcase the methodological contribution of integrating psychosocial principles with child-led, multi-modal approaches. The study will also be presented at the Professional Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology annual event at the Tavistock and Portman, with the aim of inspiring the new trainees to consider research that foregrounds young children's perspectives and emotional experiences.

5.7 Directions for further research

Information such as ethnicity and race was not collected in the current study, which represents a limitation given the growing recognition that cultural and racial factors can

shape attachment behaviours and separation responses (Rothbaum et al, 2000; Van Iizendoorn and Sagi-Schwartz, 2008). Research has highlighted that caregiving practices and children's emotional expressions vary across cultural contexts, suggesting that the experience of separation may look markedly different in cohorts with diverse ethnic backgrounds. This gap is evident not only in the present study but across the wider literature, where most research has been conducted in Western settings with limited attention to cultural variability (Gath et al., 2024; Nakaoka, 2014). Future research should therefore explore how separation is experienced by children from different ethnicities and cultural contexts, and how these factors intersect with school practices and expectations. Although not a primary focus of this study, the influence of staff beliefs and setting ethos on the separation process warrants further investigation. Previous studies have shown that professional attitudes toward separation, such as preferences for quick goodbyes or structured routines, can significantly shape children's emotional adjustment (Xu, 2006; Nakaoka, 2014; Dolby et al., 2023). Understanding how these beliefs interact with institutional norms and resource constraints could provide valuable insight into the relational climate of early education settings and inform strategies for promoting attuned, responsive care.

Future research would benefit from adopting longitudinal designs to capture the evolving nature of children's separation experiences over time. Existing studies, including the current one, primarily focus on short-term or initial transitions, offering only a snapshot of adjustment processes (Gath et al., 2024; Datler et al., 2010; Nakaoka, 2014). However, separation is not a static event; it is a recurring experience that may shift as children develop cognitively, emotionally, and relationally. A longitudinal approach would allow

researchers to examine how coping strategies, symbolic expressions, and attachment behaviours change across weeks or months. Such designs could also illuminate whether early patterns of distress or defensive adaptation persist, diminish, or transform, providing richer insight into resilience and vulnerability. This extended perspective would strengthen theoretical understanding of separation as a dynamic process and inform more sustainable, developmentally attuned interventions in educational settings.

As separation is fundamentally a relational experience, future research would benefit from exploring both parent and child perspectives to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics at play. Mellenius et al. (2023) highlighted how parental mentalisation (the ability to reflect on their child's psychological state) shapes the emotional tone of separation and influences how parents prepare for and manage this process. Including parents in research could illuminate how their beliefs, emotional regulation, and behaviours interact with children's responses, offering insight into the bidirectional nature of separation. However, while parental perspectives provide valuable context, it is essential that the child's voice remains central. Parent interpretations should not be taken as definitive accounts of the child's experience, as they may reflect adult assumptions or defensive processes rather than the child's lived reality. Approaches that privilege children's multimodal expression, through play, drawings, and verbal contributions, while situating these within the relational context of parental narratives would offer a more nuanced understanding of separation.

We are currently in a time of increased school avoidance with young people in education. There are growing numbers of children who stay at home instead of entering school, often

due to the overwhelming emotional difficulty they feel being on the premises. In Spring 2025, 2.2% of the school population were persistently absent in England (Centre for Social Justice, 2025). Separating from their parents and the relative safety of their home is no longer bearable, meaning many young people are missing out on their education. A future direction could be to explore the possible link between early separation experiences and later difficulties, and if a young person struggles with this process, does this affect their ability to engage with schooling later on.

5.8 Personal reflections

Looking back at the aforementioned university module which ignited my curiosity around separation, what has endured most strongly is my belief that separation is a significant, emotive, and potentially vulnerable experience that must be handled with the utmost care. Curiosities around the child's inner experiences remained, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity this research has afforded me to explore and foreground children's voices.

This process has not always been easy. Bearing witness to young children in visible distress as they cry for their parents is an intense and emotionally demanding experience. It has further consolidated my belief that, however inevitable separation may be, we owe it to the young people in our care to listen. Experiences of loss can be profoundly isolating, and my hope is always to support children to feel as seen, understood, and held in mind as possible.

What I have learnt from my time with Lucy and Oscar is that my deepest professional and personal commitment lies in the emotional experience of children. I have come to understand that emotional expression and adult responsivity are not ancillary to

development, but foundational to wellbeing, connection, and the capacity to tolerate separation, develop independence, and engage meaningfully in education. This belief is rooted in my own lived experience of childhood, which I continue to reflect upon beyond this thesis, and it has shaped both the questions I ask as a researcher and the way I wish to practice. At my core is a conviction that children's emotional worlds deserve time, space, and recognition, and that safeguarding this emotional space (particularly in the early years) is paramount. This conviction ultimately underpins my commitment to this research and gives meaning to the work presented within this thesis.

5.9 Conclusion

Overall, this study highlights the value of offering children a meaningful space in which to express themselves. This is not a one-off process, but an ongoing exploration of how separation is experienced and understood by children in the early years. Such experiences are often not articulated verbally, but are instead communicated symbolically through play, behaviour, and creative expression. It is therefore essential that children are provided not only with opportunities and language to process difficult emotional experiences, but also with developmentally attuned ways of expressing themselves, allowing their inner experiences to be held symbolically in forms that feel accessible to them.

The use of everyday exploratory methods, such as play, drawing, and careful observation, offers valuable avenues through which adults can better understand children's inner worlds, support emotional processing, and provide curiosity, care, and containment. Educators must remain mindful that separation is a prolonged and cumulative process,

extending beyond isolated moments of distress to shape a child's wider schooling experience. Attention must therefore be paid not only to overt expressions of distress, but also to the quieter moments in which some children experience loss privately.

Through this research, I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of how we support children not only in their academic learning, but also in recognising the importance of being listened to by a caring adult beyond their family. Central to this is the message that children's emotional experiences matter, that they are heard, and that they are worthy of attention and care.

7. References

Adamo, S. M., & Rustin, M. (2018). *Young child observation: A development in the theory and method of infant observation*. Routledge.

Adams, C. R., Barrio Minton, C. A., Hightower, J., & Blount, A. J. (2022). A systematic approach to multiple case study design in professional counseling and counselor education. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision, 15*(2).

Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bell, S. M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: Illustrated by the behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child development*, 49-67.

Alderson, P., & Morrow, V. (2020). The ethics of research with children and young people: A practical handbook.

Angen, M. J. (2000). Evaluating interpretive inquiry: Reviewing the validity debate and opening the dialogue. *Qualitative health research*, *10*(3), 378-395.

Backett-Milburn K and McKie L (1999) A critical appraisal of the draw and write technique. *Health Education Research 14*, 387-398.

Barkhuizen, G. (2014). Number of participants. *Language Teaching Research, 18*(1), 5–7.

Benjamin, J. (2014). Beyond doer and done to: An intersubjective view of thirdness 1. In *Relational Psychoanalysis, Volume 4* (pp. 91-130). Routledge.

Bick, E. (1987). Notes on infant observation in psychoanalytic training. In *Collected papers of Martha Harris and Esther Bick* (pp. 240-256).

Bion, W. R. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heinemann.

Bion, W. R. (1985). Container and contained. *Group relations reader*, *2*(8), 127-133.

Blaikie, N., & Priest, J. (2019). *Designing social research: The logic of anticipation*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bonaminio, V. (2022). *Playing at work: Clinical essays in a contemporary Winnicottian perspective on technique*. Routledge.

Bowlby, J. (1960). Rief and mourning in infancy and early childhood. *The psychoanalytic study of the child*, 15(1), 9-52.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss* (No. 79). Random House.

Bowlby, J. (1973). Attachment and loss: Separation (vol. 2).

Bowlby, J., Robertson, J., & Rosenbluth, D. (1952). A two-year-old goes to hospital. *The psychoanalytic study of the child*, *7*(1), 82-94.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners. Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative research in sport, exercise and health*, *11*(4), 589-597.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide.

Brennan, M. (2024). Examining Correlations Between Graphic Indicators in Projective Tests and Clinical Criteria of Ptsd in Children and Adolescents.

Bretherton, I. (2013). The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. In *Attachment theory* (pp. 45-84). Routledge.

Britain, G., & Beveridge, W. H. B. B. (1942). *Social insurance and allied services: Report*. Macmillan Company.

British Psychological Society. (2020). *Professional practice guidelines: Division of Educational and Child Psychology*.

British Psychological Society. (2021). *Code of ethics and conduct*. https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/code-ethics-and-conduct

Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods*. Oxford university press.

Carter, S. M., & Little, M. (2007). Justifying knowledge, justifying method, taking action: Epistemologies, methodologies, and methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative health research*, *17*(10), 1316-1328.

Central Advisory Council for Education. (1967). *Children and their primary schools: A report of the Central Advisory Council for Education (England)* (The Plowden Report). HMSO.

Centre for Social Justice. (2025). *School absence tracker.* https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/CSJ-Absence_Tracker.pdf

Children Act 1948, 11 & 12 Geo. 6 c. 46. (UK).

Children and Families Act 2014, c. 6. (UK). https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted

Clark*, A. (2005). Listening to and involving young children: A review of research and practice. *Early child development and care*, *175*(6), 489-505.

Clark, A. (2005). Ways of seeing: Using the Mosaic approach to listen to young children's perspectives. In *Beyond listening* (pp. 29-50). Policy Press.

Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Coates, E., & Coates, A. (2006). Young children talking and drawing. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, *14*(3), 221-241.

Coyne, I., & Harder, M. (2011). Children's participation in decision-making: balancing protection with shared decision-making using a situational perspective. *Journal of Child Health Care*, *15*(4), 312-319.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). Steps in conducting a scholarly mixed methods study.

Crotty, M. J. (1998). The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process.

Datler, W., Datler, M., & Funder, A. (2010). Struggling against a feeling of becoming lost: A young boy's painful transition to day care. *Infant Observation, 13*(1), 65-87.

Datler, W., Ereky-Stevens, K., Hover-Reisner, N., & Malmberg, L. E. (2012). Toddlers' transition to out-of-home day care: Settling into a new care environment. *Infant Behavior and Development, 35*(3), 439-451.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. sage.

Department for Children, Schools and Families. (2008). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. DCSF Publications. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6866/1/DCSF-00337-2008.pdf

Department for Education & Department of Health. (2015). *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0–25 years*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25

Department for Education & Ofsted. (2025). *Education inspection framework: For use from November 2025.* GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/education-inspection-framework/education-inspection-framework-for-use-from-november-2025

Department for Education and Skills. (2003). *Every child matters. The Stationery Office.*

Department for Education and Skills. (2006). *Sure Start children's centres practice guidance*. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6342/

Department for Education. (2014). *Children and Families Act.* London: The Stationery Office. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/pdfs/ukpga_20140006_en.pdf

Department for Education. (2010). *Statistical first release: Early years foundation stage profile results*. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2010

Department for Education. (2012). *Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335504/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2012.pdf

Department for Education. (2014). *Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335504/EYFS_STATUTORY_FRAMEWORK_2012.pdf *(Note: The 2014 revision updated some sections but kept the framework largely consistent with 2012.)*

Department for Education. (2017). *30 hours free childcare: Eligibility*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/30-hours-free-childcare-eligibility

Department for Education. (2021). *Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/promoting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing

Department for Education. (2021). *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (EYFS): Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/974907/EYFS_framework_-_March_2021.pdf

Department for Education. (2025, July 31). *Funded early education and childcare, Reportin*g year 2025. GOV.UK. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/funded-early-education-and-childcare/2025

Dockett, S., & Perry, B. (2011). Researching with young children: Seeking assent. *Child Indicators Research*, *4*(2), 231-247.

Dolby, R., Friezer, B., Hughes, E., Page, J., & Meade, V. (2023). Supporting educators' emotional work with infants and their families around transitions at the start of the day. *Early Years, 43*(3), 576–589. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2023.2235911

Early Education. (2021). Birth to five matters: Guidance by the sector, for the sector. https://birthto5matters.org.uk

Education Act 1944, 7 & 8 Geo. 6 c. 31. (UK).

Einarsdóttir, J. (2007). "Research with children: Methodological and ethical challenges." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 15*(2), 197-211.

Eivers, A. R., Brendgen, M., & Borge, A. I. (2010). Stability and change in prosocial and antisocial behavior across the transition to school: Teacher and peer perspectives. *Early Education and Development*, *21*(6), 843-864.

Elfer, P., Goldschmied, E., & Selleck, D. (2012). *Key persons in the nursery: Building relationships for quality provision in early years settings* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Esbjørn, B. H., Hoeyer, M., Dyrborg, J., Leth, I., & Kendall, P. C. (2010). Prevalence and co-morbidity among anxiety disorders in a national cohort of psychiatrically referred children and adolescents. *Journal of anxiety disorders*, *24*(8), 866-872.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American journal of theoretical and applied statistics*, *5*(1), 1-4.

Fonagy, P., & Target, M. (1997). Attachment and reflective function: Their role in self-organization. *Development and psychopathology*, *9*(4), 679-700.

Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., & Jurist, E. L. (2018). *Affect regulation, mentalization and the development of the self*. Routledge.

Freud, S. (1936). Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety. *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, *5*(1), 1-28.

Freud, S. (1961). *Beyond the pleasure principle* (J. Strachey, Ed. & Trans.). W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1920)

Freud, S. (1962). The neuro-psychoses of defence. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 3). Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.

Freud, S. (2017). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality: The 1905 edition*. Verso Books.

Frosh, S., & Baraitser, L. (2008). Psychoanalysis and psychosocial studies. *Psychoanalysis, culture & society*, *13*(4), 346-365.

Gath, M. E., Herold, L., Hunkin, E., McNair, L. J., Redder, B., Rutanen, N., & White, E. J. (2024). Infants' emotional and social experiences during and after the transition to early childhood education and care. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 22*(1), 88-105.

Geddes, H. (2006). *Attachment in the classroom: The links between children's early experience, emotional well-being and performance in school*. Worth Publishing.

Golkhou, M. (2024). ECEC teachers' emotional support during children's transition from home to ECEC.

Groh, A. M., Fearon, R. P., van IJzendoorn, M. H., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M. J., & Roisman, G. I. (2017). Attachment in the early life course: Meta-analytic evidence for its role in socioemotional development. *Child Development Perspectives*, *11*(1), 70-76.

Hammarberg, K., Kirkman, M., & De Lacey, S. (2016). Qualitative research methods: when to use them and how to judge them. *Human reproduction*, *31*(3), 498-501.

Hansen, K., Joshi, H., & Verropoulou, G. (2006). Childcare and mothers' employment: approaching the millennium. *National institute economic review*, *195*, 84-102.

Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). (2023). Standards of Proficiency for Practitioner Psychologists (Publication No. 12345). https://www.hcpc-uk.org/globalassets/resources/standards/standards-of-proficiency---practitioner-psychologists.pdf

Health and Care Professions Council. (2024). *Standards of conduct, performance and ethics*. https://www.hcpc-uk.org/standards/standards-of-conduct-performance-and-ethics/revised-standards

Heimann, P. (1950). On counter-transference. *International Journal of psychoanalysis*, *31*(1), 81-84.

HM Government. (1996). *Education Act 1996: Section 8*. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/8

HM Government. (2026). *SEND reform: Putting children and young people first – Government consultation*. Department for Education & Department of Health and Social Care.

HM Treasury. (2004). *Choice for parents, the best start for children: A ten year strategy for childcare*. https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20050301192906/http://hm-treasury.gov.uk/pre_budget_report/prebud_pbr04/assoc_docs/prebud_pbr04_childcare.cfm

Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*. Sage.

Hollway, W., & Jefferson, T. (2012). Doing qualitative research differently: A psychosocial approach.

Horstman, M., Aldiss, S., Richardson, A., & Gibson, F. (2008). Methodological issues when using the draw and write technique with children aged 6 to 12 years. *Qualitative health research*, *18*(7), 1001-1011.

Isaacs, S. (2018). The nature and function of phantasy. In Developments in psychoanalysis (pp. 67-121). Routledge.

Jones, Kathleen W. “Angela Davis, Pre-School Childcare in England, 1939–2010; Theory, Practice and Experience.” *Social history of medicine : the journal of the Society for the Social History of Medicine* 29.3 (2016): 650–651. Web.

Jovanovic, J. (2011). Saying goodbye: An investigation into parent–infant separation behaviours on arrival in childcare. *Child Care in Practice*, *17*(3), 247-269.

Jovanovic, J., Brebner, C., Lawless, A., & Young, J. (2016). Childcare educators' understandings of early communication and attachment. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, *41*(4), 95-105.

Jreisat, S. (2023). Separation anxiety among kindergarten children and its association with parental socialization. *Health psychology research, 11*, 75363.

Jung, C. G. (1964). Man and his symbols, London (Aldus Books) 1964.

Jung, C. G. (1968). The archetypes and the collective unconscious (Vol. 9). *Trans. RFC Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press*.

Kennedy, H., Landor, M., & Todd, L. (2010). Video Interaction Guidance as a method to promote secure attachment. *Educational and Child Psychology*, *27*(3), 59.

Kirsten, L. T., Grenyer, B. F., Wagner, R., & Manicavasagar, V. (2008). Impact of separation anxiety on psychotherapy outcomes for adults with anxiety disorders. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 8*(1), 36-42.

Klein, M. (1932). The Psychoanalysis of. Children, 1921-1945.

Klein, M. (1935). A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *16*(1), 145-174.

Klein, M. (1940). Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, *21*(1), 125-153.

Klein, M. (1946). Notes on some schizoid mechanisms. In M. Klein (Ed.), *Envy and gratitude and other works 1946–1963* (pp. 1–24). The Hogarth Press.

Klein, P. S., Kraft, R. R., & Shohet, C. (2010). Behaviour patterns in daily mother–child separations: Possible opportunities for stress reduction. *Early Child Development and Care, 180*(3), 387-396.

Klette, T., & Killén, K. (2018). Painful transitions–A study of 1-year-old toddlers' reactions to separation and reunion with their mothers after 1 month in childcare. *Early Child Development and Care, 189*(12), 1970–1977. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1424150

Koç, N. (2023). School Adjustment in the Early Years: Children's Social-Emotional Problems in Different Countries and Applied Solutions. *International Journal of Progressive Education*, *19*(5).

Landreth, G. L. (2012). *Play therapy: The art of the relationship*. Routledge.

Lansdown, G. (2019). *Promoting children's participation and agency: Evolving capacities and the right to be heard*. UNICEF Office of Research — Innocenti.

Leray, E., Camara, A., Drapier, D., Riou, F., Bougeant, N., Pelissolo, A., ... & Millet, B. (2011). Prevalence, characteristics and comorbidities of anxiety disorders in France: results from the "Mental Health in General Population" survey (MHGP). *European Psychiatry*, *26*(6), 339-345.

Levy, M. S. (2000). A conceptualization of the repetition compulsion. Psychiatry, 63(1), 45-53.

Lewinsohn, P. M., Holm-Denoma, J. M., Small, J. W., Seeley, J. R., & Joiner Jr, T. E. (2008). Separation anxiety disorder in childhood as a risk factor for future mental illness. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 47*(5), 548-555.

Lollis, S. P. (1990). Effects of maternal behavior on toddler behavior during separation. *Child development*, *61*(1), 99-103.

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British educational research journal*, *33*(6), 927-942.

Mahler, M. S., Pine, F., & Bergman, A. (1975). *The psychological birth of the human infant: Symbiosis and individuation*. Basic Books.

Malchiodi, C. A. (2012). *Understanding children's drawings*. Guilford Press.

Masi, G., Mucci, M., & Millepiedi, S. (2001). Separation anxiety disorder in children and adolescents: epidemiology, diagnosis and management. *CNS drugs*, *15*(2), 93-104.

McWhirter, J., Collins, M., Bryant, I., Wetton, N., and Newton Bishop, J. (2000). Evaluating 'Safe in the Sun' a curriculum programme for primary schools. *Health Education Research 15*, 203-217.

Melhuish, E. (2004). A literature review of the impact of early years provision on young children, with emphasis given to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Mellenius, N., Korja, R., Kalland, M., Huttunen, R., Sourander, J., Salo, S., ... & Junttila, N. (2023). “I Try to Think Behind My Child’s Cry”: Preparation for Separation Experiences in the Light of Parental Mentalization. *Journal of infant, child, and adolescent psychotherapy*, *22*(3), 290-309.

Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* Jossey-Bass.

Mertens, D. M. (2019). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. Sage publications.

Milrod, B., Markowitz, J. C., Gerber, A. J., Cyranowski, J., Altemus, M., Shapiro, T., ... & Glatt, C. (2014). Childhood separation anxiety and the pathogenesis and treatment of adult anxiety. *American Journal of Psychiatry, 171*(1), 34-43.

Moon, K., & Blackman, D. (2014). A guide to ontology, epistemology, and philosophical perspectives for interdisciplinary researchers. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 17*(5), 503–518.

Nakaoka, H. (2014). Coming to terms with daily separation: observation of two children's transition from home to nursery. *Infant Observation, 17*(3), 248-263.

Page, J., & Elfer, P. (2013). The emotional complexity of attachment interactions in nursery. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, *21*(4), 553-567.

Petticrew, M. A. R. K., Arai, L. I. S. A., Roberts, H. E. L. E. N., Britten, N. I. C. K. Y., & Popay, J. E. N. N. I. E. (2009). Testing methodological guidance on the conduct of narrative synthesis in systematic reviews. *Evaluation*, *15*(1), 49-73.

Piaget, J. (2013). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. Routledge.

Pratt, D. D. (1998). *Five perspectives on teaching in adult and higher education*. Krieger Publishing Co., PO Box 9542, Melbourne, FL 32902-9542.

Prendiville, E., & Parson, J. A. (Eds.). (2021). *Clinical applications of the therapeutic powers of play: Case studies in child and adolescent psychotherapy*. Routledge.

Pridmore, P., & Bendelow, G. (1995). Images of health: exploring beliefs of children using the 'draw-and-write' technique. *Health Education Journal*, *54*(4), 473-488.

Rassokha, I. M. (2022). Relativism as an ontological system. *Axiomathes, 32*(3), 341–362.

Richards, M. P. M. (1981). Attachment and Loss. Vol. 3. Loss, Sadness and Depression. By John Bowlby.(Hogarth Press and Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1980.)£ 12.00. *Journal of Biosocial Science*, *13*(3), 369-373.

Robertson, J., & Bowlby, J. (1952). Responses of young children to separation from their mothers. *Courrier du Centre international de l'enfance*, *2*(66), 131-142.

Robertson, J., & Robertson, J. (1989). *Separation and the very young*. Free Association Books.

Rothbaum, F., Weisz, J., Pott, M., Miyake, K., & Morelli, G. (2000). Attachment and culture: Security in the United States and Japan. *American Psychologist, 55*(10), 1093.

Rustin, M. (2006). Infant observation research: What have we learned so far? *Infant Observation*, *9*(1), 35–52.

Rutter, M. (1972). *Maternal deprivation reassessed* (pp. 53-119). Baltimore.

Rutter, M. (1998). Developmental catch-up, and deficit, following adoption after severe global early privation. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, *39*(4), 465-476.

Scharff, D. E., Fairbairn, W. R. D., & Birtles, E. F. (2013). *Psychoanalytic studies of the personality*. Routledge.

Scottish Government. (2022). Best start: Strategic early learning and school age childcare plan 2022 to 2026. https://www.gov.scot/publications/best-start-strategic-early-learning-school-age-childcare-plan-scotland-2022-26/

Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to participation: Openings, opportunities and obligations. *Children & society*, *15*(2), 107-117.

Smith, J. A., Larkin, M., & Flowers, P. (2021). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research.

Spyrou, S. (2011). The limits of children's voices: From authenticity to critical, reflexive representation. *Childhood*, *18*(2), 151-165.

Stebbins, R. A. (2025). *Exploratory research in the social sciences*. Sage publications.

Stern, D. N. (2018). The interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology. Routledge.

Stevens, R. (Ed.). (1996). *Understanding the self.* SAGE Publications Ltd, in association with The Open University.

Sukhera, J. (2022). Narrative reviews: flexible, rigorous, and practical. *Journal of graduate medical education, 14*(4), 414-417.

Świdrak, E. M. (2021). Selected Predictors of Parents' Anxiety Levels When Entrusting the Care of a Child to a Nursery. *The New Educational Review, 66*, 25-35.

The British Psychological Society (BPS). (2022). Standards for the accreditation of Doctoral programmes in educational psychology in England, Northern Ireland & Wales. Leicester: British Psychological Society (Standards of Proficiency for Practitioner Psychologists , 2023).

The National Archives. (n.d.). *Special services in education: Nursery education*. https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/special-services-education/#8-nursery-education.

Tracy, S. J. (2024). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. John Wiley & Sons.

Trevarthen, C. (2011). What young children give to their learning. In S. Robson & S. Quinn (Eds.), *The Routledge reader in early childhood* (pp. 78–83). Routledge.

United Nations General Assembly. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

Vaillant, G. E. (1992). *Ego mechanisms of defense: a guide for clinicans and researchers*. American Psychiatric Pub.

Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., & Sagi-Schwartz, A. (2008). Cross-cultural patterns of attachment: Universal and contextual dimensions.

White, E. J., Westbrook, F., Hawkes, K., Lord, W., & Redder, B. (2023). (In) visible perceptions of objects ('things') during early transitions: Intertwining subjectivities in ECEC. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 24*(4), 376-393.

Willig, C. (2013). *EBOOK: introducing qualitative research in psychology*. McGraw-hill education (UK).

Winnicott, D. W. (1951). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *London: Tavistock*.

Winnicott, D. W. (1965). The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment. London (Hogarth).

Winnicott, D. W. (1974). Playing and Reality (London: Tavistock, 1971). *Human Nature*.

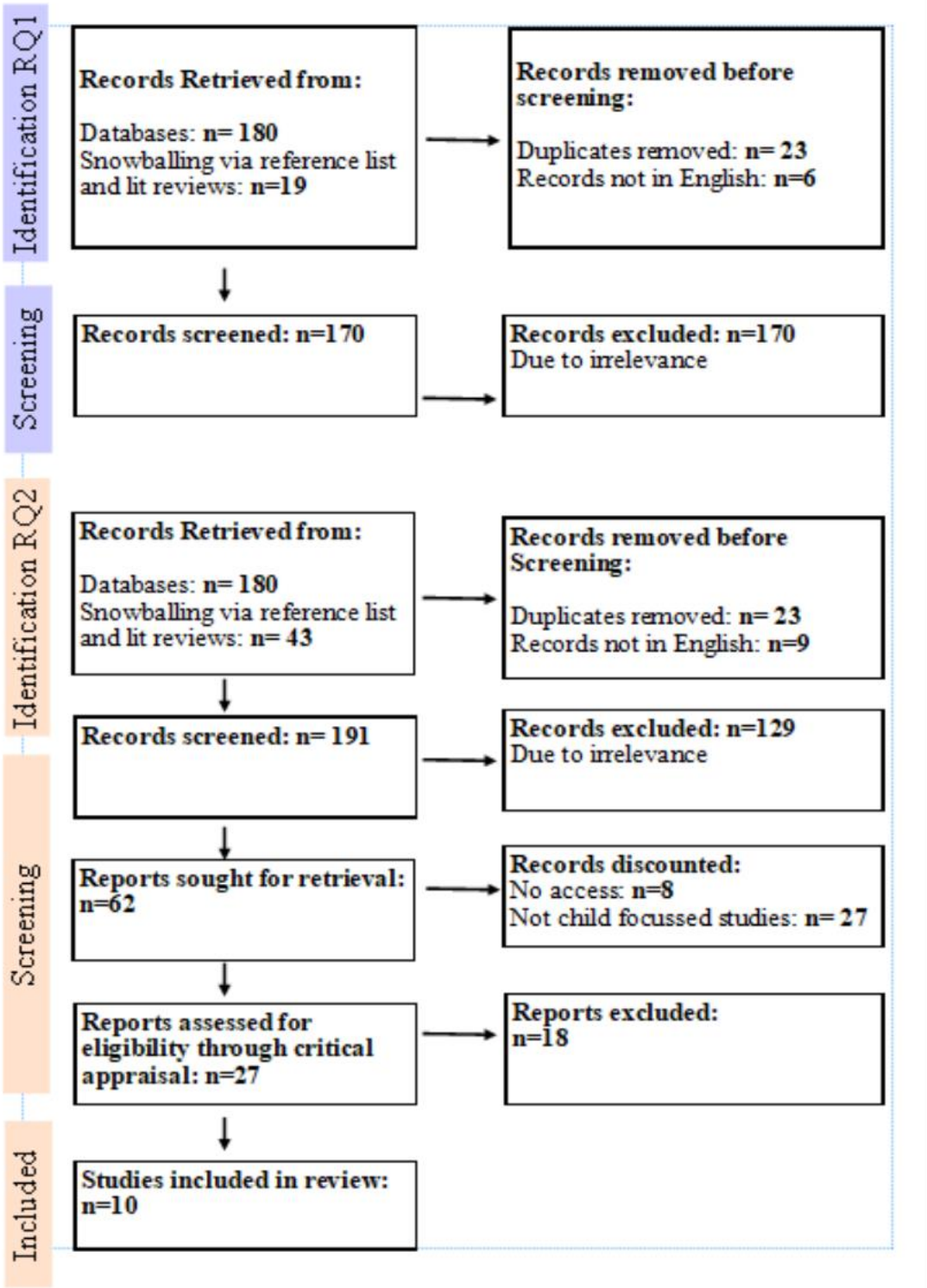
Xu, Y. (2006). Toddlers' emotional reactions to separation from their primary caregivers: Successful home–school transition. *Early Child Development and Care*, *176*(6), 661-674.

Yalom, I. D. (2002). *The gift of therapy: An open letter to a new generation of therapists and their patients*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology and health*, *15*(2), 215-228.

8. Appendix

Appendix A – PRISMA flow diagram for included studies



Appendix B - Full Text Articles Assessed for Inclusion Eligibility

Num	Author and Year	Title	Source	Rationale
1	Ahnert, L., Eckstein-Madry, T., Datler, W., Deichmann, F., & Piskernik, B. (2023).	Stress during transition from home to public childcare.	Snowball	Not included. Using a medical model to assess how children's cortisol profiles changed over the childcare day. Quantitative. Far removed from the lens of the current study.
2	Nystad, K., Drugli, M. B., Lydersen, S., Lekhal, R., & Buøen, E. S. (2021).	Toddlers' stress during transition to childcare.	Snowball	Not included. Using a medical model to assess how children's cortisol profiles changed over the childcare day. Quantitative. Far removed from the lens of the current study.
3	Drugli, M. B., Nystad, K., Lydersen, S., & Brenne, A. S. (2023).	Do toddlers' levels of cortisol and the perceptions of parents and professional caregivers tell the same story about transition from home to childcare? A mixed method study.	Snowball	Not included. Using a medical model to assess how children's cortisol profiles changed over the childcare day. Quantitative. Far removed from the lens of the current study.
5	Datler, W., Hover-Reisner, N., & Datler, M. (2015).	Toddlers' relationships to peers in the processes of separation: from the discussion of observational accounts to the development of theory.	Snowball	Included. Follows observational experiences of one child's separation into childcare setting. Qualitative.
6	Nakaoka, H. (2014).	Coming to terms with daily separation:	Database search	Included. Qualitatively follows two weekly observations of two nursery

		observation of two children's transition from home to nursery.		children focused on their experience of separation.
7	Gath, M. E., Herold, L., Hunkin, E., McNair, L. J., Redder, B., Rutanen, N., & White, E. J. (2024).	Infants' emotional and social experiences during and after the transition to early childhood education and care.	Snowball	Infants were observed at multiple times across their first year of ECEC, with emphasis placed on the first few weeks and months of transition from home to ECEC looking through a behaviorist lens but focused on the emotionality of the child.
8	Klein, P. S., Kraft, R. R., & Shohet, C. (2010).	Behaviour patterns in daily mother–child separations: Possible opportunities for stress reduction.	Database search	Not included. While this study examines daily separations, the analytic focus is on identifying adult behaviours that reduce observable child distress. Children's emotional expressions are treated primarily as outcomes of caregiver strategies rather than as lived experiences of separation.
9	Albers, E. M., Beijers, R., Riksen-Walraven, J. M., Sweep, F. C., & de Weerth, C. (2016).	Cortisol levels of infants in center care across the first year of life: Links with quality of care and infant temperament.	Snowball	Not included. Using a medical model to assess how children's cortisol profiles changed over the childcare day. Quantitative. Far removed from the lens of the current study.
10	Bernard, K., Peloso, E., Laurenceau, J. P., Zhang, Z., & Dozier, M. (2015).	Examining change in cortisol patterns during the 10-week transition to a new child-care setting.	Snowball	Not included. Using a medical model to assess how children's cortisol profiles changed over the childcare day. Quantitative. Far removed from the lens of the current study.
11	Klette, T., & Killén, K. (2018)	Painful transitions–A study of 1-year-old toddlers'	Snowball	Included. Filmed observations of toddlers separations considered from an attachment theory

		reactions to separation and reunion with their mothers after 1 month in childcare.		lens, considering the stages of protest, despair and detachment.
12	White, E. J., Westbrook, F., Hawkes, K., Lord, W., & Redder, B. (2023).	(In) visible perceptions of objects ('things') during early transitions: Intertwining subjectivities in ECEC.	Snowball	Included. Set out to understand the emotional and social experience of ECEC transitions for very young children. Recognition of how objects contributed to the relational dynamics between infants and adults.
13	Pursi, A., & Lipponen, L. (2021).	Differences in early childhood education – How does an adult deal with a crying child?	Snowball	Not included. Concentrates on how adults respond to crying children during separation, not the experience of the child themselves.
14	Hodgkins, A., Gossman, P., Paige, R., & Woolley, R. (2024).	'We cry together every day'– expressing complex emotion in research with early childhood practitioners.	Snowball	Not included. Staff used reflective diaries to reflect on their experiences of supporting separation. Does not include a child lens.
15	Revilla, Y. L., Rutanen, N., Sevón, E., & Raittila, R. (2024).	Children Under Two As Co-constructors of Their Transition From Home Care to Early Childhood Education and Care.	Snowball	Not included. Although mentions child response to separation, it is mainly focused on integration into the setting post separation.
16	Dolby, R., Friezer, B., Hughes, E., Page, J., & Meade, V. (2023).	Supporting educators' emotional work with infants and their families around transitions at the start of the day.	Snowball	Included. Evaluated the Baby Playspace Learning (BPL) professional development program. This considered how children responded to a 'secure base' method of separation.

17	Golkhou, M. (2024).	ECEC teachers' emotional support during children's transition from home to ECEC.	Snowball	Included. Transition is considered as children's separation from their parents when they enter ECEC from home. Focuses on child experience of separation and how this was affected by staff behaviour.
18	Grady, J. S., Ale, C. M., & Morris, T. L. (2012).	A naturalistic observation of social behaviours during preschool drop-off.	Snowball	Not included. Focuses on social responses of children to the preschool environment during and immediately following parental drop-off. More about responses to the transition and environment rather than the experience and impact of separation itself. It doesn't tell me what separation was like for that child. Very behaviorist stance (more parent behaviour =<>child behaviour).
19	Andersson Søe, M., Schad, E., & Psouni, E. (2023, December).	Transition to preschool: Paving the way for preschool teacher and family relationship-building.	Snowball	Not included. This is focused on staff's perspective of how separation is facilitated and what is helpful/unhelpful.
20	Bick, J., Dozier, M., & Perkins, E. (2012).	Convergence between attachment classifications and natural reunion behavior among children and parents in a child care setting.	Snowball	Not included. Focused on comparing the child's behaviour to the strange situation classifications and how this related to parent behaviour, not the child's emotional experience.
21	Xu, Y. (2006).	Toddlers' emotional reactions to separation from	Snowball	Included. The emotional experience of separation for the child depending on parent behaviour at drop off.

		their primary caregivers: Successful home–school transition.		Teacher interviews included perceptions of separation interactions. Adult behaviour (parents, grandparents, teachers) is analysed in relation to how it is experienced by the child.
22	Datler, W., Datler, M., & Funder, A. (2010).	Struggling against a feeling of becoming lost: A young boy's painful transition to day care.	Snowball	Included. Qualitatively follows a child through the Tavistock observation method, exploring his personal separation journey.
23	Mellenius, N., Korja, R., Kalland, M., Huttunen, R., Sourander, J., Salo, S., ... & Junttila, N. (2023).	"I Try to Think Behind My Child's Cry": Preparation for Separation Experiences in the Light of Parental Mentalization.	Snowball	Included. Although focuses on parental mentalisation (the ability to be attuned to their child's emotional state), it concentrates on how the child is experiencing separation through the interpretation of the parent.
24	Jovanovic, J. (2011).	Saying goodbye: An investigation into parent–infant separation behaviours on arrival in childcare.	Snowball	Not included. Quantitative, behavioral linking parent and child data. Not related to child voice.
25	Jovanovic et al (2016)	Childcare educators' understandings of early communication and attachment.	Snowball	Not included. More about staff's role around relationship building with parents and children, not separation from a child's perspective.
26	Jreisat, S. (2023).	Separation Anxiety among Kindergarten Children and its Association with Parental Socialization.	Snowball	Not included. Quantitative and statistical study around behavioural inventories. Limited depth for the focus of the current study.

27	Clark, A. (2005).	Ways of seeing: Using the Mosaic approach to listen to young children's perspectives.	Snowball	About transition to an early year setting and their perception of the space, not the separation event itself.

Appendix C - Critical Appraisal of Studies Included in the Literature Review

Section A

Question	**Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?**	**Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?**	**Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?**	**Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?**	**Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?**	**Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?**
Klette, T., & Killén, K. (2018).	Yes- The aims are explicitly stated: to investigate 1-year-olds' reactions to separation/ reunion in childcare and how staff respond, situating the question within attachment theory and childcare practice	Yes- A qualitative, naturalistic filmed-observation approach is appropriate for interpreting toddlers' lived separation experiences and subjective behaviours	Yes- The single-day filmed-observation design, framed by attachment-theory analysis, is justified and aligned with the stated aims	Yes- Recruitment via public-health nurses of healthy only-children is explained and linked to accessing the desired knowledge about first-time childcare entrants	Yes- Data were gathered through video in the childcare setting one month after enrolment with timing, duration and procedures described, though saturation is not addressed	Can't tell- The paper briefly notes possible observer influence but offers little reflexive discussion of researcher role or potential bias during data collection or analysis
Datler, W., Hover-Reisner,	Yes - The paper explicitly states it investigates how peer	Yes - Because the goal is to interpret toddlers' lived relational	Yes - A longitudinal single-case design nested within an	Can't tell - Apart from noting that 11 toddlers	Yes - Repeated in-situ Tavistock observati	Yes - Observer reflexivity is addressed (e.g., seminar

N., & Datler, M. (2015).	relationships affect toddlers' separation experiences during transition to day care and how observations can inform theory, underscoring relevance to practice and scholarship	experiences, the qualitative Tavistock observation methodology is appropriate	11-child cohort is justified as the vehicle for developing pattern-and-type theory in early-years contexts	were observed, the paper gives little information on selection criteria, recruitment process, or refusals, so adequacy cannot be judged	ons with detailed field notes, timings and context are described, directly targeting the research issue	reenactments of the child's posture) and imaginative openness is emphasised, showing awareness of researcher influence
Datler, W., Datler, M., & Funder, A. (2010).	Yes – the article explicitly sets out to examine a toddler's painful transition to day care within a broader study on "Toddlers' Adjustment to Out-of-Home Care," explaining why this issue matters for early-childhood practice and research	Yes – understanding a child's subjective emotional experience requires an interpretive approach; the authors employ Young Child Observation, a recognised qualitative method, making qualitative methodology appropriate	Yes – a single-case longitudinal observation embedded in a multi-method project is justified as suitable for addressing the stated aims, and the design is described in context	Can't tell – beyond noting parental permission, the paper gives almost no detail on how Valentine (or the other 11 toddlers) was recruited or why he was the focus of the study other than interest.	Yes – data were collected through one-hour observations every week for six months, starting on the very first day without parents, and the setting and procedures are clearly describe	Yes – reflexivity is shown: the observer's feelings are recorded and weekly seminars examined counter-transference, indicating awareness of the researcher's influence

					d and justified	
Dolby, R., Friezer, B., Hughes, E., Page, J., & Meade, V. (2023).	Yes - The paper explicitly states its purpose is to evaluate whether Baby Playspace Learning strengthens educator-parent-infant closeness during the 'Negotiated Goodbye' and 'Launch to Explore' transitions, and explains the practical importance of these understudied moments	Yes - Because the study interprets relational processes captured on video, a qualitative (interpretive) approach is suitable even though simple statistics are added for emphasis	Can't tell - A pre–post design without a comparison group is used; the authors give little justification, so causal attribution remains uncertain	Can't tell - Twenty families from one workplace nursery were included, but the paper does not discuss non-participation or sample sufficiency in relation to the aims	Yes - Filmed transition episodes were systematically coded and linked to the research issue, though there is no comment on data saturation	No - Authors who delivered the programme also filmed and scored data, yet offer minimal reflection on how their dual role might have influenced findings
Golkhou, M. (2024).	Yes - The paper explicitly aims to examine how ECEC teachers' emotional-support strategies influence children's	Yes - Because it seeks to interpret teachers' actions and children's subjective reactions, a qualitative design of observations	Yes - An interpretivist, constructionist design combining naturalistic observations with unstructured teacher interviews	Yes - Participants were selected through convenience and extreme-instance sampling, with reasons	Yes - Six mornings of non-intrusive observation (43 pages of notes) and six follow-up interviews (48	Yes - The researcher reflects on prior familiarity with the setting and states efforts to avoid influencing participants

	transition from home to ECEC and why this matters for reducing anxiety and informing practice	and interviews is appropriate and is clearly justified	is aligned with the aims and the methodological choices are explained	given for how these cases illuminate transition experiences and why some children were not included	pages) directly captured transition moments, demonstrating methods fit for purpose	during data collection, indicating awareness of positionality
Mellenius et al (2023).	Yes - The paper clearly states its aim to explore how parental mentalization manifests during toddlers' first transition to early childhood education, explaining its importance and relevance.	Yes - Because the study interprets parents' subjective experiences and conceptions, a qualitative methodology is appropriate for the goals.	Yes - The authors justify a phenomenographic design, detailing five analytical phases that capture variation in parental conceptions of separation.	Yes - Participants were purposively recruited through health and ECEC channels with stated inclusion criteria, though self-selection may limit diversity.	Yes - Long semi-structured interviews and PDI were audio-video recorded, transcribed, and saturation discussed, directly addressing the research issue.	Can't tell - Beyond logistics and pseudonymisation, the paper offers little reflexive discussion of researchers' potential bias or influence.
Nakaoka, H. (2014).	Yes - The paper clearly states its goal of analysing weekly observations of two toddlers'	Yes - Because the study seeks to illuminate the children's lived emotional experience, a qualitative, participant-ob	Yes - A six-month longitudinal participant-observer design is justified and linked to the research aims, with	Can't tell - The two children were selected because they "stood out", but the	Yes - Data collection setting, frequency, and media (weekly fieldnotes of	Yes - The author reflects on her dual role as nursery worker and observer, supported by

	transitions from home to nursery, explains why this matters for supporting children who struggle with daily separation, and locates the work within infant-observation literature	servation methodology is appropriate and explicitly grounded in Bick's infant-observation method	reference to seminar reflection supporting the chosen method	recruitment logic, inclusion criteria, and information on non-participants are not fully described	observations plus contextual details) are described, and adaptations noted, though saturation is not discussed	work-discussion seminars, showing awareness of potential influence and bias
White et al (2023).	Yes - the article explicitly aims to explore how objects become (in)visible and meaningful in infants' early transitions to ECEC using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, positioning this gap as important for practice and academia	Yes - because the study seeks to illuminate subjective perceptions and relational experiences, an interpretive qualitative approach is well suited	Yes - a multi-site, video-based phenomenological design with interviews is justified as appropriate for capturing the lived experience of objects in transition	Can't tell - participants came from three centres within a larger project but the paper gives little detail on selection criteria, non-participants or sampling rationale beyond convenience	Yes - video observations at drop-off, interviews before and after, and teacher field-notes directly address the phenomenon, though saturation is not discussed	Can't tell - teacher-researchers were embedded yet the paper offers limited reflexive critique of their dual roles or potential influence on data generation and interpretation
Gath et al	Yes – The authors	Yes – A qualitative	Yes – The embedded,	Yes – Infants	Yes – Data	Can't tell – While

(2024).	clearly state that the study aims to understand infants' social and emotional experiences during the transition to ECEC and across their first year in care, with explicit research questions outlined early in the paper	(and mixed-methods) approach is appropriate given the focus on infants' lived emotional experiences, transitions, and relational contexts.	longitudinal multi-case study design with video observations and vignettes allows examination of change over time and aligns well with the stated aims.	were purposively recruited at the point of transition into ECEC across five countries, which is appropriate for exploring early transition experiences, though the sample is small and pragmatic.	were collected through repeated video-recorded observations, systematic coding of affect and engagement, and qualitative vignettes across the first year, directly addressing infant emotional and social experiences.	ethical approval and observer training are described, there is limited reflexive discussion of researcher positionality or potential observer influence on infant behaviour or interpretation.
Xu 2006	Yes - The study explicitly states it aims to examine toddlers' emotional reactions to separation and factors influencing a smooth home-school transition.	Yes - Exploring toddlers' subjective experiences in situ justifies the use of qualitative interactional ethnography.	Yes - A four-week ethnographic observation with interviews is explained and aligns with the stated aims.	Can't tell - Participants and purposeful sampling are outlined, but rationale for specific inclusions and any non-participati	Yes - Timed observations, informal interviews, and document reviews are clearly described and appropriate to address the	Can't tell - Author notes a dual observer-participant role yet offers little critical reflection on bias or influence on data collection.

				on is missing.	research issue.	

Section B and C

Question	**Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?**	**Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?**	**Is there a clear statement of findings?**	**How valuable is the research?**
Klette, T., & Killén, K. (2018).	Yes- Ethical issues are considered; approval was obtained from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, implying informed consent and oversight	Can't tell- Analysis steps are outlined (independent viewing, attachment-focused coding) but lack detail on systematic coding, triangulation or handling contradictory cases	Yes- Findings are clearly presented with counts of protest, despair and detachment behaviours and illustrative vignettes that relate back to the research questions	Yes- Authors discuss policy implications (staff ratios, adaptation time) and suggest areas for further research, indicating practical value despite acknowledged limits
Datler, W., Hover-Reisner, N., & Datler, M. (2015).	Can't tell - Funding and absence of conflicts are reported, but consent procedures and ethics-committee approval are not discussed	Yes - An iterative, multi-phase analytic strategy for deriving patterns, changes and types is outlined, supporting rigour despite limited worked examples	Yes - Findings are explicitly stated through the Jacob case, with supportive excerpts and linkage to the original questions	Yes - The study articulates contributions to psychoanalytic theory and nursery practice, and signals future research directions
Datler, W., Datler, M., & Funder, A. (2010).	Can't tell – the article mentions parental consent but provides no information on ethics-committee approval,	Can't tell – while accounts were discussed in groups, the analytic steps (coding, theme generation, handling of contradictory	Yes – findings are clearly stated, illustrated with rich excerpts, and discussed in relation to caregiver behaviour and	Yes – the authors spell out implications for caregiver training, early-years policy and future research, showing the study's

	confidentiality safeguards, or how distress was managed.	data) are only sketched, leaving rigour uncertain	institutional defenses, linking back to the research questions	contribution despite its limited scope
Dolby, R., Friezer, B., Hughes, E., Page, J., & Meade, V. (2023).	Yes - Ethical approval, informed consent and adherence to BERA guidelines are clearly reported	Yes - A detailed coding framework with 75–90 % inter-rater agreement and transparent analytic steps indicate rigour, though disconfirming cases are not explored	Yes - Findings are explicit, supported by tables and narrative vignettes, and are discussed in relation to the original questions	Yes - The study outlines contributions to professional practice, notes limitations and suggests future research and transfer possibilities
Golkhou, M. (2024).	Yes - Detailed ethical procedures cover institutional approvals, informed consent, anonymity, secure storage and planned data destruction, showing strong ethical consideration	Yes - An eight-step abductive thematic analysis is described from transcription to theme mapping with illustrative tables and networks, demonstrating analytic rigour	Yes - Findings are presented through thematic networks that contrast acceptance and rejection cases and relate back to the research questions, with supporting excerpts	Yes - The study discusses practical implications for daycare policy, acknowledges limits and suggests future research, indicating clear value and knowledge contribution
Mellenius et al (2023).	Yes - Ethical approval, informed consent and data security processes are reported, indicating ethical issues were well addressed.	Yes - A transparent multi-stage coding process, NVivo use, peer review and a detailed codebook support rigorous analysis.	Yes - Findings are clearly presented via outcome space, categories, percentages and illustrative quotes linked to the questions and literature.	Yes - The study discusses contributions to PM theory, practice implications for ECEC, and future research needs, showing value.

Nakaoka, H. (2014).	Can't tell - Pseudonyms are used but there is no explicit statement on informed consent, confidentiality procedures with parents, or formal ethics approval	Can't tell - Analysis consists of psychoanalytic interpretation of narrative vignettes; rich quotes are presented but analytic stages, coding decisions, and treatment of disconfirming evidence are not made explicit	Yes - Findings are clearly narrated, linked to the initial aims, supported by illustrative excerpts, and their credibility discussed via theory and seminar supervision	Yes - The discussion articulates contributions to understanding nursery transitions, suggests practice implications for supporting "quiet" children, and hints at areas for further research, while acknowledging limits to transferability
White et al (2023).	Yes - the authors note informed consent, participant anonymity and ethics approval for the international study, albeit briefly	Can't tell - themes of écart and reversibility frame the analysis but procedural details (coding steps, triangulation, audit trail) are largely absent, limiting assessment of rigour	Yes - findings are presented through rich vignettes linked back to the research question and alternative interpretations are considered in discussion	Yes - the study explains how recognising objects can enhance transition pedagogy, suggests curricular implications and points to areas for further investigation, indicating value
Gath et al (2024).	Yes – Ethical approval was obtained in each participating country, with informed consent procedures for families and safeguards for video-based research with	Yes– Analysis combines systematic observational coding, reliability checks (≥80% inter-observer reliability), hierarchical linear modelling, and qualitative synthesis; however,	Yes – Findings are clearly structured around affect over time, drop-off experiences, peer and teacher interactions, and are supported by statistical	Yes – The study offers rare cross-cultural, longitudinal insight into infant transitions to ECEC, with clear implications for practice (e.g. shorter first days, attention to drop-off, value of peer and one-to-one

	infants clearly described.	qualitative analytic procedures are less fully detailed across countries.	results and illustrative vignettes linked to the research questions.	interactions), despite acknowledged limits to generalisability.
Xu 2006	Can't tell - The paper does not report consent procedures, confidentiality safeguards or ethics approval, so ethical adequacy cannot be judged.	Yes - Domain, taxonomy, linguistic and content analyses are detailed, with data extracts illustrating theme generation.	Yes - Findings are clearly stated, supported by examples, consider alternative views and relate back to research questions.	Yes - Authors discuss contributions to practice, suggest future research and consider transferability to other programmes.

Appendix D - Overview of Articles Included in the Literature Review

Author (Year)	Title	Country	Focus	Participants	Sampling/recruitment	Research design, method & analysis	Findings
Klette, T., & Killén, K. (2018).	Painful transitions–A study of 1-year-old toddlers' reactions to separation and reunion with their mothers after 1 month in childcare.	Norway	Separations and reunions	12 1-year old toddlers, typically developing and attending childcare approximately 40 hours per week, only children who were about to start childcare	Recruitment via public-health nurses	Design: Qualitative Collection: Observational recordings Analysis: attachment-theory analysis	All toddlers showed separation anxiety; protest, despair or detachment evident; low staffing worsened distress

Datler, W., Hover-Reisner, N., & Datler, M. (2015).	Toddlers' relationships to peers in the processes of separation	Vienna	Toddlers' peer relationships during separation into day care (psychoanalytic perspective)	1 child focus (Jacob)	Purposive; nursery-based recruitment within Viennese project	Design: Qualitative Collection: Tavistock infant observational Analysis: Psychoanalytic interpretive analysis	Peer relationships can buffer or exacerbate separation distress; loss of peer connection linked to withdrawal and silent distress
Golkhou, M. (2024).	ECEC teachers' emotional support during children's transition from home to ECEC.	Finland	ECEC teachers' emotional support during children's transition from home to ECEC	7 children (0–3 years) and 4 ECEC teachers	Convenience and extreme-case sampling in one Finnish kindergarten	Design: Qualitative Collection: Observations and interviews Analysis: Abductive thematic analysis	

Datler, W., Datler, M., & Funder, A. (2010).	Struggling against a feeling of becoming lost: a young boy's painful transition to day care.	Vienna	Toddler's emotional experience of transition to day care (psychoanalytic/affect regulation)	One toddler (19 months); single-case study	Purposive; drawn from wider Viennese transition project	Design: Qualitative single case study Collection: Tavistock young child observation Analysis: Psychoanalytic interpretation	
Mellenius, N., Korja, R., Kalland, M., Huttunen, R., Sourander, J., Salo, S., ... & Junttila, N. (2023)	. "I Try to Think Behind My Child's Cry": Preparation for Separation Experiences in the Light of Parental Mentalization.	Finland	Parental mentalization during preparation for toddler separation into ECEC	21 parents (toddlers aged 10–24 months)	Purposive; recruited via municipal ECEC coordinators and health services	Design: Qualitative phenomenographic study Collection: semi-structured interviews Analysis: Phenomenographic analysis	Parents vary in mentalizing preparation; tolerable uncertainty supports reflective, flexible responses to separation

Nakaoka, H. (2014).	Coming to terms with daily separation: observation of two children's transition from home to nursery.	UK	Toddlers' emotional experience of daily separation during transition to nursery (psychoanalytic perspective)	Two toddlers (aged 2 years)	Purposive; children observed within nursery where researcher was volunteer worker	Design: Qualitative case study Collection: Participant infant observation Analysis: Psychoanalytic interpretive analysis	Children differed in coping with separation; internalisation of a "good internal parent" supported adjustment; quiet distress risked being overlooked
White, E. J., Westbrook, F., Hawkes, K., Lord, W., & Redder, B.	(In) visible perceptions of objects ('things') during early transitions: Intertw	New Zealand and Australia	Role of objects ("things") in infants' transitions from home to ECEC (phenomenological perspective)	Infants, parents, and teachers across three ECEC sites	Purposive; drawn from international infant transition study (ISSEET)	Design: Qualitative phenomenological study Collection: video observations and interviews	Objects act as relational anchors during transitions, supporting

(2023).	ining subjectivities in ECEC.					Analysis: Dialogic, phenomenological analysis that is concept-driven by Merleau-Ponty	connection, soothing, and continuity; significance often overlooked by adults
Gath, M. E., Herold, L., Hunkin, E., McNair, L. J., Redder, B., Rutanen, N., & White, E. J. (2024).	Infants' emotional and social experiences during and after the transition to early childhood education and care.	Multi-country (NZ, FI, AU, SCOT, USA)	Infants' socio-emotional experiences across the first year in ECEC; what eases transition	10 infants (5–13 months), five countries	Pragmatic case selection via country leads; one infant per service starting ECEC	Design: Embedded mixed-methods Collection: Longitudinal coded event observations, videos and interviews Analysis: Vignette synthesis	Affect was lowest on the first day, improved after one week and across the year; drop-offs remained negative for about one month;

							peers, objects, and play increased affect, activeness, and involvement; one-to-one teacher interactions, especially with care objects, increased interpersonal engagement.
Xu (2006)	Toddlers' emotional reactions to separation	USA	Toddlers' emotional reactions to separation; roles of parents/grandp	Toddlers (18–30 months) in one univer	Naturalistic classroom cohort; purposive interviews (head	Design: Interactional ethnography with socioling	Most toddlers managed separa

	from their primary caregivers: successful home–school transition		arents/teachers in drop-off routines	sity preschool; parents, grandparents, staff	teacher + 2 parents)	uistic discourse analysis Collection: 4 weeks of morning observations and interviews Analysis:	tion in a high-quality setting; adult behaviours mattered (brief, confident goodbyes and positive parent-teacher interactions linked to smoother engagement); some childrn showed stronger attachment to

							grandparents; classroom arrangement supported regulation and play
Dolby, R., Friezer, B., Hughes, E., Page, J., & Meade, V. (2023).	Supporting educators' emotional work with infants and their families around transitions at the start of the day.	Australia (with UK collaboration)	Educators' emotional work and relational practices during infant morning transitions	20 infants (8–18 months), families, and 5 educators	Single long day care centre; families and educators volunteered for PDP evaluation	Design: Pre–post intervention study. Quantitative. Collection: Video analysis of transitions; coded triangular interactions, relational language, and physical availability; Analysis:	Professional development increased educator stillness, physical holding, relational language, and triangular interactions; infants, parents, and

						Fisher's exact tests	peers experienced greater closeness and belonging during morning transitions.

Appendix E – recruitment poster

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

The Daily Separation Experience

Hello! My name is Suzie and I would like to find out what children have to say about being dropped off at school.

Who?

Children starting full time in reception class with age expected levels of English language and have not experienced a prolonged separation from their caregiver.

What?

A study involving watching your child coming into school, drawing with them and playing with them over a few weeks.

Where?

Within their school morning, on site, starting September 2025.

At the end, you can meet with me to discuss your child's experience and you will have access to a webinar about supporting your child with the separation process (translator available).

Please contact me through snelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk for further information or expressions of interest

Appendix F – consent forms

The daily separation experience, a young child's perspective.

Statement	Tick if Yes
I have read the information leaflet relating to the above programme of research in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep.	
The nature and purposes of the research have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information.	
I understand that the researcher will observe my child and engage them in a drawing and play session. I understand what this involves and it has been explained to me.	
I understand that my child's involvement in this study, and particular data from this research, will remain confidential. However, I understand the legal constraints to this should cases of safeguarding concerns arise. Privacy policy - Tavistock and Portman	
I understand that if disclosure of imminent harm or safeguarding risk is communicated, the school's safeguarding procedures will be followed.	
I understand that the researchers involved in the study will have access to the data and the drawings collected within this study will be used within the thesis.	
It has been explained to me what will happen once the data collection has been completed. I understand that as the sample size is small people who know my child may be able to deduce their answers. However data will be anonymised during collection and no personal data will be stored.	
I understand that I have the right to withdraw my child from the programme at any time without disadvantage to myself	

and without being obliged to give any reason.	
I understand I have the right to withdraw my child's data up to four weeks post collection.	
I understand this data will be part of a research thesis and will be published in line with the University of Essex research guidance.	

To help the researcher to understand when your child is distressed and should provide extra care/cease the session, please detail how your child may show their distress:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

I hereby freely and fully consent to my child participating in the study which has been fully explained to me.

Parent/Guardian Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

…….

Parent/Guardian Signature

……..

Investigator's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……..

Investigator's Signature

……

Date: …….

Appendix G – Information sheet

Hello, my name is Suzie, and I am a doctoral student at the Tavistock University studying Educational Psychology. I would like to conduct my study within your child's Reception class, and I am looking for children to take part. Please read this information sheet to see if you would consent for your child to be involved.

Hello. My name is Susie, And I am a doctoral student at the Tavistock University studying educational psychology. I would like to conduct my study with your child reception class, and I am looking for children to take part. Please read this information sheet if you would consent to your child being involved.

Project Title

The daily separation experience, a young child's perspective.

Project Description

This project aims to study the separation experiences of reception aged children within their school setting. Separation is often a significant event in children and their parent's lives. It can be a complex event with sometimes distressing emotions felt by both parents and children. Research has been carried out to find out what parents and teachers think

about this time of separation, but I wish to explore how children experience this separation. Involving children in the exploration will add their personal perspective and give a voice to an age group often overlooked.

What will happen: Your child would be observed when arriving at school and for 45 minutes thereafter. After I have made notes, your child would then be invited to engage in a drawing of the separation process and a play session, where I will engage the child with toys for a collective extra hour (although this is dictated by child engagement). The child will be offered a known staff member to accompany them if they so wish. This process will be repeated over three weeks to collect themes. I will be present within the nursery the week before data collection to acclimatize to the setting and build rapport with the children.

Your child may get distressed separating from you in the early days of starting school; a common phase for most children to work through. This distress will be given space within the study, allowing your child to speak about their separation, however adults within their school team, and myself will be on hand at all times to provide comfort and support. Your child will be supported to explore these themes at their own pace. However, if your child seems increasingly distressed within the session, the distress protocol would be implemented, and they would be taken back to class with a trusted and caring staff member who has been briefed on the importance of providing comfort.
Some children may not show very much distress at all. Within this study, the aim of the research is not to judge the experience, but to hear the child's voice and the story they wish to communicate.

The activities include, observing your child for 45 minutes at the start of the day, followed by a drawing session for around 15 minutes and a play session for another 30 minutes. The length of these activities will be dependent on your child's willingness to take part on the day. Post study, if you feel that additional support is needed to aid your child's separation process, the school and parents involved will be provided with a webinar around evidence-based methods of supporting home-school handover in a relational way. This research has been approved by the Tavistock ethics committee.

Inclusion criteria

- Children who have <u>not</u> experienced a significant or prolonged separation from a primary caregiver.
- Children who have age expected language skills so they can share their thoughts.
- Attending reception on a full-time timetable.

If you would like to discuss if your child would be appropriate for the study, then please contact me with the details below.

Confidentiality of the Data

Your child's data will be stored on a password protected laptop on the University of Essex's data storage system in line with Tavistock GDPR guidelines Privacy policy - Tavistock and Portman . All data taken within the session will be written, but immediately anonymised, however due to the small sample size (2 children) anonymity may be limited. When published, no personal or setting names will be used. The data will be scanned post session and stored on the drive, with the hard copy kept in a locked safe. The child information sheet with a picture of them on it will also be kept in the locked safe. After the data is electronically uploaded, the hard copy will be shredded and disposed of securely. Once the programme is completed, the data will be stored as pertaining to the Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance for 6-10 years post involvement on the secure system. Please note all data will be subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions).

Location

Within your child's school setting. The observation will be at time of drop off on school premises. The room for drawing and play will also be within the school site.

Disclaimer

You are not obliged to allow you child to take part in this study and are free to withdraw them at any time during the research. Should you choose to withdraw your child from the research you may do so without disadvantage to yourself and without any obligation to give a reason.

Thank you for reading this information sheet. I would greatly appreciate you considering your child for involvement in this study. If you would like to have a further conversation, then please get in contact and I am more than happy to talk things through with you.

The Researchers

Suzannah Nelson, Trainee Educational Psychologist Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
120 Belsize Ln, London NW3 5BA
Snelson@tavi-port.nhs.net

Sarah Sivers, (Supervising researcher)
ssivers@tavi-port.nhs.uk

If you have any queries regarding the conduct of the programme in which you are being asked to participate, please contact:
Paru Jeram, Trust Quality Assurance Officer pjeram@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Appendix H – Child info sheet

Would you like to do some activities together?

We will do some drawing

We will play

Would you like an adult with you?

*Myself and the child	Myself, the child, the additional adult

Appendix I: Fieldwork Risk Assessment Audit

Name: Suzannah Nelson	School: Tavistock & Portman NHS Foundation Trust
Student number: 23002650	Supervisor / Director of Studies: Sarah Sivers
Thesis Title: The daily separation experience, a young child's perspective.	
Fieldwork location: School Setting	Type of Fieldwork: Observation, Drawing, play
Proposed dates or periods of Fieldwork: May 2025- October 2025	
Potential hazards or risks: *(rate high medium or low)*	
1. Participant distress/ emotional impact (medium)	2. Technical difficulties e.g., loss of internet connection (Low)
3. Safeguarding concerns (medium)	4. Data security and protection (medium)
5. Privacy and confidentiality (medium)	6. Researcher safety (low)
7.Informed consent (medium)	8. Toys (low)
9. Medical wellbeing – aware of medical needs	10.
Potential Consequences for each hazard: *(please continue on a separate sheet if necessary)*	

1. The emotional impact will be seen by the researcher within the observation, although this is naturally occurring. The research will give space for children to express their feelings around separation which could show children to be distressed/emotional.
2. Technical difficulties – there is no technology being used here except for parent conversations at the consent stage and possibly the debrief with parents at the end. Technology is not used within the study itself.
3. Safeguarding concerns could arise when spending time with the children. As this is a safe space whereby the child's feelings are open for discussion, disclosures could be made.
4. Data security breaches are a risk, this could lead to the anonymized data to be leaked.
5. If confidentiality is breached this could cause distress to the families involved due to personal data being shared.
6. The safety of the researcher could be at risk given an evacuation, medical incident or the child displaying harmful behaviours.
7. Consent could be uninformed if the family do not understand the researcher's information sheet or there are misunderstandings through the in-person/phone discussions.
8. The toys used within the session could be harmful if they are not age appropriate. This could cause injury or choking.
9. The child could be involved in a medical incident if there is an accident within the setting or the researcher is not aware of any medical needs.

Controls in place for each hazard in order of likely risk: *(please continue on a separate sheet if necessary)*

1. See distress procedure
2. A phone call can be used if the online technology fails or a conversation will be facilitated in school.
3. The designated safeguarding officer will be alerted within the school. Concerns will be discussed with the research supervisor.
4. The breach will be reported and recommended procedure will be followed.
5. The privacy of the child will need to be managed alongside parental right to be informed. Any identifying information gathered will be kept confidential for the family unless safeguarding risks are present.
6. Evacuation procedures will be followed and school procedures for first aid. The researcher will keep the child safe from harm and ask for support from staff if the child displays harmful behavior. Any psychological distress from the researcher will be discussed with their research supervisor.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">
7. Participants will be provided with a clear and accessible consent form which can be altered to support a variety of different needs and requirements. A translation service can be used for discussions.
8. Some toys may be used from the setting as these would be risk assessed already. Other toys brought by the researcher will be through the local authority store which has been risk assessed/labelled as age appropriate.
9. The researcher will ask about medical needs pre-data collection and staff will be nearby at any time the child need medical attention. If there is an emergency, the researcher will call 999.
</td></tr>
<tr><td>By signing this document you are indicating that you have consulted the policy and have fully considered the risks.

Signature of Student:

Date: 30.01.25</td><td>I agree to the assessment of risk in relation to this project.

Signature of Supervisor of Studies:

Date: 31.1.2025</td></tr>
</table>

Appendix J: Distress Protocol

Distress Policy

Participant ID		Date	
Researcher	Suzannah Nelson	Named service contact	
Has the participant become distressed during the interview?			Yes/No

If yes, do:

1. Notice and be attuned to the child's emotional wellbeing. Use the data collected from parents (consent form) around how their child shows distress and see if they are displaying these behaviours.
2. Ask them how they are feeling, listen with empathy.
3. Give them time to express themselves.
4. Provide comfort and space to display their emotions in a containing space.
5. Notice if their emotional expression heightens/they become increasingly distressed.
6. Ask if they would like another adult to join us that they know/trust.
7. Ask if they would like to keep going or go back to class.
8. If they would like to end and go back to class, arrange for a key member of staff to comfort them and check in with their wellbeing throughout the day.
9. At the end of the session, ask how they found the session to give an opportunity for sharing their feelings.
10. Share the instance of distress with the link SENDCo within the school and research supervisor.
11. Following input, parents will be offered a debrief slot to discuss findings and for them to ask any questions about the process.

Don't:

1. Try to persuade the child to stay even if they have expressed their desire to return to class.
2. Delay in speaking to the key worker around their experience and need for subsequent care.

Do you have reason to think that the child is experiencing harm and may need to withdraw from the study?

Yes/No

1. Explain your concerns to the staff involved and discuss concerns with the research supervisor.

2. Ensure that this conversation is also held with parents to keep them involved in the decision-making process.

The children will not be left alone during or after this study and known adults will be around for support. If a safeguarding risk is detected, the school's safeguarding procedure will be followed, and the designated safeguarding officer will be informed. This will also be reported to the supervising researcher.

Appendix K - Session schedule

Date	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1st – 5th Sept				*Parent transition day	*Independent transition session
8th – 12th Sept	Lucy: Observation Drawing Play	Oscar: Observation Drawing Play			
15th – 19th Sept	Oscar: Observation Drawing Play	Lucy: Observation Drawing Play			
22nd – 26th Sept	Lucy: Observation Drawing Play	Oscar: Observation Drawing Play			

- Assimilation session: Building rapport with the children and interacting, but not doing any formal data collection other than process notes/reflections afterwards.

Appendix L – The psychosocial analysis process

Figure 11: Process notes

Lucy was standing with her Mum and sister by the classroom gate, waiting for them to be let in. Compared to last week, Lucy was not holding Mum's leg. When the gate opened, Lucy walked into the classroom. Her Mum shouted after her "Bye then!" sarcastically due to Lucy not saying any formal goodbyes to Mum. She came back out to put her water bottle on the side and shouted goodbye to her mum in a slightly disgruntled tone.

Lucy approaches the number puzzle and matches the numbers and animals. She puts them together on her own. Lucy lets out a big sigh and looks at me. "I feel like its missing pieces".

T1 "So sorry Lucy, Mrs X left all her stuff there!" Moves the folders out the way so she can complete the puzzle. T1 smiles at me. Did she think I was judging that mistake?

Other children are sitting or playing at this time. There are a few blank faces, they seem overwhelmed and lost. One child is quietly crying in the corner.

H approaches me and says Hello. He shows me his uniform and tells me it is white.

TAW Tells a child who did not attend the transition days to go to Lucy and help her with the puzzle. He approaches and stands awkwardly next to her. They stand side by side quietly. Lucy breaks the end of the puzzle off and puts it together again. They stand quietly again, facing the puzzle. Neither say anything.

Lucy moves on to the book corner. Another child comes into the classroom crying. A name badge is given to her but she is not comforted. She stands in the middle of the room with her bag for some time.

Figure 12: Coded Process Notes

D1: Lucy was standing with her Mum and sister by the classroom gate, waiting for them to be let in. Compared to last week, Lucy was not holding Mum's leg. When the gate opened, Lucy walked into the classroom. Her Mum shouted after her "Bye then!" sarcastically due to Lucy not saying any formal goodbyes to Mum. She came back out to put her water bottle on the side and shouted goodbye to her mum in a slightly disgruntled tone.

D2: Lucy approaches the number puzzle and matches the numbers and animals. She puts them together on her own. Lucy lets out a big sigh and looks at me. "I feel like its missing pieces".

T1 "So sorry Lucy, Mrs X left all her stuff there!" Moves the folders out the way so she can complete the puzzle. T1 smiles at me. Did she think I was judging that mistake?

Other children are sitting or playing at this time. There are a few blank faces, they seem overwhelmed and lost. One child is quietly crying in the corner.

H approaches me and says Hello. He shows me his uniform and tells me it is white.

D3: TAW Tells a child who did not attend the transition days to go to Lucy and help her with the puzzle. He approaches and stands awkwardly next to her. They stand side by side quietly. Lucy breaks the end of the puzzle off and puts it together again. They stand quietly again, facing the puzzle. Neither say anything.

Lucy moves on to the book corner. Another child comes into the classroom crying. A name badge is given to her but she is not comforted. She stands in the middle of the room with her bag for some time.

Figure 13: Annotated drawing

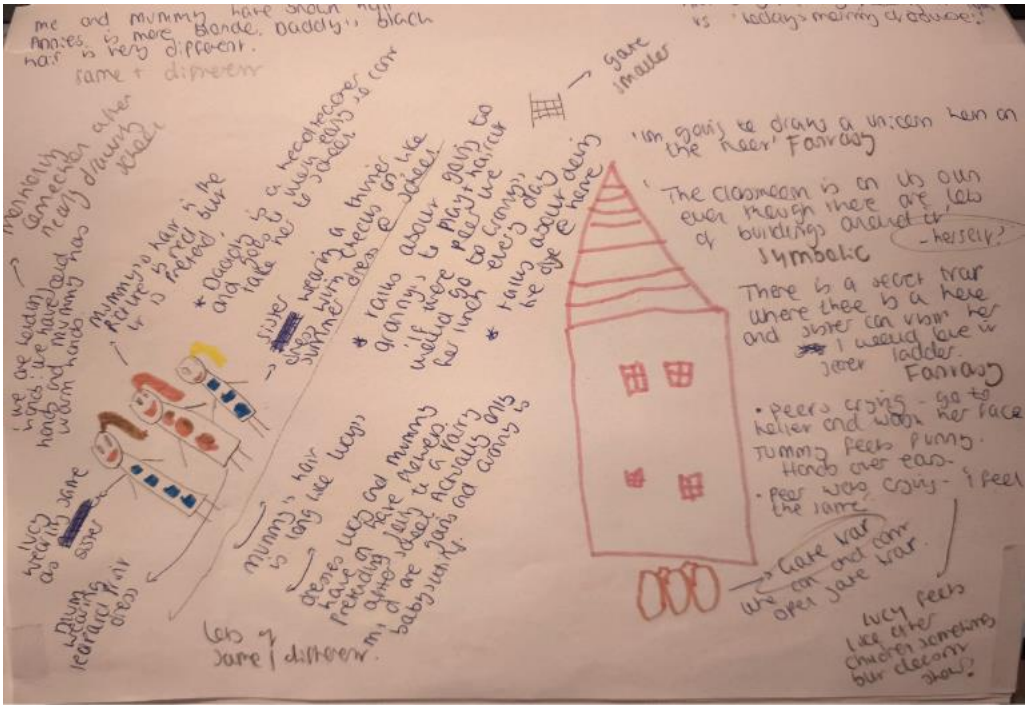
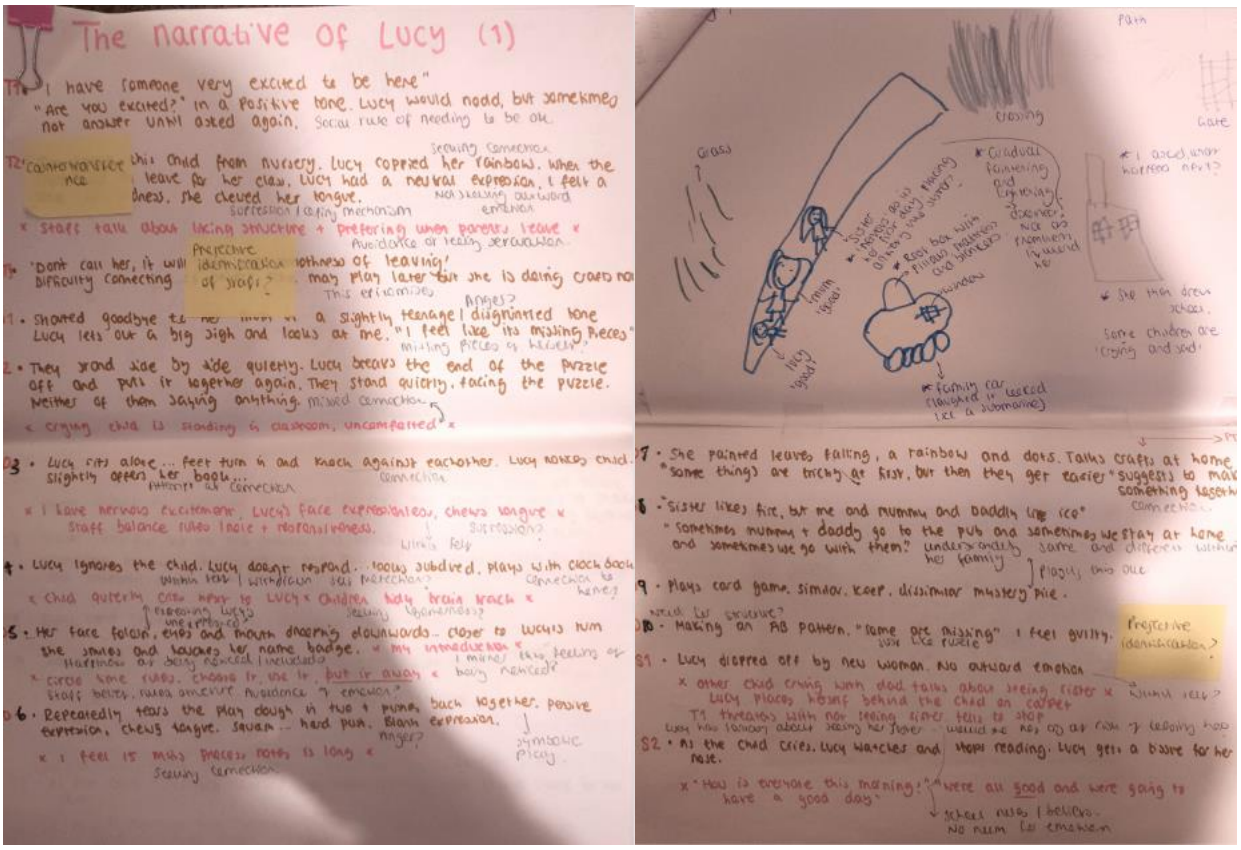


Figure 14: Booklet extracts



The narrative of Lucy (1)

T1 "I have someone very excited to be here"
"Are you excited?" in a positive tone. Lucy would nodd, but sometimes not answer UNTIL asked again. Social rule of needing to be ok.

T2 Conversation this child from nursery. Lucy copied her rainbow. When the leave for her class, Lucy had a neutral expression. I felt a ness. She chewed her tongue.
Seeking connection
Not seeking attention
Suppression / coping mechanism
emotion
x staff talk about using structure + preferring when parents leave x
Avoidance or feeling overwhelm

T3 "Don't call her, it will Difficulty connecting
Protective identification
nothness of leaving' may play later for she is doing crafts no
This minimizes
Anger?

T4 • Shouted goodbye to her mum in a slightly teenage / disgruntled tone Lucy let's out a big sigh and looks at me. "I feel like its missing pieces"
missing pieces of herself?

T5 • They stand side by side quietly. Lucy breaks the end of the puzzle off and puts it together again. They stand quietly, facing the puzzle. Neither of them saying anything. mixed connection
x crying child is standing in classroom, uncomforted x

T3 • Lucy sits alone... feet turn in and knock against eachother. Lucy notices child. slightly offers her book...
Attempt at connection
Connection
x I have nervous excitement, Lucy's face expressionless, chews tongue x
staff balance rules + role + reasonableness.
Suppression?
Withdrawn / self protection?
Little felt

T4 • Lucy ignores the child. Lucy doesn't respond. looks subdived. plays with clock book within self / withdrawn
Connection to home?
x Child quietly asks next to Lucy x Children help brain reach x
Observing ways
Unemployed
Seeking togetherness?

T5 • Her face falls in, eyes and mouth drooping downwards... closer to Lucy's turn she stands and touches her name badge. x my introduction x
Happiness at being noticed / included
I matter / feel feeling of being noticed?
x circle time rules. Choose to use it, but it away x
staff beliefs, rules, amount, frequency + consensus?

T6 • Repeatedly tears the play dough in two + puts back together. passive expression, chews tongue. squash... hard push. Blank expression.
Anger?
symbolic play.
x I feel it makes pieces parts is long x
Seeking connection

T7 • She painted leaves falling, a rainbow and dots. Talks crafts at home "some things are tricky at first, but then they get easier" suggests to mak something together
Connection

T8 • "Sister likes fire, but me and mummy and daddy like ice"
"sometimes mummy + daddy go to the pub and sometimes we stay at home and sometimes we go with them" understands her family
same and different within

T9 • Plays card game. Simon. Keep. dissimilar mastery play.
Playing two alone

T10 • Making an AB pattern. "some are missing" I feel guilty.
Like puzzle
Protective identification?

S1 • Lucy dropped off by new woman. No outward emotion
x other child crying with dad talks about seeing sister x
Lucy places herself behind the child on carpet
T9 threatens with not seeing sister tells to stop
Lucy has concern about seeing her sister... would she not cry at now of keeping her

S2 • As the child cries, Lucy watches and stops reading. Lucy gets a book for her mat.
x "How is everyone this morning?" "were all good and were going to have a good day"
school rules / beliefs.
No room for emotion

Figure 15: Descriptive narrative write up Oscar.

1. **Oscar feels deeply connected to his parents...**

It was evident from the start of my involvement with Oscar that he wished to be close to his parents and often sought proximity to them, shown by following them around on the transition morning (T1). When it came to separate, Oscar attempted to leave, but found this incredibly difficult:

> ***T4:*** *"When he comes in, he kisses his mother at the gate with his little sister. He then goes into the classroom. He then runs back and kisses her. Does this again and then becomes upset. He then runs around, circling his mother and clings to her. Teacher 3 pulls him off his mother and brings him inside. He is very distressed and crying."*
>
> ***S1:*** *Oscar arrives and cuddles his mother outside of the gate. He starts to resist separating from her and holds on to her whilst he starts to cry. Teacher 2 approaches him. He shouts and screams and says "I want to walk" but pushes his body backwards towards his mother. His mother walks away when the teacher has hold of him. He carries on crying loudly. The teacher walks him towards the door while supporting his body.*

Oscar spoke of his separation within the second projective drawing. Oscar drew two mountains, one which he was on top of, and another, school. His mother was at home, saying "Hello" and feeling happy whilst he felt sad and missed her at school. I feel as though the mountains drawn were a symbol of Oscar's perceived distance from his mother, and wish to be closer, and yet distance from school, not accepting his place within it. After finishing, Oscar pushed the pencils on top of his drawing, encouraging me to do so too. His drawing was now hidden, perhaps hiding the sadness that the picture held.

Figure 16 Descriptive narrative write up Lucy.

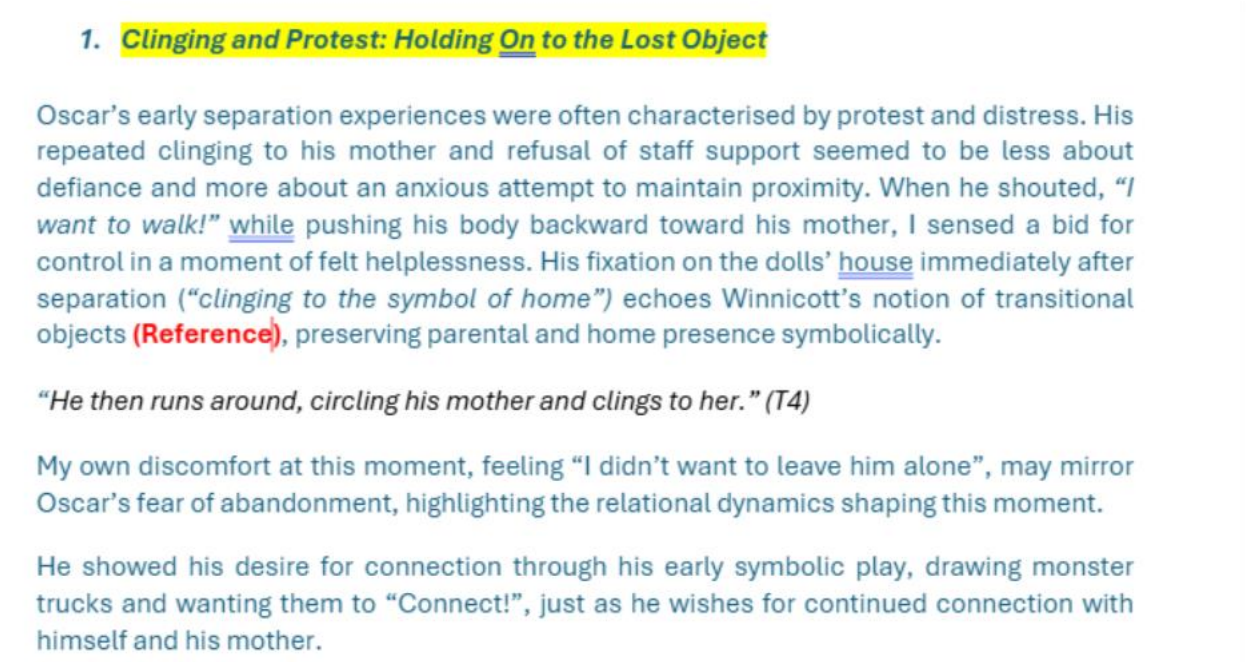
4. **Lucy processes her differences with others.**

As part of Lucy's separation experience, she seemed to process the differences and similarities she shares with the lives of her family, understanding that she now has an experience entirely independent of them, and them to her. This was expressed through a series of observations about others, such as:

> ***"D8:*** *She says, "My sister likes fire but me and my parents like ice", and that "Mummy and Daddy sometimes go to the pub and that sometimes I stay at home and sometimes I go with them".*
> ***"F6:*** *She told me: "My Mummy is going away on holiday because she can relax more and do her work", "It will be strange today because Granny will be there when I get back from school. Mummy and Daddy are going to a party together but me and [sister] are not going."*
> ***S6:*** *She shared: "We go on holiday every weekend and went away to France. The older children got to have a midnight feast, but the younger children didn't. And the adults had a midnight swim but that the younger kids didn't."*

I wonder if Lucy is remembering other times in her life where she is separated from her parents periodically.

Figure 17: Interpretive analysis



1. ***Clinging and Protest: Holding On to the Lost Object***

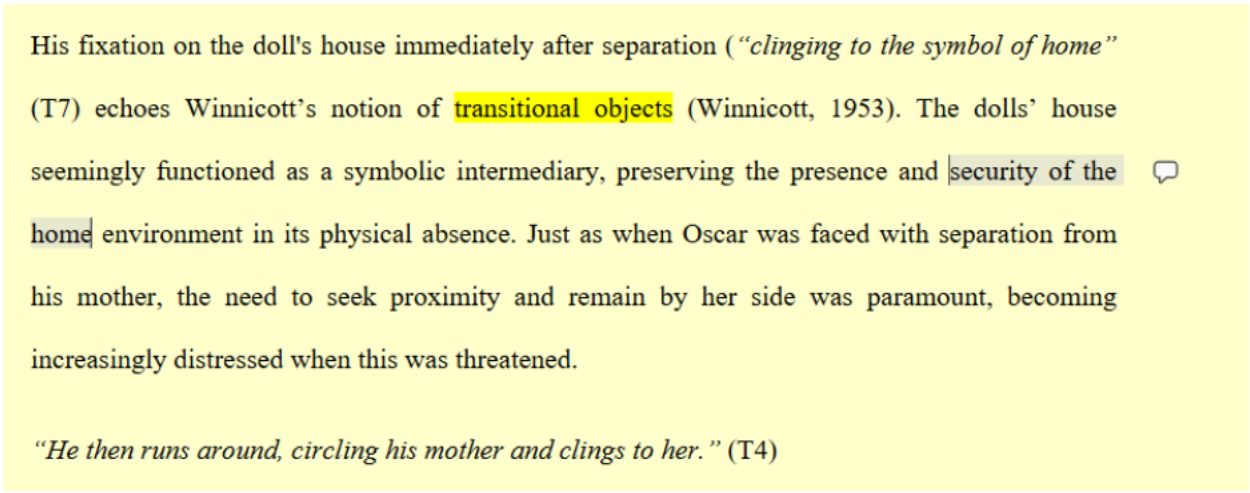
Oscar's early separation experiences were often characterised by protest and distress. His repeated clinging to his mother and refusal of staff support seemed to be less about defiance and more about an anxious attempt to maintain proximity. When he shouted, *"I want to walk!"* while pushing his body backward toward his mother, I sensed a bid for control in a moment of felt helplessness. His fixation on the dolls' house immediately after separation (*"clinging to the symbol of home"*) echoes Winnicott's notion of transitional objects **(Reference)**, preserving parental and home presence symbolically.

"He then runs around, circling his mother and clings to her." (T4)

My own discomfort at this moment, feeling "I didn't want to leave him alone", may mirror Oscar's fear of abandonment, highlighting the relational dynamics shaping this moment.

He showed his desire for connection through his early symbolic play, drawing monster trucks and wanting them to "Connect!", just as he wishes for continued connection with himself and his mother.

Figure 18: Further incorporation of psychoanalytic theory.



His fixation on the doll's house immediately after separation (*"clinging to the symbol of home"* (T7) echoes Winnicott's notion of transitional objects (Winnicott, 1953). The dolls' house seemingly functioned as a symbolic intermediary, preserving the presence and security of the home environment in its physical absence. Just as when Oscar was faced with separation from his mother, the need to seek proximity and remain by her side was paramount, becoming increasingly distressed when this was threatened.

"He then runs around, circling his mother and clings to her." (T4)

Appendix M – Webinar Excerpts

Figure 19: Slide 2 - Overview

Figure 20: Slide 11 - My research

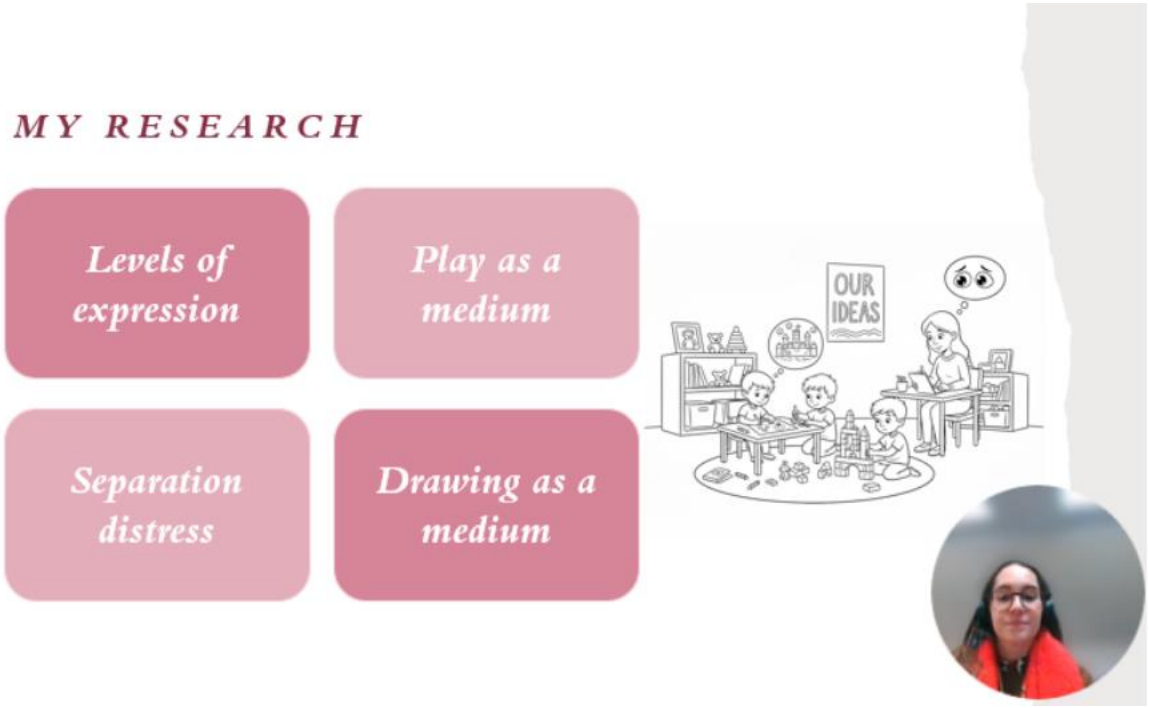
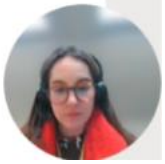


Figure 21 -23: Slide 12 - Next Steps

SO, WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT IT?

1. Monitor Engagement and Emotional Well-being

2. Establish Predictable and Welcoming Routines



SO, WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT IT?

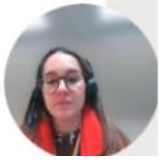
3. Use Structured Separation Dialogues

4. Incorporate Playfulness and Transitional Objects

SO, WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT IT?

5. Facilitate Emotional Expression Through Play

6. Foster Peer Connections



Appendix N – Ethics form

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)
APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

This application should be submitted alongside copies of any supporting documentation which will be handed to participants, including a participant information sheet, consent form, self-completion survey or questionnaire. See appendix for corresponding documents.

Where a form is submitted and sections are incomplete, the form will not be considered by TREC and will be returned to the applicant for completion.

For further guidance please contact Paru Jeram (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

FOR ALL APPLICANTS

If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters. You need only complete sections of the TREC form which are NOT covered in your existing approval

Is your project considered as 'research' according to the HRA tool? (http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html)	Yes/No
Will your project involve participants who are under 18 or who are classed as vulnerable? (see section 7)	Yes/No
Will your project include data collection outside of the UK?	Yes/No

SECTION A: PROJECT DETAILS

Project title	**The daily separation experience, a young child's perspective.**		
Proposed project start date	01.05.25	**Anticipated project end date**	31.07.26

Principal Investigator (normally your Research Supervisor): Sarah Sivers	
Please note: TREC approval will only be given for the length of the project as stated above up to a maximum of 6 years. Projects exceeding these timeframes will need additional ethical approval	
Has NHS or other approval been sought for this research including through submission via Research Application System (IRAS) or to the Health Research Authority (HRA)?	**YES (NRES approval)** **YES (HRA approval)** **Other** **NO**
If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters.	

SECTION B: APPLICANT DETAILS

Name of Researcher	Suzannah Nelson
Programme of Study and Target Award	M4 Community and Educational Psychology at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust
Email address	snelson@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Contact telephone number	07757848972

SECTION C: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above their normal salary package or the costs of undertaking the research? **YES** **NO** If **YES**, please detail below:
Is there any further possibility for conflict of interest? YES NO
Are you proposing to conduct this work in a location where you work or have a placement? **YES** **NO** If **YES**, please detail below outline how you will avoid issues arising around colleagues being involved in this project:
Due to using pre-existing relationships within schools, conflict of interest will need to be considered. The school I use will have bought commissioned time from my local authority, which could bring complexities with their feelings of choice. I will need to ensure the school understand that withdrawal/not consenting will not affect the service's involvement, and be sensitive to this issue. If further work is needed from the service post involvement due to issues arising throughout the research collection, discussions will be had with the Educational Psychology service Principle EP.

Is your project being commissioned by and/or carried out on behalf of a body external to the Trust? (for example; commissioned by a local authority, school, care home, other NHS Trust or other organisation). *Please note that 'external' is defined as an organisation which is external to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Trust)	**YES** **NO**
If **YES**, please add details here:	

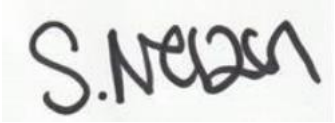
Will you be required to get further ethical approval after receiving TREC approval? If **YES**, please supply details of the ethical approval bodies below AND include any letters of approval from the ethical approval bodies (letters received after receiving TREC approval should be submitted to complete your record):	**YES** **NO**
I will need to investigate the school, and local authority the school is within, in order to understand their research governance process and send my completed TREC application to them for their records.	
If your project is being undertaken with one or more clinical services or organisations external to the Trust, please provide details of these:	
N/A	
If you still need to agree these arrangements or if you can only approach organisations after you have ethical approval, please identify the types of organisations (e.g., schools or clinical services) you wish to approach:	
I will approach a couple of schools within my local authority borough.	
Do you have approval from the organisations detailed above? (this includes R&D approval where relevant) Please attach approval letters to this application. Any approval letters received after TREC approval has been granted MUST be submitted to be appended to your record	**YES** **NO** **NA**

SECTION D: SIGNATURES AND DECLARATIONS

APPLICANT DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- The information contained in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and up to date.
- I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research.
- I acknowledge my obligations and commitment to upholding ethical principles and to keep my supervisor updated with the progress of my research
- I am aware that for cases of proven misconduct, it may result in formal disciplinary proceedings and/or the cancellation of the proposed research.
- I understand that if my project design, methodology or method of data collection changes I must seek an amendment to my ethical approvals as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

Applicant (print name)	Suzannah Nelson
Signed	
Date	03.01.25

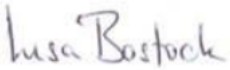
FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT APPLICANTS ONLY

Name of Supervisor/Principal Investigator	Sarah Sivers

Supervisor –

- Does the student have the necessary skills to carry out the research?
  YES **NO**
- Is the participant information sheet, consent form and any other documentation appropriate?
  YES **NO**
- Are the procedures for recruitment of participants and obtaining informed consent suitable and sufficient?
  YES **NO**
- Where required, does the researcher have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance?
  YES **NO**

Signed	
Date	31.1.2025

COURSE LEAD/RESEARCH LEAD Does the proposed research as detailed herein have your support to proceed? YES NO	
Signed	
Date	10.02.25

SECTION E: DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

1. **Provide a brief description of the proposed research, including the requirements of participants. This must be in lay terms and free from technical or discipline specific terminology or jargon. If such terms are required, please ensure they are adequately explained (Do not exceed 500 words)**

This research seeks to involve two reception aged children (4-5 years old) in an exploratory study investigating their experience of separating from their caregiver when being dropped off at school. To acclimatise to the setting, I will spend two mornings in the setting before starting a three-week cycle of data collection.

Stage one: Observations of both of the children during/post separation. This is a natural occurrence for the child so there will be no additional requirements at this stage. **Notes: I** will have fifteen minutes for process notes.

Stage two: A separate, quieter room will be used for the second and third stage. The child will be invited to a room nearby which will have resources for playing and drawing materials. The child will complete a projective drawing where the child will be required to actively engage in drawing a picture from a stimulus question ("Draw me a picture of when Mummy/Daddy brings you to school and then leaves."). This will be for 10-20 minutes. They will be encouraged to talk about their drawing with open curious statements such as 'I wonder what is happening here?'.
The researcher plays a part in developing the language, aiding a focus for their questions and insights when they arise. I will follow Coates' ethos here (2006): which involves prompting encouragingly rather than directing the child to add to their drawing. Whilst the child is drawing, I may note down things they say, but more extensive process notes will be written afterwards to ensure relational interaction is possible.

Stage three: Having a child led play session. I will invite the child to actively participate in the play session with various resources. What they play with/how they play will be up to them. Play is a way to engage the child in a method of accessing their reality through a tolerable, creative avenue, allowing inner experience to be expressed. As therapeutic play is analysed through themes, I will invite the child to play on three separate occasions to gather patterns in their expression and my countertransference data (feelings I have picked up from the session which may give insight into the child's experience). Parson et al (2015) advises that the room should be set up in a predictable way with a wide range of expressive tools and toys such as arts and crafts, puppets, figures, vehicles and moulding clay. The session will be between 30-40 minutes.
Notes: I will have fifteen minutes for process notes.

Consideration: If the child is feeling distressed at any point, I will implement the distress protocol. The child may need some preliminary play before starting the drawing. The session will always finish with play to leave the child on a relational and less directive activity instead of a more demanding one.

Data: The information will be collated for themes to deduce their feelings and opinions around the experience. This will be investigated through the post session process notes and the drawing completed in the session. Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022, 2023) method of reflexive thematic analysis will be used.

2. **Provide a statement on the aims and significance of the proposed research, including potential impact to knowledge and understanding in the field (where appropriate, indicate the associated hypothesis which will be tested). This should be a clear justification of the proposed research, why it should**

proceed and a statement on any anticipated benefits to the community. (Do not exceed 700 words)

Aim and rationale:

The aim of this research is to provide a unique and un-investigated view of a significant part of a child's daily life. Understanding the separation process has been previously investigated through observation studies or speaking to significant adults. A unique lens will be sought through the child's personal perspective. Although historically a well explored area within attachment research, the last few decades, focussing mainly on observing separation anxiety and related parental and staff experience, without an attempt to involve the child and their voice. Separation is a pivotal experience for a child and parent, one which often causes anxiety. It is important to explore the nuances of a child's lens through their voice as adults often presume contentment or distress through observation. Furthermore, separation distress is a concern often communicated by staff and parents so an area which is useful to research in order to inform decisions around care. This will inform the EP profession of what the child's experience may be, and how support can be provided through considering the child's views. For psychologists, they can also gain insight into the process of projective assessment and how this can inform child voice work.

Related research:

Predictive factors that impact separation experiences have been explored through observation, finding gender differences (Field, 1984) and frequency effects (Blehar, 1974; Jacobson and Willie, 1984; Blanchard and Main, 1979).

Staff experiences of supporting children through separation was the focus of Page and Elfer's (2013) research, finding supporting separation had an emotional impact on staff. Jovanovic et al (2016) studied staff's understanding of children's socioemotional needs, finding reciprocity and bonding through attachment allowed for greater understanding of child need.

The amount of parent interaction with the child at drop off has seen to impact distress levels and peer play (Lollis,1990), with parenting style (Jreisat, 2023) and gender (Świdrak, 2021) found to affect separation behaviour and affect. Similar research into stress has found ritual to be supportive (Klein, Kraft and Shohet, 2010), with parents playing a large part in the management of routine within separation (Jovanovic, 2011). Although a relational experience is therefore an important factor, observation and parental voice still does not provide the child with an opportunity to share their voice. Within the current study, I will provide the unique opportunity to be heard.

The separation experience specifically, and what this entails, has more limited research. Although some studies have considered the infant separation experience (King and Perrin, 1987; Godwin, Groves and Horm – Wingerd, 1993; Nakaoka, 2014), none have made a targeted exploration of the separation event by including the child's voice.

Related research is that of transition, which incorporates the event of separating into an education setting. Researchers have used a variety of methods such as drawing and photographs (Clark, 2005), finding the Mosaic approach useful in expressing their transition to school and what was important to them, with Dockett and Perry (2011) using draw and talk techniques to explore experiences of starting school, finding children to mention expectations and the purpose of school throughout. Einarsdóttir (2007) explored children's views on why they attend playschool, what they learn and enjoy, and the role of adults using the Mosaic approach. This method of joining many sources of information together to build a comprehensive picture enables children to be active participants in exploring a topic directly influencing them. However, its uses have been based on opinions of places, not emotional events such as separation.

Overall, there has been no targeted exploration of the separation experience from the child's perspective.

3. Provide an outline of the methodology for the proposed research, including proposed method of data collection, *tasks* assigned to participants of the research and the proposed method and duration of data analysis. If the proposed research makes use of pre-established and generally accepted techniques, please make this clear. (Do not exceed 500 words)

This research is an observational and participatory study of a child's experience. It takes the sentiment of a Mosaic approach; whereby multiple sources of information are pieced together to construct a view of a child's life. The method will include both a psychodynamic observation, taking note of the child's response to separation and the emotional experience this elicits within me. It will further involve the child's experiences through a projective drawings and play sessions, allowing the child to tell their story through their own words. This Psychosocial research explores 'beneath the surface' within the discourse between internal and social worlds and within subconscious communications.

Recruitment:

I will start with scoping conversations with SENDCo's within my local authority school allocation whom I have a pre-existing relationship. I will meet with them in person to discuss the details of the research with them. If they are open to this, I will provide them

with a participant information sheet and talk to the class teacher. I will ask the class teacher to share details of my research with parents when they conduct their home visits during the summer term 2025. Furthermore, I will attend any open days/drop-in sessions held for the families of the new cohort to aid consent/recruitment before the new academic year.

Data Collection:

Following an ethnographic nature, I will spend two mornings in the setting, helping with the running of the day as to assimilate. This will aid discussions with parents about the study and also aid child rapport building before direct involvement. Data will not be formally collected until post assimilation.

- The observations, drawings and play would be experienced by the myself without taking notes in the presence of the child, however post experience, I will make detailed process notes whereby the memorable behaviours and feelings would be documented for each activity.
- The observation will be in line with Anna Freud's perspective noted by Manna Friedmann (Adamo and Rustin, 2018). Here, Freud recommends to "Make a note of anything you would be inclined to tell a friend, either because it charmed you, or it was funny, and amused you, or it was irritating and angered you…".
- Then, the child will be invited to a separate room to engage in play and drawing. The method here after the prompt will be a minimally directive. The researcher plays a part in developing the language, aiding a focus for their questions and insights when they arise. The researcher will follow Coates' ethos here (2006): "The researchers' utterances, rather than directive, aimed by means of prompting, encouraging and social talk to persuade children to extend their visual explorations and spoken discourse, and enhance their confidence in the worth of these by the means of approval and positive reinforcement."
- The drawing session will be approximately 15 minutes and the play for approximately 30 minutes after this. This will be entirely free-flow and will follow the child's lead with how they wish to use the time. The play will finish after a maximum of 40 minutes.
- Observation, drawing and play are all well-known techniques with an extensive history within the psychology field.

See below for a breakdown of the data collection schedule:

Date	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs
End of Sept – Oct	Setting experience day	Setting experience day	Obs Child 1 Time for notes	Obs Child 2 Time for notes
End of Sept – Oct	Obs child 1 Time for notes Drawing and Play session #1	Obs child 2 Time for notes Drawing and Play session #1		
End of Sept – Oct	Obs child 2 Time for notes Drawing and Play session #1	Obs child 1 Time for notes Drawing and Play session #1		
End of Sept – Oct	Obs child 1 Time for notes Drawing and Play session #1	Obs child 2 Time for notes Drawing and Play session #1		

Timings: The involvement will be two hours in total for each session.

The observation will take place for 45 minutes as soon as the child arrives in reception. The researcher will have 15 minutes to write process notes.

The drawing will be conducted after this time, with play for as long as the child wishes to engage within the interactive hour slot.

Storage:

The process notes will be handwritten after the activities (post observation and then post play and drawing) and anonymised using pseudonyms. Document will be scanned onto the computer and stored onto a secure University of Essex server (OneDrive). The original documents will be shredded. The drive will follow Essex University GDPR guidelines. The data will be stored for 6-10 years under the doctoral thesis storage guidelines.

Analysis:

To collate all data sets I will be using a reflexive thematic analysis. This method will allow an in-depth analysis of the process notes for all three stages and for themes to be collected across them. The data analysis is expected to take 2-3 months. This is an established method by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022, 2023).

Debrief/Aftercare:

Parents and school staff will be made aware that they can contact me during the data collection phase if they have any questions or concerns. Once data collection is completed, I will provide a pre-recorded webinar to offer practical guidance to strengthening attachment bonds relationally within the setting, if required. This will give practical guidance and reassurance around the complexities of separation. Furthermore, parents will be signposted to organisations that may be of support, as well as the local authorities local offer, if they feel they need further help with their child.

SECTION F: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

4. Provide an explanation detailing how you will identify, approach and recruit the participants for the proposed research, including clarification on sample size and location. Please provide justification for the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate) and explain briefly, in lay terms, why these criteria are in place. (Do not exceed 500 words)

The participants will be recruited using purposive sampling from one local authority school within my borough. Initial scoping conversations will be had with the SENCO and Reception teacher before they visit. Once the school has agreed to engage with the research information sheets will be provided for the reception teacher to share with parents when they conduct home visits. Parents will be invited to contact me and I will then provide further information and gain informed consent. Additionally, when the setting holds drop-in sessions for parents, I will be present to speak about the study and answer questions.

The inclusion criteria is:

- Child will be attending a Local Authority (LA) mainstream school reception class – to fit age requirements for first separation experiences.
- English language ability appropriate for chronological age – to ensure discussion can be had around play and drawings to give insight into their world view.
- Attend the setting full time – To ensure they will be available for participation.
- Start with the setting in September 2025 – So that data collection can begin at the start of term and the first school separation experiences are studied.
- The child will not have experience of any prolonged and significant separation from their primary caregiver (e.g. Adopted, special guardianship).

The exclusion criteria is:

- A history of a significant and prolonged separation from the primary caregiver (e.g. Adopted, special guardianship) – to ensure that the research will not be excessively triggering for the child.
- Language deemed below age expected level.
- Attending school on a part time timetable – This would bring significant organisational challenges.

1. Please state the location(s) of the proposed research including the location of any interviews. Please provide a Risk Assessment if required. Consideration should be given to lone working, visiting private residences, conducting research outside working hours or any other non-standard arrangements. **If any data collection is to be done online, please identify the platforms to be used.**
The location of the research will be within the childcare setting at all times.
2. **Will the participants be from any of the following groups?*(Tick as appropriate)*** Students or Staff of the Trust or Partner delivering your programme. Adults (over the age of 18 years with mental capacity to give consent to participate in the research). Children or legal minors (anyone under the age of 16 years)[1] Adults who are unconscious, severely ill or have a terminal illness. Adults who may lose mental capacity to consent during the course of the research. Adults in emergency situations. Adults[2] with mental illness - particularly those detained under the Mental Health Act (1983 & 2007). Participants who may lack capacity to consent to participate in the research under the research requirements of the Mental Capacity Act (2005). Prisoners, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Young Offenders, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Healthy volunteers (in high risk intervention studies). Participants who may be considered to have a pre-existing and potentially dependent[3] relationship with the investigator (e.g. those in care homes, students, colleagues, service-users, patients).

Other vulnerable groups (see Question 6).

Adults who are in custody, custodial care, or for whom a court has assumed responsibility.

Participants who are members of the Armed Forces.

[1]If the proposed research involves children or adults who meet the Police Act (1997) definition of vulnerability[3], any researchers who will have contact with participants must have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.

[2] 'Adults with a learning or physical disability, a physical or mental illness, or a reduction in physical or mental capacity, and living in a care home or home for people with learning difficulties or receiving care in their own home, or receiving hospital or social care services.' (Police Act, 1997)

[3] Proposed research involving participants with whom the investigator or researcher(s) shares a dependent or unequal relationships (e.g. teacher/student, clinical therapist/service-user) may compromise the ability to give informed consent which is free from any form of pressure (real or implied) arising from this relationship. TREC recommends that, wherever practicable, investigators choose participants with whom they have no dependent relationship. Following due scrutiny, if the investigator is confident that the research involving participants in dependent relationships is vital and defensible, TREC will require additional information setting out the case and detailing how risks inherent in the dependent relationship will be managed. TREC will also need to be reassured that refusal to participate will not result in any discrimination or penalty.

3. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable? YES NO

For the purposes of research, 'vulnerable' participants may be adults whose ability to protect their own interests are impaired or reduced in comparison to that of the broader population. Vulnerability may arise from: · the participant's personal characteristics (e.g. mental or physical impairment)· their social environment, context and/or disadvantage (e.g. socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, resources, substance dependence, displacement or homelessness). · where prospective participants are at high risk of consenting under duress, or as a result of manipulation or coercion, they must also be considered as vulnerable· children are automatically presumed to be vulnerable.

3.1. **If YES, what special arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable participants' interests?**

Attunement

I will use attunement to focus on the inner world of the child and gauge how the child is doing emotionally, offering breaks or to stop interacting if necessary. Attunement

will ascertain whether a tolerable amount of emotion is being elicited or whether the child may need to withdraw. Verbal communications of assent will be listened to, and the child will be withdrawn from the study at any time the parent wishes them to be.

Containment

The projective drawing is a technique which elicits subconscious themes to arise and be projected outwards onto the natural stimulus (the page) and distress within the child could be expressed, similarly within therapeutic play. A need of the study will be containment, as I may need to 'hold' children when they are expressing themselves (Bion, 1985). Emotional themes may emerge for which I will support the child to express in a safe and supportive environment.

Child-directed

The directive activity (drawing) will be sandwiched between two non-directive spaces (observation and play) to finish interaction from a child led space and avoid overwhelm. The creative and therapeutic format of the activities allows the children to bring the themes they wish to. The study allows for three drawing and play sessions, so that the children can build comfortability and bring themes at their own pace. The activities will be within the school setting, and children will be offered to have another familiar staff member with them if they so wish.

Emotional expression

In terms of any distress communicated, displaying emotion when speaking about an emotional event is a healthy psychological response. We, as education practitioners, in my view, should be teaching children that having open and honest conversations about upsetting themes is a healthy part of relationship. This is already a naturally occurring event in the child's life, and any emotion that is expressed outwardly is already within the child, it is just being given space to be voiced. In my opinion, giving a space whereby they can express their feelings, listened to and 'held' by a psychologist is an experience of value. Furthermore, the consent form includes a section for parents to include how their child expresses distress, which will help me to recognise their emotional state and respond empathetically (see distress protocol).

If YES, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check **within the last three years** is required.

Please provide details of the "clear disclosure":

Date of disclosure: 14/07/23

Type of disclosure:
Organisation that requested disclosure: Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust
DBS certificate number: 001838997968

*(NOTE: information concerning activities which require DBS checks can be found via https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-check-eligible-positions-guidance). Please **do not** include a copy of your DBS certificate with your application*

4. Do you propose to make any form of payment or incentive available to participants of the research? YES NO

If **YES**, please provide details taking into account that any payment or incentive should be representative of reasonable remuneration for participation and may not be of a value that could be coercive or exerting undue influence on potential participants' decision to take part in the research. Wherever possible, remuneration in a monetary form should be avoided and substituted with vouchers, coupons or equivalent. Any payment made to research participants may have benefit or HMRC implications and participants should be alerted to this in the participant information sheet as they may wish to choose to decline payment.

5. What special arrangements are in place for eliciting informed consent from participants who may not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information provided in English; where participants have special communication needs; where participants have limited literacy; or where children are involved in the research? (Do not exceed 200 words)

To gather consent from parents, teachers will disseminate consent forms and participant information sheets to parents of the Sept cohort whilst visiting nurseries of the Sept cohort in their scoping visits to assess need within the summer term (May 2025). Here, teachers will pass on the information sheet if they feel the child fits inclusion/exclusion criteria. I will then meet with parents to gather direct consent. From the information sheet, parents will be asked to contact me to set up a meeting/call to talk about the process and answer any questions they may have. Once we both feel as though their child would be appropriate to take part, they will be asked

for consent. To aid accessibility, a translator can be used to ensure the parent has full understanding if the child had age expected English language skills and could take part.
As part of the nature of observation, informing the children that are being observed could create bias and alter behaviours. Therefore, they will not be informed of this stage of the process.
For child assent, I will have a conversation with the child pre-activity to explain what they will be doing and if they would like to participate. Visuals will accompany this to aid understanding. They will also be asked if they would like another known adult to join them for comfort.

SECTION F: RISK ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

6. Does the proposed research involve any of the following? *(Tick as appropriate)*

- ☐ use of a questionnaire, self-completion survey or data-collection instrument (attach copy)
- ☐ use of emails or the internet as a means of data collection
- ☐ use of written or computerised tests
- ☐ interviews (attach interview questions)
- ☐ diaries (attach diary record form)
- ☒ participant observation
- ☐ participant observation (in a non-public place) without their knowledge / covert research
- ☐ audio-recording interviewees or events
- ☐ video-recording interviewees or events
- ☐ access to personal and/or sensitive data (i.e. student, patient, client or service-user data) without the participant's informed consent for use of these data for research purposes
- ☒ administration of any questions, tasks, investigations, procedures or stimuli which may be experienced by participants as physically or mentally painful, stressful or unpleasant during or after the research process
- ☐ performance of any acts which might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience discomfiture, regret or any other adverse emotional or psychological reaction
- ☐ Themes around extremism or radicalisation
- ☐ investigation of participants involved in illegal or illicit activities (e.g. use of illegal drugs)
- ☐ procedures that involve the deception of participants
- ☐ administration of any substance or agent
- ☐ use of non-treatment of placebo control conditions
- ☐ participation in a clinical trial
- ☐ research undertaken at an off-campus location (risk assessment attached)
- ☐ research overseas (please ensure Section G is complete)

6. Does the proposed research involve any specific or anticipated risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?

YES **NO**

If **YES**, please describe below including details of precautionary measures.

There is potential for witnessing distress of the children when they are being observed within the separation experience. Although this would be part of their daily experience, the child could be distressed to a degree where adult support/intervention is necessary. The drawings and play could further elicit the child to show their inner experience and therefore display distress around exploring the separation. This would be a space to explore those feelings with me, however the research itself will not elicit distress that is not already within the child.

7. Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress for participants, please state what previous experience the investigator or researcher(s) have had in conducting this type of research.

As a trainee educational psychologist, I am used to assessing and talking to children about their experiences. I am required to tackle potentially distressing life events with them and discuss them in depth. The separation experience, being one sometimes elicits distress, will be a theme which will need to be explored with the children through play and drawing. This is a commonplace task for me which will require empathy, tact and the ability to contain the child's emotion. These are all skills I regularly practice within my role.

Playing, drawing and observations are also commonplace within my role. These could elicit distressing themes connected to the separation experience, however being child led and encouraging participation through sharing their personal experience in a safe space allows a child to explore their inner experience freely. I am confident with how to organise these activities and have responded with empathy and care when they arise within my work. I also understand safeguarding procedures for when unexpected events are shared.

Within my doctoral study I have been involved in a module around young child observation. How to behave and deal with children approaching you for attention and support has been a part of that process. I am well versed in the tensions this produces and how to ethically respond without compromising process validity. Agreements were made between the parent and myself around direct communication throughout the observation (there lack of) and a full debrief of non-judgmental reflections were provided afterwards. I am used to needing continuous communication and 'check-ins' to ensure parents are happy and fully informed.

8. Provide an explanation of any potential benefits to participants. Please ensure this is framed within the overall contribution of the proposed research to knowledge or practice. (Do not exceed 400 words)

NOTE: Where the proposed research involves students, they should be assured that accepting the offer to participate or choosing to decline will have no impact on their assessments or learning experience. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants who are patients, service-users and/or receiving any form of treatment or medication that they are not invited to participate in the belief that participation in the research will result in some relief or improvement in their condition.

The research will provide knowledge and insight into the personal experiences of children when separating from parents at the start of school. This is an unresearched area from the direct perspective of the child and will benefit the field of child psychology. It will not only give childcare practitioners and parents an insight into a child's inner experience of this commonly complex event, but also psychologists who work with children who struggle with separation and what may help them. For psychologists, they can further gain insight into the process of projective assessment and how this can inform child voice work. Post involvement, the parent and setting will have access to a pre-recorded webinar detailing how to support the children with their separation experiences within school in a relational way. This will support the child's development, and the system as a whole as it is applicable to any child. For the child themselves, experiencing a 1:1 safe space whereby they can express themselves and explore difficult themes could be a cathartic/therapeutic experience which allows their voice to be heard and to work through complex emotions.

9. Provide an outline of any measures you have in place in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes and the potential impact this may have on participants involved in the proposed research. (Do not exceed 300 words)

Within the research itself, the right to withdraw will be given to parent and child if they do not feel they would like to participate any longer. The child's voice will be considered throughout and any verbal or physical signs of wishing to stop will be listened to. The child may show distress whilst exploring these themes, for which I will employ containing and supportive techniques to ensure they feel cared for. Although mild distress or show of emotion will be supported, if the child seems to be experiencing heightened or unmanageable distress, the distress protocol will be followed (see appendix 5) which includes taking the child back to class and passing them on to their key adult within the setting. This adult will be briefed beforehand to comfort the child should the need arise.

If child is distressed during or after the observation stage a familiar adult can accompany the child if the child requests this.

Post session, I will contact the parents to inform them of how the session has gone and any distress that arose. Post involvement, if the parent or setting is concerned about their child's separation experience, they will have access to a webinar around techniques that can be employed at home or school to support attachment and separation.

See distress protocol for further details.

10. Provide an outline of your debriefing, support and feedback protocol for participants involved in the proposed research. This should include, for example, where participants may feel the need to discuss thoughts or feelings brought about following their participation in the research. This may involve referral to an external support or counseling service, where participation in the research has caused specific issues for participants.

Parental worry about their child's separation experience may also be of concern. Parents could feel their child is experiencing extreme distress and they are concerned with how to support them after these feelings are openly explored within the study. Following input, parents will be offered a debrief slot to discuss findings and for them to ask any questions about the process. I will provide guidance and recommendations to the parent for how to support their child with separation if they are struggling. Pathologizing the event will be avoided to ensure parents do not feel judged for their child's experience, and psychological perspectives supportive of this outlook will be shared.

The normal occurrence of separation distress will be highlighted to reduce feelings of judgement or worry.

11. Please provide the names and nature of any external support or counselling organisations that will be suggested to participants if participation in the research has potential to raise specific issues for participants.

Local offer, parenting groups, school could contact school psychologist.

Within the borough, there are platforms which provide parents and families with signposting advice to services which they can access for support. I will ensure parents are made aware of the local offer to explore this:

https://fis.wandsworth.gov.uk/kb5/wandsworth/fsd/localoffer.page;jsessionid=5D1E3EE22E79F81C8B182C91B47368AB?newfamilychannel=2

Parents will also be signposted to any relevant parent support groups if they would like community-based support and guidance. Parents and school will be informed of the process of involving the Educational Psychology Service's support if they feel this would be of benefit.

12. Where medical aftercare may be necessary, this should include details of the treatment available to participants. Debriefing may involve the disclosure of further information on the aims of the research, the participant's performance and/or the results of the research. (Do not exceed 500 words)

N/A

FOR RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN OUTSIDE THE UK

13. Does the proposed research involve travel outside of the UK? YES NO

If YES, please confirm:

I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice? http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/

I have completed ta RISK Assessment covering all aspects of the project including consideration of the location of the data collection and risks to participants.

All overseas project data collection will need approval from the Deputy Director of Education and Training or their nominee. Normally this will be done based on the information provided in this form. All projects approved through the TREC process will be indemnified by the Trust against claims made by third parties.

If you have any queries regarding research outside the UK, please contact academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk:
Students are required to arrange their own travel and medical insurance to cover project work outside of the UK. Please indicate what insurance cover you have or will have in place.
14. Please evidence how compliance with all local research ethics and research governance requirements have been assessed for the country(ies) in which the research is taking place. Please also clarify how the requirements will be met:

SECTION G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND WITHDRAWAL

15. Have you attached a copy of your participant information sheet (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials. **YES** **NO** If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:
16. Have you attached a copy of your participant consent form (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials.

YES **NO**

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

17. The following is a participant information sheet checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

Clear identification of the Trust as the sponsor for the research, the project title, the Researcher and Principal Investigator (your Research Supervisor) and other researchers along with relevant contact details.

Details of what involvement in the proposed research will require (e.g., participation in interviews, completion of questionnaire, audio/video-recording of events), estimated time commitment and any risks involved.

A statement confirming that the research has received formal approval from TREC or other ethics body.

If the sample size is small, advice to participants that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity.

A clear statement that where participants are in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers that participation in the research will have no impact on assessment / treatment / service-use or support.

Assurance that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.

Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.

A statement that the data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies.: https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/

Advice that if participants have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this research project, they should contact Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

18. The following is a consent form checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

Trust letterhead or logo.
Title of the project (with research degree projects this need not necessarily be the title of the thesis) and names of investigators.
Confirmation that the research project is part of a degree
Confirmation that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time, or to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
Confirmation of particular requirements of participants, including for example whether interviews are to be audio-/video-recorded, whether anonymised quotes will be used in publications advice of legal limitations to data confidentiality.
If the sample size is small, confirmation that this may have implications for anonymity any other relevant information.
The proposed method of publication or dissemination of the research findings.
Details of any external contractors or partner institutions involved in the research.
Details of any funding bodies or research councils supporting the research.
Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

SECTION H: CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

19. Below is a checklist covering key points relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Please indicate where relevant to the proposed research.

Participants will be completely anonymised and their identity will not be known by the investigator or researcher(s) (i.e. the participants are part of an anonymous randomised sample and return responses with no form of personal identification)?
The responses are anonymised or are an anonymised sample (i.e. a permanent process of coding has been carried out whereby direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers).
The samples and data are de-identified (i.e. direct and indirect identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The investigator or researchers are able to link the code to the original identifiers and isolate the participant to whom the sample or data relates).
Participants have the option of being identified in a publication that will arise from the research.

Participants will be pseudo-anonymised in a publication that will arise from the research. (i.e. the researcher will endeavor to remove or alter details that would identify the participant.)
The proposed research will make use of personal sensitive data.
Participants consent to be identified in the study and subsequent dissemination of research findings and/or publication.

20. Participants must be made aware that the confidentiality of the information they provide is subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions). This only applies to named or de-identified data. If your participants are named or de-identified, please confirm that you will specifically state these limitations.

YES **NO**

If **NO**, please indicate why this is the case below:

NOTE: WHERE THE PROPOSED RESEARCH INVOLVES A SMALL SAMPLE OR FOCUS GROUP, PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE ADVISED THAT THERE WILL BE DISTINCT LIMITATIONS IN THE LEVEL OF ANONYMITY THEY CAN BE AFFORDED.

SECTION I: DATA ACCESS, SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT

21. Will the Researcher/Principal Investigator be responsible for the security of all data collected in connection with the proposed research? YES NO

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

22. **In line with the 5th principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), which states that personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for that purpose or those purposes for which it was collected; please state how long data will be retained for.**

1-2 years 3-5 years 6-10 years 10> years

NOTE: In line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data should normally be stored for 10 years and Masters level data for up to 2 years

23. **Below is a checklist which relates to the management, storage and secure destruction of data for the purposes of the proposed research. Please indicate where relevant to your proposed arrangements.**

Research data, codes and all identifying information to be kept in separate locked filing cabinets.
Research data will only be stored in the University of Essex OneDrive system and no other cloud storage location.
Access to computer files to be available to research team by password only.
Access to computer files to be available to individuals outside the research team by password only (See **23.1**).
Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically within the UK.
Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically outside of the UK.

NOTE: Transfer of research data via third party commercial file sharing services, such as Google Docs and YouSendIt are not necessarily secure or permanent. These systems may also be located overseas and not covered by UK law. If the system is located outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or territories deemed to have sufficient standards of data protection, transfer may also breach the Data Protection Act (1998).

Essex students also have access the 'Box' service for file transfer: https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/it-services/box
Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers.

Collection and storage of personal sensitive data (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political or religious beliefs or physical or mental health or condition).
Use of personal data in the form of audio or video recordings.
Primary data gathered on encrypted mobile devices (i.e. laptops).

NOTE: This should be transferred to secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity.

All electronic data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For hard drives and magnetic storage devices (HDD or SSD), deleting files does not permanently erase the data on most systems, but only deletes the reference to the file. Files can be restored when deleted in this way. Research files must be overwritten to ensure they are completely irretrievable. Software is available for the secure erasing of files from hard drives which meet recognised standards to securely scramble sensitive data. Examples of this software are BC Wipe, Wipe File, DeleteOnClick and Eraser for Windows platforms. Mac users can use the standard 'secure empty trash' option; an alternative is Permanent eraser software.

All hardcopy data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For shredding research data stored in hardcopy (i.e. paper), adopting DIN 3 ensures files are cut into 2mm strips or confetti like cross-cut particles of 4x40mm. The UK government requires a minimum standard of DIN 4 for its material, which ensures cross cut particles of at least 2x15mm.

24. Please provide details of individuals outside the research team who will be given password protected access to encrypted data for the proposed research.

N/A

25. Please provide details on the regions and territories where research data will be electronically transferred that are external to the UK:

N/A

SECTION J: PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

30. **How will the results of the research be reported and disseminated?** ***(Select all that apply)***

Peer reviewed journal
Non-peer reviewed journal
Peer reviewed books
Publication in media, social media or website (including Podcasts and online videos)
Conference presentation
Internal report
Promotional report and materials
Reports compiled for or on behalf of external organisations
Dissertation/Thesis
Other publication
Written feedback to research participants
Presentation to participants or relevant community groups
Other (Please specify below)

I will also disseminate research information via debrief to parents post involvement.

SECTION K: OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

31. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)?
Child safeguarding Child safeguarding, as in any education setting, will be prioritised and monitored throughout the research. I have had training from the University and understands safeguarding policy and how to take action. The school's safeguarding policy will be read beforehand, familiarising myself with the school designated safeguarding officer and who I would be first point of contact. This will apply to any child I encounter within the school environment. **Implications being a trainee** Being a trainee could bring concerns for the parents connected to competence and likelihood of harm. When speaking to parents about the study, I will ensure they are aware that I am a student, whilst outlining the support I have from the University from a qualified EP. The contact details of the supervisor is on the information sheet if the parents wish to contact them for clarification or reassurance.

SECTION L: CHECKLIST FOR ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

32. Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

~~Letters of approval from any external ethical approval bodies (where relevant)~~
~~Recruitment advertisement~~
Participant information sheets (including easy-read where relevant)
Consent forms (including easy-read where relevant)
~~Assent form for children (where relevant)~~
Letters of approval from locations for data collection
~~Questionnaire~~
~~Interview Schedule or topic guide~~
Risk Assessment (where applicable)
~~Overseas travel approval (where applicable)~~
Distress protocol

33. Where it is not possible to attach the above materials, please provide an explanation below.

PLEASE SEE SEPARATE FILE FOR APPENDIX

Email requesting amendments and confirming approval

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699
https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/

Suzannah Nelson

By Email

01 April 2025

Dear Suzannah,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: '*The daily separation experience, a young child's perspective.*'

I am writing to inform you that your application has been reviewed by the Assessors, and I can confirm your research ethics application has not been approved at this stage.

Please note that **Minor amendments** have been requested.

Ethical approval is given subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC) and on the proviso of **minor amendment(s)** requested by TREC assessors are addressed.

The amendments are as follows:

Condition	Comments
1	In the TREC form provide a list of the toys that are going to be made available to the children during the play session
2	I think it would be helpful that the student immediately approaches the school where she has a placement as Trainee Educational Psychologist to ascertain that they are happy for her to carry out the study and to provide a letter for TREC. This is necessary as it would be different to carry out a study within a setting where the student already has a role, and she is known by the staff then to set-up a study in a school where there aren't pre-existing work relationships.
3	Information sheet and Consent form need to be on Trust letterhead or logo. Provide also version number and date for each.