

**Illustrating career stories lived by early childhood professionals**

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines career stories curated with four early childhood professionals offering an intimate view of how early childhood professionals become early childhood professionals. The research aimed to reflect on how early childhood professionals discuss their lives and careers, how they navigate factors shaping their professional transitions and how people’s lives are affected by the work they do.

A visual narrative methodology supported data collection and informed the presentation of this research. The challenges and possibilities of making-meaning through a visual and verbal medium provided a constant source of reflection, bringing a messy-richness to the research. Using diffractive analysis and through a process of becoming-with-the-data, iterative and non-linear findings emerged. Exploration of the particularity of the four stories opened a window for further understanding the contextualisation of career trajectories within the profession and the diverse factors shaping career decisions.

Interpretation of the research data finds a symbiotic relationship occurring between the career choices of people working within the profession and the influences on, and from, wider society. This includes an absence of theorised or recognised discussions about career pathways for early childhood professionals. These findings contribute to the debates calling to widen rather than narrow discussions about careers in early childhood education and care, where professionals are considered not only for their skills and training, but how they grow and change as human beings.

In summary, the research aimed to contribute to the gap in knowledge about career trajectories experienced by early childhood professionals. Both theoretical and practical implications are proposed, including greater theorisation of career trajectories and more proactive discussions within and through the workforce about the diverse pathways and opportunities available. The research problematises the use of a visual narrative methodology, suggesting it is an interesting space for examination.

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**Chapter 1 -** **Introducing**



Postcard 1: Visualising my (multiple) self through a poststructural lens

1.1 - Introduction

This thesis examines career stories curated with four early childhood professionals offering an intimate view of how early childhood professionals become early childhood professionals as they navigate factors shaping their career trajectories. The work of early childhood professionals and the remit of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has grown in prominence over the last 30 years (OECD 2017; Miller, Dalli and Urban 2012; Osgood 2012, 2009, 2006, Bonetti, 2018, 2019, Jackson 2018). This growth has incorporated complex and contested ideas surrounding early childhood professionalism, but amongst these dizzying changes, the lives and career stories of early childhood professionals remain a clandestine messy entanglement (Lash and Castner 2018) dominated largely by narratives created outside the profession. This study aims to respond to the calls for further research (Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2018; Bullough 2016, Taylor 2018) by considering how early childhood professionals navigate their changing professional landscape as part of their everyday lives and how knots of experience shape their professional transitions and career choices. Whilst this contribution to knowledge drove the decision to undertake this research, it was also an engagement with narrative and visual methodologies that set in motion how these issues could be considered. This led to the creation of these research questions:

• What do early childhood professionals say about their lives and careers working in early childhood education and care?

• What professional transitions are identified by early childhood professionals as shaping their career trajectories and approaches to practice?

• What factors do early childhood professionals identify as influencing their professional transitions and career trajectories?

• (How) do early childhood professionals express their lives impacting on their practice, or their practice impacting on their lives?

* (How) can a bricolage of creative art based, poststructuralist, new materialist and posthumanist approaches contribute to the study of the lives and careers of early childhood education and care professionals?

The following sections in this chapter work to position this research. The next section introduces myself as a researcher, including how I view my multiple identities or roles as a messy tangle. My understanding of multiple identities is visualised in the ‘postcard’ above (postcards are explained further in Chapter 2) which represents one embodied person, but through shadows, many selves and identities emerge. This tries to highlight how each shadow, or self, can represent different priorities, understandings and functions depending on the specific context. This representation is expanded upon when I introduce myself, but it is an image that begins to highlight the poststructuralist (Lyotard 1979; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991) approach that ripples through this whole study. I use the term poststructuralist to recognise that ‘meaning’ or knowledge can be multiple and context specific, and this multiplicity can open up the mean-making process for further analysis. This approach to knowledge is considered further in the third and fourth sections of this chapter, which situate the study in the research context, before explaining the research rationale. The final section of Chapter 1 details the organisation of the thesis, highlighting the key chapters that follow.

In summary, this chapter includes the following sections:

1.2 – Positioning the researcher

1.3 – Positioning the research

1.4 - The research rationale

1.5 - Thesis organisation

**1.2 - Positioning the researcher**

Who I am is hard to answer. As the postcard at the start of this chapter tries to illustrate, I take the position that one person can embody many selves, with different subjective identities – shadows – being visible in different contexts. There are some people who are more comfortable with absolutes, a right and a wrong, and I am not one of those people. Recognising the identities that influence this research and how my researcher subjectivities’ have changed through this research process is a valued contribution to this study.

When thinking about who I am, I am reminded of the work by Carr (1995) when he describes finding an old textbook from when he was at school. Inside the textbook was an extended address beginning with his street name and home town, and ending with the words “The World, The Solar System, The Universe” (Carr 1995, p.18). A similar address could probably be found in my school books. Carr (1995) went on to explore the idea of how his 13-year-old self was trying to explore his place in the world; to embed his particularities within the social and cultural contexts that were meaningful to him at the time of writing his address. Carr (1995) is still the person who once lived at that address; however, the meaning he found in those details (The World, The Solar System, The Universe) has changed over time. As Carr grew older he changed the tools or language he used to describe his identity. I imagine The World, The Solar System and The Universe may have fascinated a 13-year-old, yet this may not have been considered as meaningful by Carr as an adult when writing his address many decades later. This line of thinking is relevant as I deliberate upon who I am because the terms I choose will be appropriate to me at this time in my life and have meanings that are informed through my own social, historical, cultural and linguistic experiences.

The example from Carr (1995) highlights the use of physical spaces and time to locate and define oneself, yet a person is also located in a field of personal relationships and behaviours. When I consider myself, I am a partner and a friend. I am a mother, a daughter and, possibly, a future daughter-in-law. I am an academic and I am a student. I am a white, British, 30-something year old female who has lived in England and Australia. I am a sister and a colleague. But maybe, just maybe, I am an enemy and an adversary too, because my view of the world is that lives can be complicated and multi-layered. I do not intend to be an adversary, and I prefer to consider myself as a friend, but one category does not necessarily negate the presence of the other. It just places one term in the ascendant (friend) and one as the subordinate (adversary), and some identities become more constant than others. Therefore, what I learned through Carr (1995) is that, to some extent, I can construct the image(s) of myself for you the reader to interpret. By which I mean, in the spirit of Barad (2007), that I can question and choose what is being made to matter as I present myself. What matters to me is the messy, complex and, maybe for some, contradictory entanglements of (my) life. These messy multiple entanglements are vital for offering an understanding of self which is not singular or definite, but constantly shifting and always becoming.

When considering views of myself as messy and multiple, I take a poststructural orientation (Lyotard 1979; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991, MacLure 2013c). Poststructuralism is a complex term without a clearly defined meaning and the impact of this stance on the research is developed further in Chapter 4. Here, when introducing myself, I use this term to reject the idea of one essential self that remains constant in all situations. In contrast, my poststructuralist stance decentres the single-self and acknowledges that identities can shift in relation to the context. It follows, therefore, that I, and other people, will view the world differently and have different social realities depending upon the social, historical, cultural, material and linguistic experiences that each individual has been exposed to and involved in.

As well as embracing the different subjective identities that I bring to this research, another impact of my poststructuralist orientation is that when I introduce myself using terms like female, or daughter, I am aware that this language has a meaning that is both generalising and subjective to each individual. These are terms that are generally recognisable within our social structures of society; female is a largely recognised adjective denoting the sex of a person, and daughter is a noun for a female in relation to her parent(s). Yet when you read the terms female and daughter you also draw on your own experiences and relative interpretations of these terms. As a reader you may have different subjective interpretations of the terms female or daughter than I intended when writing these words. This research embraces these subjective understandings by individuals, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the structural forces in society that help us take some shared meaning from these terms. This multiplicity of meaning does not seek to discover ‘the truth’ or privilege one account in ascendance over another, instead a poststructuralist framework recognises meaning as context specific, and embraces multiple meanings as opening up opportunities for further analysis. For example, by acknowledging the possibility of becoming a daughter-in-law when introducing myself, this language is used as a tool to represent more subjective identities than a daughter or a mother. The impact of my poststructuralist stance can embrace possible future selves (May 2017), as well as those that are currently enacted, enabling more layers or subjectivities to be interrogated and critiqued.

I could make this introduction of myself more simplistic, but this may silence the uncertainty, the contradictions and the ongoing changes that enrich (my) life. To redirect a phrase by Law (2003), I think something less messy would make a mess of describing me. These entanglements are important to me and help inform how I view the world and approached this research. In summary, from my perspective, who I am – who any of us are – involves textured experiences rather than labels or social positioning; and this underpins my approach throughout this research when exploring the career stories of early childhood professionals.

**1.3 - Positioning the research**

This section further locates the research within the current context – politically, personally and professionally and then works to position key terms and provide an overview of the bricolage framework being deployed.

I started working in early childhood education and care provisions nearly 20 years ago. How I understand the early childhood education and care profession is explored in more detail at the start of the literature review; however, working in ECEC has influenced my life in many ways, interweaving personal, professional and academic identities. My work in ECEC has enabled me to meet a diverse range of early childhood professionals and a consequence of these experiences is that participants in this study are recruited from a range of roles and provisions across the ECEC sector in England, rather than any specific institution. Research conducted within the workforce (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years - PACEY 2017; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development - OECD 2017; Bonetti 2018, 2019) suggests that ECEC is a broad and contemporary profession that can include roles such as nursery practitioners, children’s centre staff, teaching assistants, teachers, childminders, sport coaches, researchers, lecturers, trainers or child development workers. This research study is motivated by my subjective life experiences and shifting political influences when working and learning from this wide range of professionals. My current working role is within a university, supporting the learning and development of undergraduate students on work-based degree programmes and it is this context that contributed to the rationale for this research.

I now go on to explain key terms that are used throughout the thesis and provide an overview of how the bricolage approach is deployed. Yee and Bremmer (2011, p.1) describe a bricolage approach to research design as “a method that consists of combining methods from the social sciences, humanities and hard sciences to derive a suitable model of inquiry.” The term bricolage originated in France and is an equivalent to the English phrase of ‘making do.’ “The bricoleur views research actively, rather than passively meaning that the researcher actively constructs methods with tools at hand rather than accepting and using pre-existing methodologies” (Yee and Bremmer 2011, p.3.) I used this bricolage methodological design to aid the interpretation of this complex research subject and to facilitate a multiple perspective approach (as discussed in the last section.) It is important though to continually challenge, clarify and adapt research design, and with this in mind the approach is regularly considered throughout the study, guided by the 5th research question stated in the introduction (see chapter 1.1).

Within this methodological bricolage a range of poststructuralist, postmodernist and new materialist approaches are drawn upon and worked within, aspiring to keep a focus on the everyday lived experiences rather than normalising lived experiences (Sakr and Osgood 2019.) This involves use of some complex terms and the focus here is to offer my interpretation of these terms and indicate how I believe they work productively together in this research.

The term post – poststructural, postmodernist, posthumanist – is a complex term as it can imply a neat movement to something new, or something after what came before. Sakr and Osgood (2019, p.3) suggest there is no single shift into a ‘post’ world, “rather past, present and future ways of thinking are entangled and innovations are constantly in debt to what came before and even what will come after.” The approach in this research, supported through the methodological bricolage, is to use certain terms and concepts as “jumping off points” (Sakr and Osgood 2019, p.3) that appear the most relevant tools for that aspect of the study. Such diversity and difference may appear chaotic and at times it can be. This research does not aim to be presented as a smooth articulation of this bricolage. However, the 5th research question intends to highlight these differing perspectives and consider how they can work productively together.

Theories adopting a sociocultural frame value the importance of context and move the conceptualisation of a human (child) away from being “fixed, linear and timeless” (Burman 2008, p.82). This line of thinking is traced within this study, as an opportunity to open up possibilities, rather than close options down. This aligns somewhat with the poststructural and postmodernist terms discussed within the last section – positioning the researcher – where an overarching poststructuralist framework recognises meaning as context specific, embracing multiple meanings as opportunities for further analysis. New materialist and post humanist accounts explore these multiple opportunities by experimenting with the unpredictable, by considering the influence and network of human and more-than-human actions. The focus is not to form predictive or repeatable generalised processes, but to reimagine ideas, to provoke thought and to focus on how *effects* ripple through and within human and more-than-human things. When embracing these accounts, the aim is to recognise the endless possibilities and how things may cause effects on/with/through other things.

Within new materialist and posthumanist accounts there are key terms that are put to work. An assemblage used within a Deleuze and Guattarian sense (1987) indicates any number of ‘things’ or pieces of ‘things’ gathered into a single context which could bring about any number of effects. These things can be human and more-than-human matters, and rather than being tightly organised within one dominant reading, they are a jumbling together of things with many different ways of influencing or creating effects. Within an assemblage, ‘*becoming*’ indicates a process. These are processes of change, flight, or movement and the term becoming serves to account for relationships between the ‘things’ forming the assemblage. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p.239) becoming “is a verb, with a consistency all of its own,” becoming is used to describe the continual (re)production of difference. In this sense, becoming is not viewed as movements or moments between two events, but an event in itself. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p.205) keep a focus on how things connect, rather than what they are, through their use of the term ‘lines of flight’. “When a body encounters another body, or an idea another idea, it happens that the two relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole, and sometimes one decomposes the other.” In Deleuze and Guttarian (1987) terms these transformative shifts or encounters into the not-yet-known are considered ‘lines of flight.’

Working within and through the terms shared by Deleuze and Guttari (1987), Barad (2007) proposes an ontological and epistemological framework that she terms ‘agential realism’. Here, agency exists not as an influence of one pre-existing entity upon another, but as ‘intra-action’, a cooperative force, where the relationship brings entangled materialities into being. These forces and relationships are entanglements, which Barad describes as follows:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.

(Barad 2007, epigraph).

Within entanglements Baradian (2007) thinking suggests matter and meaning cannot be understood as independent from each other. Rather, the new materialist ontology dissolves categorical distinctions (such as binary and hierarchical), thereby promoting a more-than-human or posthuman perspective. This is where ecological and sociological perspectives cut across the divide between nature and human culture seeing humans as entirely integral to the ‘environment’ (Fox and Alldred 2016.) This research study does not claim to fully embrace a posthumanist approach but to work with posthumanist terms where it seems most suitable. The overarching aim is to explore the extraordinariness of the everyday, this helps the poststructural, post humanist and new materialist bricolage work productively together. Where there are bumps and collisions in this combination the research aspires to acknowledge these knots and keep questioning the effect of the methodology on the research study.

**1.4 - The research rationale**

My own career trajectory working within the early childhood education and care profession has not followed a linear route that I had pre-planned or could easily align within any grand narratives generalised within society. I could track my experiences through labels and social positionings such as worker, student, unqualified trainee, early years practitioner, leader, teacher, consultant or lecturer yet these miss the textured experiences that informed each professional transition or the nested context of my (personal) life at that time. These social positionings also miss the narratives I have experienced over the years, such as ‘early years not being education’, or that ‘I should work with older children, higher up in a school, in order to progress and achieve my potential’. These are ideas recently captured by Gaches and Walli (2018, p.131) in their paper entitled “My mom says you’re not really a teacher”. However, I heard these suggestions, but I did not really listen to them. For me, the younger the children were that I worked with, the greater difference could be made to their lives. The two-ness of a two-year-old, or the three-ness of a three-year-old, holds its own value, and not as a child-in-waiting to join the potential of pre-school. Yet when I began teaching on early childhood degrees, these negative discourses ruptured back onto my radar. Undergraduate students – with and without experience of working with children and families – who had committed personally and financially to develop as early childhood professionals, reported having little information about the opportunities available within this profession. They described limited discussions about what roles they could experience or places they could work with children from birth to five years, with narratives dominated by teaching roles in schools as the only alternative to low-skilled labour. There seemed to be a limited understanding beyond the profession about what working with young children involved or the wealth of professional roles that had expanded over the last 30 years.

This led me to explore the narratives accessible within the profession about career trajectories and lived experiences working within the contemporary early childhood education and care profession. Here I found a wealth of debates about interpreting professionalism and social positioning through labels (Dyer 2018; Taylor 2018, Havnes 2018), yet a dearth of discussion involving the term ‘careers’ within stories told by those working, navigating and championing the profession (Bullough 2018). This lack of information about careers, with silence instead of stories, also appeared to be filled by the assumptions of people beyond the profession, where people created narratives ‘for us’ about living and working in ECEC. This process is what Campbell-Barr (2017) called ‘silencing the knowledge-bases within the profession’, where the voices and stories of professionals are lost amongst the policy context. It is this entanglement of factors that became the catalyst and motivation for this research study.

**1.5 - Thesis organisation**

This section lays out the structure and content of the thesis, prominent points are highlighted from each chapter, and the thesis is drawn into a coherent assemblage. The next chapter – Chapter 2 – is an experiment in visual thinking and introduces my engagement with creative methodologies (Pain 2012; Clough and Nutbrown 2019). My experiences working in ECEC taught me to value the entanglement of words, images, materials and spaces to produce diverse forms of knowledge; knowledge and thinking that is un-flattened by the boundaries of our current frame of mind that favours words and demotes images (Sousanis 2015; Barry 2017; Mannay, Staples and Edwards 2017). Drawing on inspiration from Barry (2017) and Sousanis (2015), creative tools feature throughout this research and Chapter 2 explains the use of the ‘picture postcards’ found at the start of each chapter, including this one. Chapter 2 provides the rationale for including visual elements within the written thesis and despite problematising the use of a visual methodology (Mannay, Staples and Edwards 2017; Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Clough and Nutbrown 2019), creative tools are presented as an interesting space for examination.

Chapter 3 is a literature review which frames the knowledge upon which this research is based and aligns with the contributions to knowledge. The chapter begins with a review of how the international landscape of ECEC practices has changed over recent decades, resulting in many contested forms of professionalism (Osgood 2006, 2012; Dyer 2018; Elwick, Osgood, Robertson, Sakr and Wilson 2017). Yet Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018) argue that how these changes have impacted on the lives and careers of early childhood professionals is under researched and poorly understood. This chapter explores key terminology such as the concept of careers (Bullough 2008; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1987; Cuzzocrea and Lyon 2011) and what I mean by professional transitions. The research does not understand a career as a linear predetermined pathway, and nor does it propose to create universal pathways for career trajectories in ECEC. The research provides a space for learning and (re)thinking about the lives and careers of early childhood professionals, where career trajectories are considered within a process of becoming professional (Deluze and Guattari 1987; Hakim and Dalli 2016). The limited recognition or discussion of career trajectories from within the early childhood education and care sector is critiqued, questioning the sparse use of any career terminology within research or workforce literature (Waniganyake 2013; Dyer 2018). Overall the literature in Chapter 3 works to locate this research study within the field and indicates where existing knowledge may be extended and challenged.

Chapter 4 addresses the research methodology and, with further support from Chapter 5, the method, ethics and analysis processes are discussed. In these chapters the research is located amongst research traditions and provides an overview of how ontological and epistemological assumptions have shaped the main theoretical concepts that frame this study. The philosophical positions or commonalities offered by a narrative methodology are problematised especially when accompanied by a visual tool like drawing. The strengths and dilemmas of using visual narratives are debated and the work of Kigler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018) is used to help summarise how the research is materially aware; meaning the researcher’s stance embraced a nexus of selves, stories and materials within the methodology and subsequent data analysis.

It is within Chapter 6 that the four visual narratives co-created individually with each participant are analysed using diffractive analysis. The stories shared by Sarah, Tony, Charlotte and Kate are each analysed individually, beginning with their visual creation and an introduction to the particularities of their working lives as early childhood professionals. It is through a process of becoming-with-the-data (MacLure 2013, 2013a, 2013b) that iterative and non-linear findings emerged. Whilst this data only represents four single stories, each narrative contributes to the debates calling to widen rather than narrow discussions about careers in early childhood education and care.

Chapter 7 draws together the research findings. Aligning with the literature review, this research finds an absence of theorised or recognised discussions about career pathways for early childhood professionals. Through examination of the four co-created stories, the findings uncover professional transitions entangled with spaces, places, people, materials and time. Recommendations are proposed, including more proactive discussions where career stories are championed from within the profession. In addition, the research discusses the implications of using a visual narrative methodology and problematises this approach amongst the dominance of the written word.

The final chapter of this thesis offers a reflective conclusion to this research process. The research questions are revisited, accompanied by the findings of this study and what these findings have to offer the surrounding literature. The implications of this new knowledge are considered including how this study can support policy and practice within the early childhood education and care profession. In summary, the research helps illuminate how four early childhood professionals narrate their careers, considering how they describe their life impacting on their practice, and their practice impacting on their life. The results call for more research to explore careers in early childhood education and care, as well as providing me with stories to share in my own practice as I support early childhood professionals in becoming early childhood professionals.

**Chapter 2 – Picture postcards**

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**Postcard 2:** Drawing “helped me to stay by giving me somewhere else to go”, an extract from Barry (2017, p.105).

**2.1 - Introduction**

This chapter is an experiment in visual thinking. My approach to the world is that lives can be complicated and multi-layered, and it is this orientation that led me to explore our abilities to make meaning through different methods and less linear structures than words and sentences alone. I refer to the explanation by Barry (2017) captured in the postcard above, where the act of drawing is viewed as a form of transportation – the pen and paper helped move her to a new position, that in turn, helped her stay where she was. Drawing “helped me to stay by giving me somewhere to go” (Barry 2017, p.105), and this concept helps underpin my own use of drawing and picture postcards throughout this research.

The value of art-based research, visual thinking and drawing is critiqued in the first section of this chapter. I present a rationale for using drawing as a reflective tool and highlight some of the challenges and possibilities that occur when using this medium. The last section details the rationale behind the ‘picture postcards’ included at the start of each chapter.

In summary this chapter includes the following sections:

2.2 - Why visual research?

2.3 - Postcards introducing chapters

**2.2 Why visual research?**

I have come to appreciate that my interest in visual research and visual thinking is another expression of my poststructuralist orientation, where I view knowledge and meaning as multiple and context dependant and I choose to express and interpret those meanings through multiple media. This aligns with Sousanis (2015, p.39) who writes (and draws) that the way humans construct knowledge has given a primacy to words over images, “and in relying on text as the primary means of formulating understanding, what stands outside its linear structure is dismissed, labelled irrational”. Similar to Barry (2017) quoted in the postcard above, Sousanis (2015, p.39) goes on to argue that “the visual provides expression where words fail” and this is an idea that resonates with me and my experiences of working with young children and the adults that care for them.

The area of visual research focused on in this study is drawing. I do not think of drawing as an artistic process – I would not identify myself as an artist or an illustrator. I think of drawing as a thinking process: a process of movement and mark making that helps me to think something through, what Brown (2015) calls a ‘doodle’. I think my experiences working in ECEC has contributed to my interest in different forms of thinking and this led me to consider how other researchers have incorporated drawing, visual thinking or creative approaches into their studies.

For Clough and Nutbrown (2019, p.4) art-based educational research in the early childhood profession is described as an approach:

developed out of a growing need to portray human experience in ways that do not seek to quantify, or generalise, or even ‘analyse’, and from a sense of the importance of retaining faithful portrayal, interpretation and understanding of human experience.

They conclude that “insight is embodied rather than in any way propositional” (Clough and Nutbrown 2019, p.5). Embodied insight and different modes of thinking are factors that have shaped my practices within early childhood education and care. My experiences within educational and caring spaces have taught me to notice sensory experiences and value how senses can support an interpretation of events and learning (Tinkler and Allan 2015; Iorio, Hamm, Parnell and Quintero 2017; Morriss 2017). Whilst this research focuses on visual thinking, an example of what I mean by sensory learning embodied within the context of an early childhood setting, is when a young child is separated from their parent(s). Young children are still developing their senses such as sight and fingertip touch in their earliest years and rely on other senses for exploration, including sense of smell. As the child transitions into an ECEC provision, spraying a comfort blanket or soft toy with a parent’s scent can help a child to settle after the parent leaves. If a young child is shutting their eyes as they drift into sleep, the power of a familiar smell on the comforter can aid the process of sleep. Whilst this is a ‘smelly’ entanglement, it is an example of entangled intra-acting factors (child, place, object, sight, touch, scent) and these human and material forces help support the young child to learn about the new environment and new humans through keeping a scent of familiarity; and in turn, the adult humans learn about the child.

It is from experiences like this that I have come to value how multiple senses can support knowing, learning and communicating in ECEC practices. Yet, Clough and Nutbrown (2019) are promoting art-based educational research as a concern with ‘portrayal, interpretation and understanding’, whereas the focus within this study moves beyond this to focus on the mediation of learning through materials. Whilst this study does not dismiss the interpretive approach of Clough and Nutbrown (2019), it does move away from sense-making, coding, or re-presenting a knowable world ‘out there’ through art, to approaching art as something that unfolds in an unpredictable and multi-layered entanglement. Sakr and Osgood (2019) propose viewing art as “an opportunity to open up rather than close down” and this is the line that I have taken.

Amongst these diverse theoretical approaches to childhood art and the growing use of art-based approaches in research with children (Parry 2015; Clough and Nutbrown 2019, Sakr and Osgood 2019), there is a deficit in how drawing or visual approaches to knowledge are valued in research with adults working in ECEC (Mannay, Staples and Edwards 2017, Knight et al. 2017). When specifically considering the value professionals place on children’s drawings as a form of knowledge construction, Knight et al. (2016, p.320) argued that:

the dearth of research into the drawings of early childhood professionals seems … at odds with the high regard given for drawing in early childhood, and presents an interesting space for examination.

This study aims to contribute to this gap in research by using drawing as a method to convey meaning with five early childhood professionals – the four participants in the research and myself as the creator of the postcards at the start of each chapter.

It is important to avoid positioning visual thinking or creative methods as a panacea, which enables greater insight into people’s minds (Clark and Morriss 2017). However, my experiences in ECEC and teaching adults who work in ECEC brought me to engage in debates concerning the limitations or overuse of the written and spoken word in research, and the increased use of creative and visual methods (Clark and Morriss 2017; Rose 2013; Pink 2011, 2015). I aspire for the picture postcards to help unflatten thinking, acting as a break from the boundaries of our current frame of mind which favours words and demotes images (Sousanis 2015). “This flatness is not literal. … This is a flatness of sight, a contraction of possibilities … where inhabitants conform to what Marcuse called a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour” (Sousanis 2015, p.6).

In this research, I started using drawing as a way to reflect on the research process. But drawing grew beyond this, it became a space where I could play with knowledge; rethink knowledge through the process of re-presenting it in a visual form. Drawing was an experiment (Kind 2014), where the process of drawing created knowledge (Ingold 2013).

Gilles Deleuze helps us see encounters of materials, objects, places, and humans as part of the flow of experience. In his view, we are never separate from the world; we are made up of relations; thought creates itself through encounters. For Deleuze, thought is experimentation. Stories are told through it, forces are harnessed, roles are performed.

(Kind 2014, p.3).

Drawing became processes that helped me practice viewing things differently during the study, where I could notice what I was valuing and what I was valuing less. I would not regard myself as a talented drawer, but the process of having to present knowledge in a visual way helped me think further, notice my habitual thinking and provide opportunities to develop my understandings. This is a process that notable scholars such as Rose (2013), Barry (2017), Pink (2011, 2015), Kind (2014) and Mannay (2010, 2016a) describe as making connections between ‘seeing and knowing’, and it was something I wanted to retain within the written thesis. It is this line of thinking that led to the picture postcards drawn to introduce each chapter of the thesis.

Knight et al. (2016 p.334) state that “drawing whilst behaving as a researcher could feel like a struggle at times”, and this is a feeling I could relate to. Experimenting is not without risk; the direction of travel or outcomes could not be known (neatly) in advance. Similarly, Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018) suggest that whenever we work or focus on unfamiliar processes in research, or society, we can experience elements of that un-familiarisation or marginalisation ourselves. Drawing for a thesis felt odd at times but I also found that drawing could capture the multiple, contradictory and conflicting ideas that I struggled to organised or represent into linear words and sentences. Despite the oddness, visual images are used in many research contexts, such as tables and diagrams. Clough and Nutbrown (2019, p.6) suggest “text itself can be art”. Word clouds or ‘wordles’ can be used in research to represent longer texts within a shorter (re)assemblage of words, where factors such as location, size, and sometimes colour convey something about the significance of key terms. Yet there are difficulties to acknowledge when using visual methods.

If there is difficulty in visually representing conditions of human existence in an unambiguous way, these difficulties are magnified when broad abstractions – prototypically ‘society’ and ‘culture’ – are attempted.

(Banks and Zeitlyn 2015, p.21)

Here, Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) are highlighting a messiness in using visual research, but messiness is not something that has been shied away from in this study. Embracing messiness is echoed by Sikes (in Goodson, Antikainen, Sikes and Andrews 2017) when describing the storying of lives and in Loughran and Mannay’s (2018) work when discussing the emotional experiences of doing research. I found drawing as a reflective tool helped me play with this mess and stay present amongst the mess, and it is these drawings that evolved into the picture postcards that are used to introduce each chapter of the thesis.

**2.3 - Postcards introducing chapters**

Each chapter of this thesis has a drawing to help introduce the content of that chapter, or part of that chapter. These drawings are referred to as picture postcards. When I decided to use the postcards to introduce each chapter, I started to teach myself how to draw, learning from Brown (2015) and Barry (2015). For me drawing came to be relaxing, as Barry (2017) suggests it can be. It is a different process from writing in a linear, organised way on a screen. Drawing kept me interested and engaged in a different way, or as Reason and Bradbury (2008, p.1) explain, it is “through such micro-practices [of drawing that] people increase their ability to make sense of their world”. Whilst creative approaches or drawing may not be embraced by all researchers, Knight et al. (2016, p.322) argue that:

A one-size-fits-all labelling of drawing is akin to judging all writing as poetry irrespective of its intention (such as writing a shopping list, or a project report). It is important to understand that drawing, like other forms of communication operates within different genres: as the intention changes, so too does the drawing in terms of its style, content, purpose.

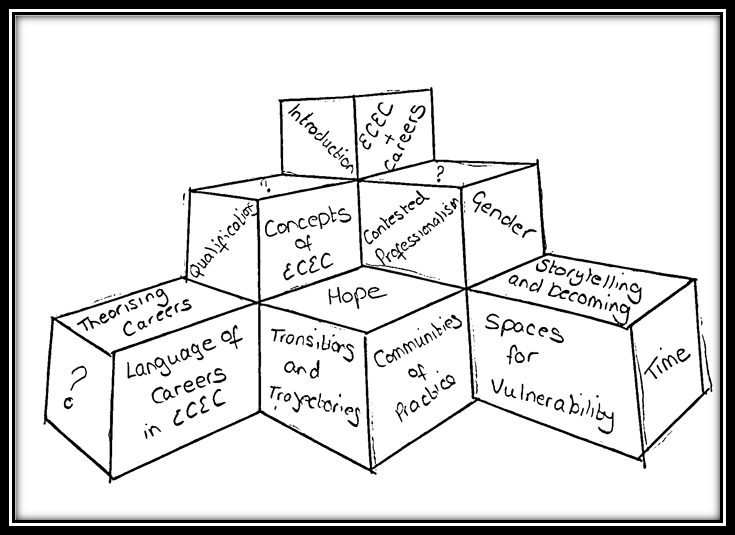
Aware of the advice from Knight et al. (2016), I did not have any style or rules for the picture postcards. I wanted contributions to be able to change depending on my intensions. Sometimes, the drawings started without conscious thought – just lines on a page without much direction at first – yet over time, certain postcards became more meaningful representations to me. Drawing assisted reflexivity (Clark and Morriss 2017) and helped me use a poststructural theoretical framework, where questions were constantly asked, and ideas unsettled and reformed.

The more I drafted the picture postcards the more I could relate to the messages I was reading within research about visual methods, discussing the insufficiency of one method. Godden’s (2016) work on participatory studies with community workers and Tinkler and Allan’s (2015) work around gender and education both indicate how visual imagery can help show the knots of research, or the insufficiency of other methods to iron out entanglements. McNiff (2008, p.35) writes that visual methodologies “offer ways of solving and re-visioning problems that are simply not possible through descriptive and linear language”, and this summarises how I came to understand the picture postcards. To return to the postcard at the start of this chapter, “drawing helped me stay (in the research), by giving me somewhere else to go” (Barry 2017) and it felt important to keep some of these images within the written research.

A postcard is located at the start of each chapter. It is intended as an introduction to that part of the thesis and is open for interpretation by the reader. The postcards may not appeal to everybody, partly because drawing is a method that embraces embodied knowledge (Godden 2017; Clough and Nutbrown 2019). Yet, I aspire for the postcards to offer an alternative medium for reflection and a moment to pause from the linear procession of sentences.

The start of the next chapter, like all chapters, begins with a postcard and this postcard focuses on the literature review.

**Chapter 3: Literature Review**

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Postcard 3: Building my research through the literature

**3.1 – Introduction**

This chapter maps the development of research and prominent literature surrounding and informing this present study, which examines the working lives and career stories of early childhood professionals in England. This chapter aims to outline key themes within the literature in order to locate and contextualise the content of this primary research.

The provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) is a contested and changing landscape, which is highly politicised and hotly debated, but within these dizzying changes, the lives and career stories of early childhood professionals are a clandestine messy entanglement (Lash and Castner 2018) that according to Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018; Bullough 2016), is generally ignored. My interest in illustrating the career stories of early childhood professionals erupted from questions about how early childhood professionals navigate the changing landscape as part of their everyday lives. Questions include those such as how early childhood professionals become early childhood professionals amongst the multi-layered entanglements of cultures, materiality and space (Moxnes and Osgood 2018), how knots of experience affect career transitions, and how material objects are intimately entwined in ever-changing relations. These seemingly ordinary events may be micro moments, but they spark possible lines of potential or potent connections that rise-up and matter within people’s lives. Similarly, Cousins’ (2016, p.1) research claims that “practitioners bring so much more to their work than that which they learned from their professional training or work experience”. This research study helps contribute to what Cousins (2016, p.1) may mean by “so much more”, by providing an up-close and intimate view of who early childhood professionals are, illuminating their career stories and how they are affected by what they do.

Following this introduction, the next section of this literature review conceptualises early childhood education and care (ECEC) as it is understood for the remit of this study. This includes an exploration of the profession, as the international landscape of early childhood education and care has changed rapidly over the last few decades. The traditional views of ECEC that emphasise socialisation and play are generally in opposition to the current, highly politicised focus on school readiness, academic outcomes and the professionalisation of the workforce. This has led to increased debates about the remit of the workforce, and the dominant discourse surrounding qualifications will be debated. Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018) argue that amongst all these contested forms of professionalism, the lives and careers of early childhood professionals has also changed, but how and in what ways is less understood.

Section 3 of this literature review explores what I mean by the terminology of careers, and how careers have been theorised in diverse ways in recent decades. This research does not understand a career as a linear predetermined pathway, nor does it propose to create universal pathways for career trajectories in ECEC. This research provides a space for learning and (re)thinking about the lives and careers of early childhood professionals. Careers are considered within a process of becoming professional (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 2017; Hakim and Dalli 2016). The process of ‘becoming’ is examined as an ontological approach to understanding experiences and how an individual can use storytelling to incorporate entanglements of culture, materiality, space and affects into their actions and experiences. Stories afford the narrator an opportunity to show their working life as a deeply personal creation, as well as “a battle to authorise the truth, because the truth does not just happen” (Elfer, Greenfield, Robson, Wilson and Zacharos 2018, p.10). The last part of Section 2 incorporates a debate about the use of terminology, such as career trajectories and professional transitions, to appreciate how early childhood professionals’ fashion and refashion their working lives.

Following the theorisation of career stories as understood for the remit of this research, the fourth section returns to literature about early childhood education and care to examine how the sector uses the language of careers. I agree with Hall-Kenyon, Bullough, MacKay and Marshall (2014, p.4) that the literature surrounding the lives and work of early childhood professionals is “deeply fragmented” and “rather narrow and limited”. From within, the sector does not promote narratives about careers in early childhood education and care and there is sparse use of any career language within research or workforce literature (Waniganyake 2014; Dyer 2018). Urban (2010, 2008, 2007) summarises that the sector over relies on extrinsic judgements, or an epistemological hierarchy of knowledge. This identifies a gap where this research can contribute, by capturing some career stories as lived within the profession. Yet, in line with the process of becoming which embraces personal and multi-sensorial entanglements, career stories can be influenced by a diverse range of factors. These diverse factors are the focus for the fifth section of this literature review.

In a cross-national discussion, Arndt, Urban, Murray, Smith, Swadener and Ellegaard (2018) researched the constructions of early childhood professionals and conclude that many factors shape their lived experiences and professional choices. The continuous changes of policy reform, continual becoming and shifting understandings of professionalism have already been discussed, but this literature review also explores factors such as constructions of time, vulnerability, hope, and communities of practice as sites supporting ongoing professionalism, all of which can shape the narration of career stories.

Finally, the last section draws the literature together through a closing summary. The study is located within existing research such as Hakim and Dalli’s (2016, p.1) work which declares becoming an early childhood professional to be a never-ending journey, and a journey of “profound humanity” according to Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018, p. 1). But both these studies highlight the pressing need for a greater understanding about the lives and work of early childhood professionals. This research aims to contribute to this need by illustrating an up-close and intimate view of who early childhood professionals are, illuminating their career stories and how they are affected by what they do.

In summary this chapter includes the following sections:

3.2 - Conceptualising early childhood education and care

3.3 - Theorising careers

3.4 - The language of careers within early childhood education and care

3.5 - Career influences

3.6 - In summary

**3.2.** **Conceptualising early childhood education and care**

Childhood is a complex, heterogeneous and ethically challenging concept that has been socially constructed over time (Aries 1960; British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the Training Advancement and Co-operation in Teaching Young Children (TACTYC) 2017; Taylor et al. 2012). Adding to this entanglement, Sommer (2012) proposes that childhood has become a blended experience in recent decades and she uses a dual socialisation butterfly model to theorise how children are spending time between modern families and provisions that offer education and care (for children aged 0-7 years). Internationally the number of children attending ECEC provisions has risen significantly over the last two decades (OECD 2017; Sommer 2012) yet there is no straightforward understanding or definition of educational and caring provisions for children that unequivocally stands across each country (OECD 2017; Miller, Dalli and Urban 2012; Arndt et al. 2018). However, in many countries, the expansion of educational and caring places for children has been increasingly reinforced by legislative entitlements for parents and families.

In England, ECEC services “received unparalleled attention, resources and initiatives” at the turn of the century through the New Labour Government (Osgood 2012, p.6), and despite a mixture of terms existing at the time – such as childcare or early years – early childhood education and care became an all-encompassing term in an attempt to join-up the sector and unite the conceptual divide between education and care. Yet as Penn (2014), and more recently Bonetti (2018) argue, the disparity of staff within the workforce still embodies this divide especially through qualification deployment. Degree qualified teachers are required within nursery schools and reception classes where teachers are perceived as supporting the ‘education’ of children, and the much larger proportion of less qualified practitioners cover the wider and younger (0-3 years) age range of provisions perceived as providing ‘caring’ services.

The fragmented provision in England is further exemplified in the makeup of settings, with a very wide range of providers able to offer ECEC services (OECD 2017; Bonetti 2018, 2019). Providers include a mixture of private, voluntary and independent nurseries, schools, home-based settings, children’s centres and social play groups, which differs from other countries where private businesses are not the norm for providing ECEC services. This mixed market within England has become an added factor complicating the government’s neoliberal agenda. By neoliberal agenda in the context of ECEC, I mean the increasing drive to regulate the sector with quality standards and accountability (DFE 2008, 2014, 2017; OFSTED 2017) in parallel with increased formalisation of financial exchanges – exchanges between the provider of the ‘ECEC service’ and either the government through free entitlement contracts (DFE 2006) and/or with parents and families as the ‘customer’ receiving the service. “Central to this narrative is the term *investment*” (Ardnt et al. 2018, p.4) which suggests a return on this financial outlay through increased educational capital and employability for the nation. A problem with an investment discourse though, is that by the time a child or a generation ‘grows up’ to a level of employment, there are many other services and people that would lay a claim to having ‘make a difference’. As well as ECEC providers, primary and secondary schools would argue they made a difference, health services would want credit for their work, so may community planning services for offering greater access to outdoor facilities, or social care provisions for increases in family support. With ECEC being such an early contributor of support in the life of a child, the acknowledgement of these services ‘making a difference’ can become eclipsed by more present services in the lives of older children, which does not help ECEC practices gain credit, recognition or funding.

As part of the services offered by providers of ECEC, the term ‘practice’ envelops all the interactions, experiences and environments created to support and enhance early learning through playful pedagogy. This practice can incorporate a wide-ranging workforce in England across health, education and social care services for children and families from pre-birth to five years of age. This incorporates teachers, early years practitioners, childminders, teaching assistants, specialists, coaches, health practitioners, family workers and a range of researchers and tutors who train this workforce (Hordern 2016). Research from an Irish perspective by Ardnt et al. (2018) discusses the challenges of identifying a single professional title, but for clarity’s sake, in this research all these members of the workforce are considered as early childhood professionals.

**3.2.1 A profession and a professional workforce**

According to Popkewitz (1994, p.2) ‘profession’ is “an Anglo-Saxon word brought into the language of many countries to describe the social formations of work within the middle class”. More recently Urban (2010, p.8) argues that whatever the specific sector, any profession “is embedded in systems of knowledge production and application” and that the term professional practice is being used to distinguish a separation from work that produces goods or work that produces services. Therefore profession, professionalism or professional are not neutral terms and have no specific intrinsic meaning (Hargreaves 2000). “They exist in relation to other words, in social patterns and institutional settings” (Popkewtiz 1994, p.2).

Hakim and Dalli (2016) and others (see Osgood 2006, 2010, 2012; Dalli, Miller and Urban 2013; Chalke 2016; Fairchild 2017; Payler and Davis 2017, Leafgren 2018, Lash and Castner 2018) argue there has been an international upsurge of interest recently regarding the professionalisation of early childhood education and care. Researching in Colombia, Carulla (2018, p.50) describes this upsurge as evolving around protecting children’s rights which is used as “a lever for social and thus economic development of a nation”. Within the English context, this development relates to narratives about quality, rights for children, outcomes for children, and qualifications and training for practitioners under an umbrella of professionalising the workforce (DFE 2017). Carulla (2018) develops her argument to propose that the rights of children have taken prominence over the rights of others – such as the professionals in Colombia – whilst it remains unclear if this is the situation in England (Hordern 2016; Elfer et. al 2018) the discourse of qualifications does dominate the landscape.

**3.2.2 Qualifications**

In England part of the government’s narrative on professionalism includes the concept of upskilling the workforce though training and qualifications. But, similar to other countries, the conceptualisations of professional competencies – such as abilities, skills and individual autonomy (Viskovic and Visnijic Jevtic 2017) – are fragmented (Urban 2008; Penn 2014; Hakim and Dalli 2016, Jackson 2017, Arndt et al. 2018). The debate on qualifications for early childhood professionals can be split into two narratives –the level of qualifications and the content of qualifications.

Currently in England early childhood professionals are legally deemed ‘qualified’ to work with children aged 0-5 years when they have a level 3 qualification and a suitable safeguarding check (DFE 2014, 2018). Yet, at least one professional per class working with children aged 4 years+ in government-maintained schools is required to hold qualified teacher status (QTS), a post graduate level qualification (level 6 or 7). This qualification gap exacerbates the historical divide between care and education services for children aged 0-5 years. This divide is not theoretical though as it echoes in the lives of people working in ECEC. For example, Bonetti’s (2018, p.4) research on administrative data found that professionals working in school-based settings were provided with “more financial incentives for staff to progress up the career ladder” and “the wage differential between senior and non-senior staff is higher in school-based settings than in group-based settings”. Bonetti (2018, p.28) acknowledges, however, that the data gathered were scattered because “the sector is very heterogeneous, and we cannot create a complete and clear picture of this heterogeneity”. She concludes that “in an area where policy-making is presented as being evidence-based, it is worrisome to find out how many evidence gaps we still need to fill for the early years”. This echoes a similar issue raised by Arndt et al. (2018) who highlight the irony of having a ‘quality agenda’ that ignores the quality of practitioner’s lives. In this research study I argue that this gap is especially worrying for children and professionals, as policies and agendas do not just change what people do, they change who people are (Collet-Sabe 2016; Ball 2003).

The qualification levels in England are erratic (Bonetti 2019, 2018) and controversial when considered alongside international comparisons. In England, ”over 40 per cent of the childcare workforce holds NVQs” [National Vocational Qualifications] at level 3… 25.1% of the childcare workers have a degree or equivalent education” (Bonetti 2019, p.27). In New Zealand 74% of the workforce are degree-qualified when supporting children aged 0-7 years (Dalli 2017). More widely though, across international countries, the qualification levels of practitioners range from “lower secondary school level to graduate level, and include, but not always, specialized training in ECEC. The minimum qualification required tends to increase with the age of the children worked with” (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) 2016, p.104). This qualification threshold alludes to the conceptual division between the skills needed to educate older children and the skills needed to care for younger children (0-3 years). A consequence of this is that the workforce still suffers from a low status in society and within the education system itself. Adding to these worries though, Bonetti (2018, p.4) found a trend in England that highlights:

Almost half of highly qualified staff (level 6 and more) are aged over 40, with 21 per cent aged over 50 and approaching retirement in the next 10 to 15 years. Findings around financial incentives and current enrolment levels … cast doubt on the capacity of the younger workforce to keep the proportion of graduates steady, let alone for it to increase. This potentially means that the early years workforce in the future could be even less qualified than today.

The second trend within debates about qualifications improving the early childhood workforce involves the content of qualifications and how knowledge is conceptualised. How qualifications prepare individuals for work, and during work, is a contentious issue. The approach within English policy discourse draws on technocratic knowledge and performativity, “led by the pursuit of an idealised and ill-defined notion of quality” (Elwick et al. 2018, p. 13). By this I interpret Elwick et al. (2018) to mean that qualifications in ECEC are based around understanding uniformity and systemised knowledge, where normative child development patterns are centralised and desired as positive stages of development for children. These stages of development, in turn, become the basis for predictable outcomes that can be generalised across settings, geographical areas and different countries, and used as an ill-defined measure to debate a professional’s competencies.

However, modernist constructs that seek objectivity and certainty as a sole source of knowledge in qualifications are being challenged within ECEC research (Elwick et al. 2018; Hakim and Dalli 2016). Campbell-Barr (2017) calls for multiple forms of knowledge to be embraced, representing both the empirical and ethical constructs of ECEC professionalism. Campbell-Barr (2017) describes the current policy discourse as silencing the knowledge-base from within the profession, opposing technocratic knowledge with constructs of practical knowledge and ethics of care. She is arguing that previous experiences and ‘dispositions to care’ need to be valued (more) as knowledge, as this can support an understanding of ethical responsibility. This chimes with a growing area of research that explores emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) and emotional attachments (Page 2017) that complicate professionals’ experiences of “love, satisfaction and exhaustion in the nursery” (Elfer et al. 2018 p.1).

Research by Elfer et al. (2018) discusses the significance of practitioner’s emotions within their working practices. Their research draws upon widely different social-cultural contexts to argue that vividly different accounts highlight the importance of emotions within this professional role, and despite the broad approaches to theorising emotion in nurseries, it is an under researched area that can be difficult for practitioners to acknowledge or express.

For example a practitioner may find her or his struggles to relate to a particular child but denies this experience for fear that it is unprofessional or that colleagues will regard it as unprofessional. … there is a tension … to avoid thinking and understanding where the topic is threatening or stressful. … Rustin (2008, p.12) suggests, ‘an atmosphere of enquiry … so that the unknown can become less unwelcome’.

(Elfer et al 2018, p.3.)

To expand upon this thinking Elfer et al. (2018 p. 3) draws upon the work of Armstrong and Rustin (2015) and Rustin (2008) to express the challenges practitioners can face “dealing with routinely stressful and emotionally charged situations … unless there are institutional opportunities for their subjective responses to be understood and contained.” However, opportunities to discuss subjective responses within a workplace or within a training environment is a complex issue, as it is an approach that challenges modernist constructs of knowledge that seek objectivity and certainty.

This connects back to Campbell-Barr’s (2017) argument that professionals learn from all experiences, as everyday knowledge is accumulated, and practical wisdom develops over time. Prior experiences and emotions inform future choices and training, alongside time in practice, and continued professional development. These all add to a professional’s abilities, skills and dispositions; therefore, knowledge and professionalism are not fixed entities. Yet discourses and regulations from outside the sector measure technocratic knowledge and achieving a qualification as a fixed state. Campbell-Barr (2017) summarises these two opposing approaches as a difference within the sociology of knowledge. The sociology of knowledge means the relationship between human thought and the social-cultural basis within which the thought arises, and the effects that prevail on society from different knowledge-bases. Offering more detail Campbell-Barr (2017, p.75) argues that:

Modernist constructs of quality focus on qualification levels rather than considering the knowledge obtained via the qualifications and whilst postmodernism highlights the limitations of modernism, the deconstruction of the empirical knowledge-base creates uncertainty as to what those working in ECEC are expected to know. Whilst postmodern perspectives foreground a more ethical construct of professionalism (e.g. Dahlberg and Moss 2005), the associated knowledge-base struggles for legitimacy.

Whilst debates about the types of knowledge within qualifications and practical wisdom unfold (see Taylor 2018), the impact of a female-dominated profession also emerges as a contributing factor shaping the development of the ECEC workforce.

**3.2.3 – Gender influences**

Gender has become one of many issues debated within the twenty-first-century conceptualisation of ECEC services, in terms of the role of the workforce and understandings of knowledge within England and beyond. There is a general consensus amongst researchers and practitioners that gender influences the image of the early childhood education and care profession in society, yet how gender debates are constructed ‘within’ and from ‘without’ the sector can be problematic.

ECEC has a legacy associated with women and a ‘caring’ female workforce which is considered an influential factor in understanding the limited recognition of the sector and its low status in society. In 1985 Steedman discussed the inexplicit and unexamined notion that linked the teaching of young children with an understanding of mothering. Steedman (1985) drew on the earlier work of Froebel and Pestalozzi who had both created theories about children’s learning from naturalistic observations of mothers interacting with young children. Steedman’s (1985) critique questioned the work of male theorists like Froebel and Pestalozzi for unconsciously entwinning mothers and education, as this led to maternal instincts becoming a basis for pedagogy. This is a relationship that still exists in the 21st Century.

Osgood (2010, 2014) argues that gender and other biographical or cultural inflections have shaped the social construction of the early childhood workforce, yet the workforce is not united in the way it challenges such factors. As Osgood (2005, 2012) and Taggart (2011) explain, creating a debate about the gendered nature of the workforce often creates unhealthy binary divisions as well as discussions that are infused with gendered understandings of practice. The ECEC workforce may be mainly female because of the feminised legacy of care within society and the ‘caring as a substitute for motherhood’ discourse (Page 2014; Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2018; Steedman 1985). Yet creating a discourse about children needing ‘male role models’ or ‘male approaches to play’ (i.e., for increased rough and tumble or risky play) only adds to unhealthy gendered constructions of early childhood practices. Whilst encouraging more diversity in the workforce is beneficial, the diverse approaches to addressing this issue can become problematic and have damaging implications for fostering secure professional roles and career pathways (Dahlberg and Moss 2005; Osgood 2005, 2012.)

As these debates unfold, they begin to highlight the lack of coherent language used within early childhood education and care. This includes a contested image of professionalism which further limits the reputation of the sector.

**3.2.4 Contested professionalism, inconsistent language**

Brock (2012), Osgood (2012, 2009) and more recently Arndt et al. (2018) describe a distinction between those who are speaking about qualifications and professionalism and those who are being spoken about, with professionals’ views and voices becoming lost in political rhetoric. For example, in England, Osgood (2009) summarised the raft of national policies as promoting a deficit model of professionalism, due to hegemonic monologues about the workforce lacking quality, technical knowledge and qualifications (Urban 2008; DFE 2017). In contrast though, research from within the sector by Chalke (2015), Moxnes and Osgood (2018) and Fairchild (2017) endorse a difference model of professionalism which identifies reflexivity, diffraction and an ongoing process of becoming as contributing to a more diverse lens with which to conceptualise professionalism. Taking this difference model even further, Leafgren (2018) calls for disobedient professionalism within ECEC where professional behaviour includes a willingness to challenge power, disrupt authority and maintain an openness to the not-yet-realised possibilities of professionalism. What is emerging are different lenses of professionalism.

Debates about professionalism which jigsaw together issues of supranational quality, qualifications and outcomes for children can begin to lose sight of the individual professional(s) or localised issues about professionalism and professional practice within each setting and community (Hakim and Dalli 2016; Tesar, Pupala, Kascak and Arndt 2017; Dyer 2018; Arndt et al. 2018). This is an issue that Urban (2010, p.10) describes as an epistemological hierarchy amongst these different lenses of professionalism, where a “powerful top-down stream of knowledge” from global and national policies creates a means of control and regulation – what Foucault (1972) calls a regime of truths – imposed upon those in practice by those in power (also see Gaches and Walli 2018). This research aims to consider how early childhood professionals narrate their professionalism throughout their career, focusing on the micro moments of resistance, refusal or reorientation as they battle to authorise their truth and decide upon the meanings they can live by.

Before considering the use of the word career within the early childhood education and care context, the following section considers how the concept of a career has changed in recent decades.

**3.3 Theorising careers**

This section explores changes in the theorisation of careers and maps the development of research across changing concepts of work, employment and careers. Key themes are outlined regarding the sociology of work, career theories and career models. The sociological conceptualisation of careers is discussed, resembling the influential broad meanings first developed by scholars from the Chicago school.

**3.3.1 The developing concepts surrounding work**

The word ‘career’ is deliberately used within this research, but it can be a controversial word because it is not as inclusive as the term ‘work’. Historically work was about survival, work was a term associated with harvesting crops, growing fruit and farming animals for food. According to the psychological perspective of Blustein (2006, 2011) survival remains a major motivation for many individuals worldwide who do not have choice or volition regarding their working lives. However as Western society entered a post-industrial and postmodern era, with unprecedented changes in technology, information and globalisation, a choice of work became more readily available. As the choices of work grew within these countries, a broad pattern or sequence of work became encompassed within the concept of a trade or a vocation. A vocation is a noun for a calling, or a strong feeling an individual may experience for a particular type of work. Vocations have a long-standing connection with work that requires dedication or a drive to help people, and this has led to an association that the rewards may be intrinsic and not necessarily financial. As the choice of work has grown within Western societies, some vocations have developed the requirements for prolonged training and formal qualifications which support learning, knowledge development and experience. This pattern of training-for-work led to the notion that an individual could publicly declare – ‘profess’ – to be skilled in a certain vocation, occupation or profession.

In 1983 Schon (p.8) stated that “professions have become essential to the very functioning of our society”. He expanded on this by suggesting that the principle businesses of society such as “making war and defending the nation, educating our children, diagnosing and curing disease, judging and punishing those who violate the law… and designing and constructing buildings” had all become professional sectors. Professionals and professions became viewed as the solutions to society’s problems and a route for social progression, yet this became increasing complex with unprecedented changes in technology, information and globalisation leading to plural understandings of professionalism within any single profession.

Within this research, the term ‘early childhood education and care profession’, alongside the word career, are chosen to evoke this understanding that working with young children involves negotiating professional pluralism, where differing skills, (emotional) labour and types of knowledge, are complex and various, and further supported by incremental experiences. The following section unpicks this definition of a career in more detail.

**3.3.2 Defining careers**

This section considers the contested understandings that exists when defining a career. Baurch (2003) posits that the concept of a career has undergone major changes in recent decades. The first listed publication citing the word career was in the 1890s according to Pryor and Bright (2011). In 1909 Frank Parsons suggested that when choosing work a person should match their understanding of their abilities to the duties needed for that role. Fundamentally this meant that individuals had to know two types of information; their own skill sets as accurately as possible, as well as the duties needed for a range of different occupations. This matching process became known as the trait-factor approach in career theory but gained criticism for its static design. Holland (1959) developed the theory of career choice, which proposes that careers are determined by an interactional fit between personalities and the surrounding environment. However, both these early career theories became criticised for embracing a positivist epistemology and a psychological orientation, where individuals are defined objectively as a set of skills, or personalities, that can be revealed and matched to a predefined list of job roles.

Following the person-fit and trait-factor approaches, theories of careers evolved to embrace more movement and change. The developmental model of Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, and Herma (1951) and Super (1953, 1957, 1980) argue that there are developmental stages across the lifespan, and that ‘good’ career decisions need experience gained over time. However, this assumes that there is a ‘good’ career and that a good ’fit’ can be externally determined by another person. Like Holland (1959) and Parson’s (1909) work, “the developmental model is restrictedly psychological in its focus, treating each person as a discrete entity and minimising the impact of social and contextual factors as part of the decision-making process” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, p.32).

Diverging from the psychological approaches, sociological theories of work try to make sense of careers as lived by individuals (Krumboltz 2009; Bullough 2008; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Cuzzocrea and Lyon 2011). Through a sociological lens, the term career became less focused on a single career decision or a concept “reserved for those who expected to enjoy rises laid out within a respectable profession” (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989, p.46). Instead a career became used in a broader sense, as a concept which “allows one to move back and forth between the personal and public, between self and its significant society” (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989, p.46). In short, rather than careers being measured and matched in an objective binary way, such as brilliant or disappointing, a career is recognised as a pattern of work, or a series of jobs. Societal influences are seen as an integral part of people’s career decision-making processes and professional transitions.

This relationship between an individual and social structures is an explicit aim in Becker and Strauss’ (1956) sociological theory of careers, yet their empirical research remained incomplete. For Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, p.29) sociological literature “emphasises the dominance of socially‐structured pathways” when considering the concept of careers, which they argued was largely missed in earlier theories. They go on to say:

Career decisions can only be understood in terms of the life histories of those who make them, wherein identity has evolved through interaction with significant others and with the culture in which the subject has lived and is living. We use 'culture' to describe the socially-constructed and historically-derived common base of knowledge, values and norms for action that people grow into and come to take as a natural way of life.

(Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, p.33)

Sociologists from the Chicago school, such as Hughes and his students (1937; Becker 1952), developed significant contributions to career theory. They recognised that a career was not necessarily hierarchically but could be defined as an individual’s own formulation of a meaningful career, without embodying a notion of vertical movement or ‘upwards’ progression. Also, beyond the individual’s perspective, the Chicago sociologists framed careers through the attributes of a collective (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989; Cuzzocrea and Lyon 2011). They suggested that for an individual to orient themselves with a pathway of work that they socially recognise as a ‘career’, there must be attributes that several previous people have followed or been associated with that are used as a reference group.

Career lines can exist only when a number of individuals have followed the same path. For only when the path is socially recognised can the individual draw from the career a ratified identity … But at the same time that the career made the individual, the individual instantiated the social reality of the career and, by extension, the collective that underwrote its terms.

(Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989, p.51).

Examples of these different theorisations of careers can be seen within the Nutbrown review (2012) which focused on the early childhood education and care profession. Nutbrown (2012, p.9) indicated that the matching process between a person’s skills and the duties perceived for certain occupations was still used to offer many people advice when considering a training course between the “hair and care stereotypes”, especially when ‘caring’ students with the poorest academic records are involved. (By stereotypes in haircare or childcare Nutbrown (2012) is indicating the historical legacy of (female) college students choosing between the two caring career pathways of haircare or childcare.) Whilst this empirical research does not focus directly on why participants enter the early childhood profession, the Nutbrown review (2012) highlights that a matching process is still present – with individuals given advice based on an objectively defined set of skills – and that societal perceptions of a work environment are also influential. This highlights the individual and social-cultural complexity that surrounds career decision-making processes. Whilst there is a lack of research about this process within the profession of ECEC (Lash and Castner 2018), research about the working lives of teachers offers a particularly valuable contribution to this research study.

**3.3.3. Learning from research about teachers’ (working) lives**

This research study is not focused solely on the role of teachers as it embraces a wider understanding of roles within services for children and families via early childhood education and care. Yet the research exploring (or removing) the boundaries between a teacher as a ‘professional’ and a teacher as a ‘person’ is particularly pertinent to this study.

In 1932 Waller highlighted the tensions that occur for teachers between the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’. This relationship between the thresholds of ‘life’ and ‘work’ shaped the understanding about ‘who’ teachers were for decades and how the career of teaching became understood (Francis et al. 2008; Nias 1989, 1991; Sikes, Measor and Woods 1985; Ball and Goodson 1985). Over the 1980s and 1990s the lives, identities and working practices of teachers emerged as a significant area of interest which Hargreaves and Woods (1984) considered as the sociology of teachers and teaching. This sociological approach favoured an examination of how an individual teacher changed in the contexts of their institutional school setting (Hargreaves 1994). Teachers were embraced as having their own shifting personal views and sense of purpose that leaked into their professional practices, whilst the school setting was also perceived as a site of flux, with policies, cultures, colleagues and behaviours that could influence a ‘professional’ teacher as well as their personal identities. In summary, Nias (1989, p.13) states that the relationships between personal, professional and situated identities is a “crucial element in the way teachers… construe the nature of their job”, and this continues to unfold and be retold over the life of a career.

Within research about teaching, a dovetailed relationship between a teacher’s personal and professional identities has emerged which knits together the “disparate dimensions of teachers’ lives – curriculum, career, home life, pedagogy” (MacLure 1993, p.320). Yet I am left to question why the lives of teachers are the stories that get told and therefore privileged, which consequently reinforces the (hegemonic) power of such privilege. I question this not to belittle research about the lives of teachers, or the lives of teachers themselves, but to highlight this dominance as a trend. Despite the diverse professional roles that educate children or the professional pluralism in circulation within early education and care, the lives of early childhood professionals across a range of roles remains clandestine and effaced amongst the dominance of teachers’ narratives.

What I take from the research about teachers’ lives that I find particularly pertinent for the current research is the idea that careers are understood as boundaryless and always becoming. Rather than treating a career as predetermined or “a single matter of concern”, life experiences and career experiences are theorised as “a whole entity” (Chen 1998, p.439) continually in flux as they are shaped by situational understandings, institutional workplaces and personal-professional biographies. Patterns of work, decision-making processes and careers are researched as complex subjective issues involving both individual and social structures. Differences such as gender, religion, age, accessibility or ethnicity are embraced as influential forces, each with diverse lines of flight. Influences like families, group dynamics or communities are understood as contributing to an individual’s choices and career trajectories, with research about chance events (Bright, Pryor, Chan and Rijanto 2009), happenstance (Mitchell, Levin and Krumboltz 1999), or relationships between spirituality and work (Bloch 2004) also embraced within sociological theories of careers.

An individual’s assembled perceptions of becoming amongst cultures, spaces and places can holistically influence their experiences of work, as well as influencing their experiences of life. To unpack this idea of becoming in more detail is the focus of the following section.

**3.3.4 – Storytelling the processes of becoming**

There has been much debate about the characteristics of professionals in early childhood education and care and limited discussion using the language of careers and career stories in this sector (Dyer 2018; Taylor 2018). This research brings these two areas together through an understanding of a career as a process of continual becoming within the ECEC profession, where flux is favoured over a fixed or stable view of identity (Lash and Castner 2018). The difference being highlighted here is ontological – an ontology of becoming rather than an ontology of being. The work of Heidegger (1971), Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and later Deleuze (1994, 1997) tracks these differences through a long philosophical history, summarised by the more recent work of Reardon, Sanzogni and Poropat (2006, p.161):

To compare these two ontologies, one suggests a world that just ‘is’ and we struggle to understand it within the confines of our subjectivity (being). The other suggests that all things are constantly changing and our knowledge of them is derived by striving to explain and understand the drives and impacts of changes.

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p.239) becoming “is a verb, with a consistency all of its own”. It is a doing word that embraces an individual and the assemblage of materials that surrounds them, and this is a concept I want to unpack. An individual, the materials, the people and the objects that surround them, including their environmental or cultural contexts (gender, race, religion, ability, and ethnicity) create an assemblage – a gathered flux of forces that intermingle to produce something new, something different and fluid. As an example, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) considered the movements and flux of forces between an orchid and a wasp during pollination, describing this assemblage as affecting both the orchid and the wasp indiscernibly, as well as the wider ecology. Yet, despite observing assemblages, affects and new becomings, like pollination, is not a process that is straightforward to predict or regulate.

Not all becomings have a physical transformation; the focus is on the ‘affect’ of events created as human and non-human forces or materials intermingle. An example of this is shared by Reardon et al. (2006, p.162) who detail Deleuze and Guattari’s (1984) scenario of a hijacked airliner becoming transformed from a plane into a prison.

There is no physical transformation here, while one can argue there is a perceptual and a psychological transformation for both passengers and hijackers that endures after the event. The transformation is temporary and does not infer a similar transformation in every other airliner. …. While transformation maybe be temporary it steals something from the entity and severs any return to the original images… freedom and privacy are lost with an increase in security and loss of innocence for those travelling…

Here Reardon et al. (2006) highlight Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) proposition that affects can be boundaryless, rippling beyond any existing territories. By this I am reminded of times when airlines have been hijacked or disappeared in flight over recent years and I have observed children within early childhood settings role playing such events. These children are exploring and using play materials to process their understanding. The impact of accessible news reporting and aeroplane events may not be easily associated with affecting children’s play, but the flow of information, materials with meaning (toy aeroplanes) and the flux of forces become complex, multiple and ambiguous leading to the possibility of such occurrences.

As these examples reveal, it is imperative that materials and objects be considered as having the potential to construct (or reconstruct) knowledge in the processes of becoming. Tools and materials such as small chairs, highchairs, junk play or carpets have been researched (see Bone 2018; Bradley et al. 2012; Odegard 2012; Kim and Kim 2017, respectively) within early childhood settings to consider how “matter and meaning are mutually constituted” in the production of knowledge (Barad, 2007 p.152). These research studies relate to Lenz Taguchi’s (2007) awareness of knowledge generation as inseparable from the materials used in the assemblage. Similarly, individuals ‘become professional’ in ECEC (Fairchild 2017 reframing Deleuze and Guattari 1987) by handling, intermingling and constructing knowledge through the materials that surround them, such as the spaces they inhabit, the materials worn, or the tools used.

Similar to the children who sought out small world resources to investigate and explore aeroplanes and news events, adults seek out clothes, job titles, name badges, technology or other materials to aid with professional tasks (Pulsford 2016) or remake themselves for an important event. Lenz Taguchi (2012, p.267) described this process as our “ability to make matter intelligible”. As humans we add these materials into our assemblage, maybe for an event because the materials add meaning for us, or because they are perceived as having meaning to others. These object or materials are perceived as having the potential to create certain affects or associations amongst the assemblage of other forces; this is what Deleuze and Guattari (1980) referred to as lines of flight. Yet taking these ideas further, a new materialist approach acknowledges the impact of materials, spaces or objects “acting back” too (Horton and Kraftl 2006, p. 73). By acting back, Horton and Kraftl (2006) are considering the ways materials can play with an individual, not just how an individual can play with materials. For example, the children who played with the aeroplanes may have also experienced emotional or social turbulence in response to using those materials, in those places, in that assemblage of time. Or an adult may use a job title to (re)make themselves into becoming-professional in a certain role, yet the job title may also act back through forces of responsibility, legacy associations or unexpected affects.

It is this understanding of becoming professional, as boundaryless, complex and multi-layered, that is embraced within this research. Through the theorisation of becoming, concepts of a career move away from the idea of linear, pre-prescribed judgements of what a career is (or should be) that solely focus on individual agency (Peila-Shuster 2018). The understanding of knowledge becomes an emerging situation narrated by an individual who can incorporate their chosen objects, materials and relationships to (re)create their experiences of changes, transitions, twists or splits that rupture or leak into life. It is from this position that the use of the term career ‘stories’ is a deliberate choice in this research.

By using narrative approaches, individuals can share stories of their working lives in their own words. An individual can choose which objects, spaces, materials, cultures or people to incorporate within their storytelling and what they silence can also speak loudly. Narrating stories captures the struggles when deciding “the meanings of our actions, thoughts and feelings” (Elfer et al. 2018, p. 10). Stories accommodate how professionals reason their way through problems. Therefore, centralising an individual’s narrative perceives career decision-making from the chooser’s perspective, whilst enabling the surrounding assemblage to be included as factors that shape an individual’s working life.

This research seeks to understand the messages people share about their work in ECEC and appreciate how early childhood professionals fashion and refashion themselves and their career trajectories in response to the contexts they encounter. These influences can be personal, professional or academic in origin, they can involve anticipated or unanticipated events or professional transitions within a career trajectory. Affects can be re-affected by the influence of time and individuals have greater autonomy over what they describe as a change. These concepts of changes are unpacked further within the next section that examines the terminology of career trajectories and professional transitions.

**3.3.5 - Terminology: career trajectories and professional transitions**

A career trajectory is the term used in this study to describe the patterns created by an individual when visually narrating their career pathway. A professional transition is the term used to incorporate any changes, movements, or experiences that an individual sees as significant within their career trajectory. By ‘change’ Peake and McDowall (2012) draw on the earlier work of Heppner (1998) who offers three alternative perspectives. The first is a ‘task change’ which keeps the same work location but introduces new task(s). The second is a ‘position change’ which can involve a current or new employer and maybe a new work location. The third is an ‘occupational change’ which involves a move to a completely new set of tasks. I would add to the later occupational change category that this can also include transitions out of occupational roles, maybe due to family factors or health needs. Bloch (2005) includes graduation, being fired, ambition, illness, and virtually any event as potential sources of transitions, whether they are ‘done by’ or ‘done to’ an individual. This is the understanding of change being embraced within this research about professional transitions experienced by early childhood professionals, but the use or presence of materials within story telling will also be explored as a tool to signify changes or transitions in thought.

In this respect transitions and changes can be sought or thrust upon an individual but they are always interwoven and part of a relational network of affects – whether considered by an individual that way or not. Peake and McDowall’s (2012) research concluded that career transitions can also be triggered by chance – chance encounters, chance catalysts, chance opportunities. The seven participants in Peake and McDowall’s research (2012, p. 407) described “non-linearity, marked by chance and one-off events, paired with growth through adversity, as resounding themes in career transitions”. Whilst this is a small study due to its call for rich individual narratives, the findings correlate with another study by Ensher et al. (2017).

Ensher et al. (2017) theorised five types of changes that can be considered as defining moments or intense transformational experiences. These changes can be anticipated transition events, unanticipated transition events, insight experiences, relational experiences, and spiritual experiences. Ensher et al. (2017) reached these findings by analysing career defining moments described by 18 senior leaders from a variety of industries. They concluded that similar research is needed in broad and specialist industries as it provides a lens through which to understand, anticipate and support people’s career transitions, which are becoming increasingly prevalent in twenty-first-century life. This study was not focused on early childhood professionals, but the implications show that the ability to recognise professional transitions can be illuminating, and in an evolving landscape like ECEC (Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2018) this could offer beneficial insights to aid the sector.

Another reason Ensher et al. (2017) endorse research that aims to understand change and transitional moments is that decisions can be consequential and shape the process of becoming-professional. Decisions serve as a catalyst for future decisions that impact lives and career choices, and a deeper awareness of this process can bring comfort or a better anticipation of one’s own needs. When researching the influences of modern times and economic austerity on careers, Leach (2016) argued that how a person constructs a narrative and connects what may be disparate experiences is one of the most important skills for the twenty-first century. I interpret this to mean, that how a person can explore and ascribe meaning to their experiences, how someone can join transitional points and affects into a fluent narrative that can benefit their current goals – their reflexivity – is being championed as beneficial in the modern world of work. For me this point highlights the importance for individuals to conceptualise their career trajectories as a complex issue, where the examination of transition points can help us to understand the power of small changes (Bloch 2004; Ensher et al. 2017). This is a process, that for Pring (2012), reaches beyond career development and can help people in constantly becoming rounded citizens, in deliberating the reasoning that shapes their lives and how they live.

Understanding an individual’s reasoning, what they perceive as transitional events and their perception of work, life and career successes can be very personal. It is important to recognise that the theoretical position of this research does not aim to define or measure a ‘successful’ career story or an authentic truth. A list of generalising factors alone would embrace a positivist tradition, which is irrelevant, incomplete and always transient when viewed through a poststructuralist lens. In this research, professional transitions and career trajectories are conceived of as events, sometimes a series of choices, objects or pathways that have internal harmonics or resonances for an individual. There is not an external measure of ‘success.’ The sharing of a career story in ECEC, incorporating transition and trajectories, aims to appreciate how individuals navigate the changing landscape, how a person’s life is affected by contested professionalism, or how life events rupture into the complex experiences of love, satisfaction and exhaustion (Elfer et al. 2018) in the ECEC sector. Yet this understanding of career stories narrated by individual early childhood professionals sits in tension with the language of careers used in the ECEC sector.

The following section builds upon the previous literature about approaches to contemporary careers and the process of becoming-professional to consider how careers are conceptualised within the early childhood education and care profession.

**3.4 The language of careers used in early childhood education and care**

Whilst there is research about contested professionalism in ECEC, the types of knowledge endorsed by qualifications, and relationships between life and work, there is little use of the word career or a language of careers in these debates. This section examines how the language of careers is used within ECEC research and considers the effects this may have on the profession.

In 2017 BERA and TACTYC (p.9) co-produced a literature review with one section focusing upon “early years as a career in the socio-political and economic context of the UK”. This section investigates what “the research evidence since 2003 tell us about ECEC in relation to Professionalism – Early Years as a career”. The relationship between professionalism and career in this review was not clarified. The words profession, professionalisation, or professionalism appear approximately 110 times, with the word career appearing 15 times. Furthermore, within the method section of the review, the key terms/words searched for within the existing literature did not include the word career – they included “professional\*; profession\*; early childhood; outcomes; quality; workforce\*; qualification\*; vocation\*; development; early years; nursery; preschool” (BERA/TACTYC 2017, p.10). Whilst these words are all associated with working in the ECEC sector, this begins to illustrate the sparse use of the word career within this workforce (Waniganayake 2013). There is little systematic research into career stories or professional trajectories for early childhood professionals, yet there is a growing body of work focused on their lived experiences.

Extensive research does exist about teachers constructing their own career pathways and professional transitions (Rinke and Mawhinney 2017), yet teaching is only one pathway within the diversity of careers in ECEC. When looking beyond the legislated route of early childhood teaching in primary schools in England, the theorising of careers in early childhood education and care is under developed. Despite this, in its workforce strategy (2017, p.17 -19) the Department for Education in England proposed that ECEC should be “a career of choice”. However, the DfE acknowledged that a current barrier to this happening is the limited reputation of the sector for “offering good career progression or varied career opportunities”. This statement about the government’s understanding of careers in early childhood education and care is largely accurate, the sector does not coherently promote its varied career opportunities or understand how careers are developed in this growing workforce. Yet this is not new information. Five years earlier, the Nutbrown review (2012, p.8) stated that “despite the strong evidence on the importance of early education in children’s development, work in early education and childcare is widely seen as low status, low paid, and low skilled”. This public perception does not help the ECEC workforce to be seen as a contemporary career profession. The wording of a career is however, regularly used within some ‘practice’ focused texts such as those by the Community Playthings company which promote resources or texts produced and shared by childcare companies for their staff and beyond.

The choice of wording about career progression within the DFE’s workforce strategy (2017) places the responsibility for this lack of understanding with the sector itself. The choice of words implies that the sector has responsibility for ‘offering’ those messages about career opportunities and trajectories. There is a difference in the location of power, with the government proposing the end goal (ECEC being a career of choice) but that the sector needs to develop these messages itself. Whilst this embraces the neoliberal agenda of contemporary governments, it also presents an opportunity for the sector to champion itself and share career stories from within the profession.

There are existing higher status professions that drive their own career narratives and define their own practice from within the sector, whilst negotiating government policy. Originally market-led professions like medicine, banking or law have forged ways to design and use their own language about careers (Evetts 2011), with competing views of professional practice interpreted as a strength and evidence that professional choices are not easy. Whilst there are many differences between these workforces and they are not offered as direct comparison to ECEC, they do offer ideas and possibilities to forge a way forward with competing and challenging forces. Yet in ECEC the profession continues to lack – or not to exercise – the power to claim similar approaches, for a variety of diverse and complex reasons. In ECEC the government’s control may promote a model of professionalism that is universal, measured and linear for the workforce, yet the government does not have a monopoly on creating narratives. Unfortunately, ECEC does not have a defined professional infrastructure to voice diverse stories of professional-becoming (see Stronach et al; Osgood 2012, Fairchild 2018) that can be circulated in a coherent manner. Yet a language of careers and a contemporary theorisation of careers is not embraced in the majority of current research either.

Dyer (2018) and similarly Taylor (2018) contribute to the debates about professionals and professionalism in ECEC with small, rich narrative-based studies which question the power of change within the head, heart and hands of practitioners (Chalke 2015.) Dyer (2018) recognises the overarching power of the government’s regulatory forces, yet she defaults to discussing careers within a nationally recognised structure. This approach silences the power of the sector and the abilities of professionals to voice their own bespoke career stories, by defaulting solely to the power of regulators. For example, Dyer (2018, p.356) discusses the lack of a “nationally recognised career structure … which might offer [professionals] a clear career pathway … and temper some of the inconsistencies”. Yet this perspective endorses the power of the government to dominate the agenda in ECEC, which sits in contrast to other professional sectors which have created a dual approach to defining their career pathways from ‘within’ the sector as well. I am not suggesting that the ECEC sector splits from the government agenda, but that we can also strengthen our position by using the language of careers, and championing career pathways and progression routes from within the sector too. This may not be easy and realistic narratives would have multiple tensions as well as rewards. But the concept of a ‘career’ is deeply embedded in social cultural frameworks, in a similar way to the contested notion of professionalism; therefore, the ECEC sector is best positioned to illustrate its own understanding of career stories and champion its own development opportunities and trajectories from within (Stronach et al, Osgood 2012).

In order to understand how the lives and career stories of early childhood professionals are shaped from inside and outside the ECEC sector, the following section reviews the literature on factors that are considered as emerging career influences in twenty-first-century lives.

**3.5 Influences shaping career stories**

Learning and continuing to work within ECEC involves not only negotiating practice, but also understanding the demands, policies, local expectations and interpretations of a particular context, with overlapping — and sometimes competing — forces. This section considers some of the factors that influence professional transitions and career trajectories when early childhood professionals narrate their career stories. The factors examined include how time, vulnerability, hope and communities of practice can aid early childhood professionals as they seek to make sense of their lives and careers working in ECEC.

**3.5.1 - Time**

The ways in which early childhood professionals construct concepts of time are perpetual within narratives. By concepts of time I mean the ways in which people forecast the future, or narrate the past, in their present day. When expanding on this concept, Lewin (1951), Carr (1986) and more recently Taber (2012, p.200) suggest that “decision making is not only contingent upon what takes place in the present but also how one feels about the past and one’s hopes for the future”. Spacetimemattering is a neologism introduced by Barad (2014), in which she argues that space, time and matter should not be considered as separate entities, instead, they entangle with/in each other. Time is active and it is doing something – creating a space, a distance, a narrowing, a commitment. Time is a factor that shapes stories, when stories are shared, to whom and how.

Scholars have aimed to theorise the use of the past, present and future temporal zones in different ways. In 1932 Mead discussed the subjectivity of time, with the present being a temporal collection of horizons leading to many paths and many possible futures. Giddens (1999) called time a fluid construction and more recently Adam and Groves (2007, p.12) use the term a social construction of time.

All of us are prophets, predictors, prospectors and planners for the future when we negotiate traffic, keep appointments, honour obligations … All these projections and plans imply knowledge before the event … and tacit know-how. In our daily lives we move in and out of such different futures without giving much thought to the matter.

Here Adam and Groves (2007) focus on the future time perspective, and Taber (2012) posits the study of the past and present constructions are less frequently considered within research about career stories and career decision-making literature. The ontology of becoming taken within this research, and discussed in an earlier section, it is a perspective that emerges from the stories of who we have been previously, who we are presently, and who we hope or worry about becoming in the future. This is not to imply events are determined by human intentionality, but to acknowledge that becoming is an ongoing process in a post-human sense. That time and events can fold into each other, overlap and become entangled, moving away from the view of time as linear. Barad (2007) encourages thinking about the non-lineage of time and suggests a new way of looking at our relationship with space and matter. This is a complex process though and care needs to be taken when exploring complexity. Time can work on the human subject in many ways, not always positively. Offering time, matter and space to people can help them think about and develop thoughts before sharing life and work stories (May 2017) but it can also be unsettling or worrisome. Davies (2014, p.1) writes about “the openness to becoming different in one’s encounters,” but not everyone may be open to letting go of attachments or engrained ideas in order to recompose themselves. Therefore, storytelling as a research method needs thoughtful consideration.

When theorising the use of time within written narratives, May (2017) and Pederson (2009) draw on the earlier categories created by Morson (1994); these include back-shadowing, fore-shadowing and side-shadowing. “When back-shadowing a narrator portrays the present as an unavoidable result of the past, whilst foreshadowing means bringing anticipated future events that have not happened yet into the present” (May 2017, p.6). May’s (2017) research continues by describing side-shadowing as a way to consider the possible paths available, currently or previously, which may or may not have been taken. In doing so alternative paths become part of a person’s narrative, leaving a legacy or imprint of paths not chosen.

Using time in diffracted ways may be encouraged in this research by asking early childhood professionals to narrate their career stories but this does not guarantee what will become visible, or less visible. It should not be forgotten that the stories created are emergent from a person’s current present; they are a view of the past created in that present moment, and the past will continue to be reinterpreted when the future becomes the present. Barad (2007) suggests that space, time and matter are in constant communication. Also, drawing on the work of Bourdieu (2000), a person’s ability or willingness to share (or make) future plans can be affected by a person’s sense of security and stability in the present, past or percived future. Some more advantaged groups in society may already have an advantage here. People with economic, social or cultural capital may be more resourceful or protected against problematic outcomes, so less prone to questioning their security. This attunes with the understanding that time is couched in many other cultural contingencies. Western understandings of sense of self are dominated by individualism, where ideals promote a productive person contributing to their future. This need for productivity can emerge through using the past to enliven the present (May 2017), by fore-shadowing the future as a way of avoiding an uncomfortable present or in Barad’s (2007) theorisation an entanglement of space, time and matter. Therefore, as this research considers the construction of time as an influential factor within career life stories of early childhood professionals, many influences shape a person’s approaches to the use of time.

In a recent study by Read and Leathwood (2018) about academics’ career stories, they suggest that creating a secure professional future has become increasingly difficult in modern times. I would claim that similar events have occurred within the early childhood profession as job (in)security, lifelong learning and increased neoliberal forms of governance such as qualification pressures has added to a general sense of vulnerability. How early childhood professionals live and work with an unforeseeable future and fractured past is a complex issue which begins to be unpacked in the following section.

**3.5.2 - Spaces for vulnerability and hope**

Similar to the multidimensional conceptualisation of time in the previous section, vulnerability and hope are multidimensional concepts entwined within career stories. Papaux (2016, p.332) researched the role of vulnerability in her own life as an individual and a supervising professional in an educational context. She summarised vulnerability as:

Being susceptible to damage, to being wounded or hurt and as being open to moral attack and embodied injury. To be vulnerable is to be laid open to something undesirable or injurious, to be exposed.

Here Papaux (2016) is developing the work of Schulz (2010) to describe vulnerability as not just exposure to being ‘wrong’, but how we think, feel and respond to being in the context of vulnerability. This complexity connects with research by Elfer et al. (2018 p.1; Burkitt 1997, p.42) regarding emotions within the nursery, as they propose defining emotions “…cannot be reduced to biology, relations or discourse alone, but belong to all these dimensions as they are constituted in on-going relational practices.”

To unpack these complex definitions further, I draw on the work of Butler (2014) who added that vulnerability is a term that has a way of shifting and evoking alternative responses depending on its use. Sometimes vulnerability is constructed in opposition to resistance or strength. Such binary constructions can force unnecessary psychological choices between these two positions. As Butler (2014) and Read and Leathwood (2018) discuss, a resistance to include vulnerability within a self-narrative can be based on a lack of choice, perception or political pressures. History illustrates that a discourse of vulnerability has been associated with those of less power, through discrimination, inequality, colonialisation, violence or exploitation. Taylor (2018), for example, has researched early childhood professionals on training placements as located in a position of less power. This majority and minority binary can associate vulnerability with the oppressed, with a weakness, or as a ‘group’ seeking protection. Yet this imagery evokes the sense of paternalistic powers from ‘protectors’, which, in turn, may shore up the perception of the ‘protectors’ as located in a position of control. This creates a continuous cycle of inequality or disadvantage and silences the power of individuals or ‘minority’ groups that does exist, through a blanket label of vulnerability.

If the profession of ECEC is positioned as a vulnerable sector (Dyer 2018) due to its lack of political interest when compared to the legacy of primary or secondary education, this construction silences the power, agency and resilience that also exist within the sector. This view aligns with Butler’s (2014, p.16) argument, that “the use of vulnerability effaces the condition of vulnerability”. Instead debates about ECEC need to understand how vulnerability affects action or vulnerability interacts amongst wider narratives about living and working in the profession. This approach would unpick the binary oppositions of vulnerability and strength, or at least begin to start such debates.

The challenge with accepting vulnerability amongst other elements of professionalism means an individual (or group) are “willing to do something with no guarantee or certainty of the outcome” (Papaux 2016, p.333). This is a struggle for legitimacy which Papaux (2016, p.333) explains further:

It is difficult to own vulnerability when it touches the image of the practitioner as a professional because one fears not being worthy of belonging and/or losing one’s job, both of which may be fantasies or projections, or down to earth realities.

The idea of professionalism can convey, for some, an invitation to avoid vulnerability. Yet owning vulnerability and encouraging individuals to discover new resources or forces embraces courage and hope, as people foreshadow an alternative future. Breaking away from vulnerability, as an opposition to resilient strength, provides a sense of ownership and hope that things can be otherwise.

Hope has long been associated with caring and educational professions such as ECEC (Elfer et al. 2018), social work (Boddy et al. 2017) and education (Silin 2017; Webb 2012; Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2011), and research by Arndt et al. (2018) argues that ideals, utopia, dreams and desires are all hopeful drivers that lead many early childhood professionals into this sector. Yet the meaning of hope remains elusive and hard to conceptualise (Webb 2012). According to Boddy et al. (2017, p,1) “hope has dynamic features that looks to the future and motivates people”. For Freire (1994), hope is a vision for the future; hope is indispensable, radical and emancipatory. Hope can emerge out of chance, change or vulnerability. This view of hope is more than an individual psychological conceptualisation of hope (see, Snyder 2002, 1995), as it includes a social context of hopefulness, where materials, objects or spaces can foster hopeful affects.

Hope, like vulnerability and arguably time, are debated issues, but all can be present within an assembled narrative about the life and work of an early childhood professional. Yet the cross-national discussion by Arndt et al. (2018) suggests hope and morality become reduced to an implicit motivator and their research calls for more explicit conversations about hope within and beyond the community of early childhood education and care. This research will respond to this call by considering hope as a factor that shapes the working lives of early childhood professionals and their communities of practice.

Communities of practice are the focus for the next section, including how spaces and teamwork support professionals and their ongoing careers.

**3.5.3 –Becoming professional with/in/through communities of practice**

The influences of hope, vulnerability and time have been considered as factors that can emerge or shape an individual’s career story when living and working as early childhood professionals. Yet the presence of relationships with both human and more than human objects needs to be considered within spaces and places that form part of a community of practice.

Clandinin and Connelly (2004) remind us that places and spaces can shape the meaning of narratives as locations and are not neutral. Physical spaces and places such as early childhood education and care nurseries, schools, home-based provisions or training facilitates contribute to the assemblages where experiences occur, and within these spaces the human relationships differ. Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the term ‘communities of practice’ as a model to examine the support for new or less experienced professionals entering informal learning environments, such as placements, where learning is situated. Communities of practice have been researched within an ECEC context focusing on students in training (see, Taylor 2018) but studies have also been conducted that focus on using communities of practice to support all professionals within a local geography, regardless of their level of experience. Ratner, Bocknek, Miller, Elliott and Weathington (2017) consider how bringing people together with a common professional interest can support becoming-professional for all. This more inclusive approach to communities of practice (inclusive for all levels of experience, qualifications and specialist multi-agency professionals) still prioritises human relationships supporting individuals’ learning journeys, developing participation and a submergence in the social-cultural practices of a community. But as research by Ratner et al. (2017) and Melasalmi and Husu (2018) explore, communities of practice can be built upon different social, political and geographical values, and different values can begin to personalise generalising outcomes. Localised communities of practice can aid teamwork and human relationships, where a sense of belonging can support ownership of vulnerability and be transformational for people and places.

Communities of practice in ECEC can become spaces where professional colleagues reflect on their life and work, where a mixed group of people with a range of roles, experiences, or qualifications can support what Hakim and Dalli (2016) describe as a process of life-long professional becoming, for individuals and the setting itself. Beyond the physicality of a place though, the rise in social networking sites has also created spaces where professionals can gather in online communities of practice to discuss living and working in ECEC.

How occupations are being discussed in the information age is an emergent area for research according to Golan and Babis (2017) and this needs to include how social media dialogues are affecting professionalism and career narratives in ECEC. What is emerging within research across wider occupations though, is that social networking sites are leveraging crowd wisdom into a form of knowledge (Golan and Babis 2017). This aligns with Campbell-Barr’s (2017) questioning about the sociology of knowledge formation within ECEC and, also, challenges what Urban (2010) called the epistemological hierarchy of knowledge production which has been dominated by legislation in recent decades. However, even within their small study Golan and Babis (2017) caution that little is known about the online strategies used by professionals to navigate these online or digital communities of practice, or how influential they are at shaping the lives of early childhood professionals.

These theorisations of a community of practice, based on the original work of Lave and Wenger (1991) are still human centric, focused on human to human forces and influences. Taking a new materialist turn or using the literature about post humanism, a community of practice could be much more then its human elements, embracing influences such as a comfy chair, a good coffee machine, or familiar objects lying welcoming on a desk. These objects, things and forces can still aid practice, training or human belonging as Lave and Wenger (1991) first proposed, but in a way that embraces more than human forces within the assemblage.

This entanglement of factors – professional-becoming, physical and online communities of practice, mobile access, and the value of human and more than human relationships – is a developing area of modern life. This is a broad concept that reaches beyond the scope of this study, but the forces and materials that are embraced within a community of practice will be considered as the four participants discuss their working lives for this research study.

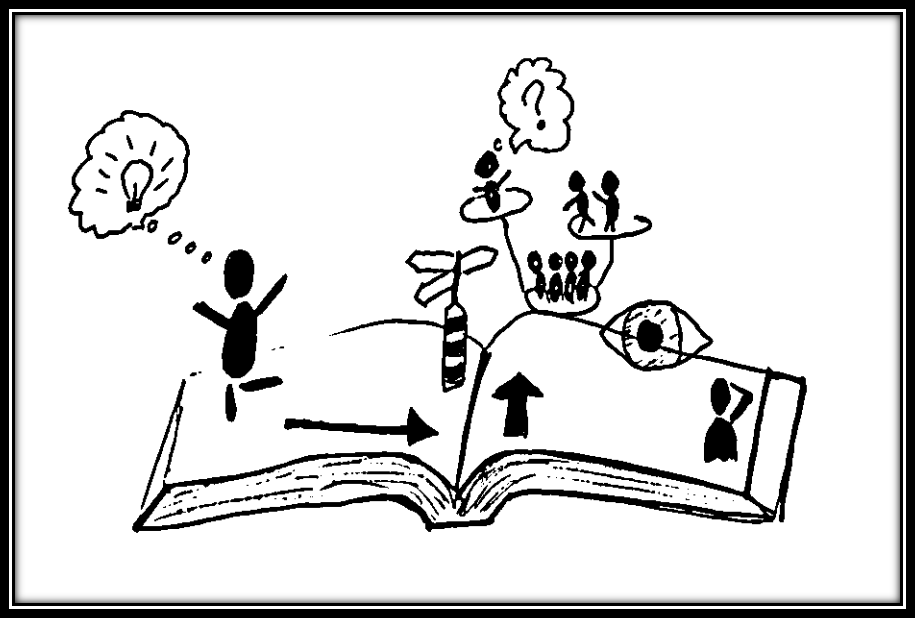
**3.6 – In summary**

This research aims to illustrate the career stories of four early childhood professionals working and living in England. In summary, this literature review has located itself within debates about contested professionalism and contextualised ECEC as a diverse workforce shaped by multiple forces, such as gender (Osgood 2010, 2012), government-driven qualifications (Elwick et al. 2017; Campbell-Barr 2017) and clandestine discourses of emotion (Elfer et al. 2018; Lash and Castner 2018). Contemporary theories surrounding the social construction of careers have been debated, settling on an understanding of career stories as an approach that encompasses an ongoing process of professional-becoming. Whilst there is limited research that uses a language of careers in ECEC (Taylor 2018; Dyer 2018), the approach of this study locates itself amongst the work of Hakim and Dalli (2016, p.1) who declare becoming professional to be a never-ending journey, and a journey of “profound humanity” according to Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018, p. 1).

This empirical research aims to question how early childhood professionals become early childhood professionals, and how individuals narrate their career stories about living and working in a changing landscape. Research from beyond the ECEC profession (Papaux 2016, Pulsford 2016) indicates that narratives become entwined with attachments to material objects, and stories embrace a wide range of factors beyond those associated with any individual sector. This directed the literature review to explore wider forces within career stories including the social construction of time, spaces for vulnerability and hope, and never-ending communities of practice.

Overall, the literature indicates that the early childhood education and care sector needs to rely less on extrinsic judgements (Campbell-Barr 2017; Taylor 2018; Dyer 2018) or what Urban (2010) called the epistemological hierarchy of knowledge production and begin to use a sociological approach to careers that can project narratives as lived by people within the profession. This research aims to contribute to this need by illustrating an up-close and intimate view of who early childhood professionals are and the seemingly ordinary events that rise-up and matter within their working lives, affecting how they live.

**Chapter 4 - Methodology**



Postcard 4: Visualising a storytelling methodology

4.1 Introduction

Researchers have many choices when designing research. These choices concern the subject of study and the surrounding literature, as well as choices about the approaches to research, the research design and theories used. Here, “theory means ‘to look’, and researchers’ choice of theory shapes how they look at evidence, and how they question, collect and interpret it” (Alderson 2013, p.18). The aim of this methodology chapter is to explain, justify and reflect upon the theory chosen and how this influenced the direction of this research.

Decisions about adopting a methodology are not straightforward (Sikes 2004) and this chapter provides an overview of how ontological and epistemological assumptions have shaped the main theoretical concepts that frame this research. The chapter develops a particular focus on the philosophical positions or commonalities offered by a narrative methodology – hence the storytelling postcard at the start of this chapter. Carter (2018, p.128) states that “narrative is a highly nuanced and complex term – and many researchers approach it in a variety of ways”. Within this research, a narrative methodology was accompanied by a visual tool to explore the career stories shared by four early childhood professionals.

In summary, this chapter includes the following sections:

* 1. - The researcher’s positionality
  2. – A visual narrative approach to research
  3. - Summarising the research questions

4.2 The researcher’s positionality

Sikes (2004, p. 19) argues for the importance of reflexivity by researchers, stating that:

A reflexive and reflective and, therefore, rigorous researcher… is able to present their findings and interpretations with the confidence that they have thought about, acknowledged and been honest and explicit about their stance and the influence it has had upon their work.

With the concept of reflexivity in mind, this section presents my stance as a researcher and acknowledges how my understandings of the world influenced the approaches taken within this research.

Trends within research suggest that researchers with an interest in subjective issues usually focus on qualitative research, whereas quantitative methods are suited to researchers who have an interest in making generalising objective statements. Weedon (1987) defines subjective issues or subjectivity as the (un)conscious emotions and thoughts of an individual that shape their sense of self in relation to their world and the forces around them. This subjective, qualitative preference broadly conceptualises my approach to understanding the world and the paradigm or beliefs that I brought to this research. Yet, social research studies are also “complex, diverse and pluralistic” (Sarantakos 2005, p.29). This pluralistic understanding broadly aligns my position with a postmodern or poststructuralist stance which encourages the exploration of alternatives or “challenges assumptions about truth and the right way to do things” (Hickson 2016, p.383; Fook 2002).

From a postmodernist point of view, “there is no absolute knowledge, no absolute reality ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered. … Instead the world and our knowledge of it are seen as socially constructed” (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence 2007, p.23). For Dillet (2017, p.2) poststructuralism “…gives a point of meaning in the vast landscape of ‘French’ philosophy”, within which Derrida (1979, 1978) has defined poststructuralism as the rejection of the idea of a single truth about reality, or a rejection of finding the truthful essence of a phenomenon. Following this thinking, research about reflections of reality become interesting not because of the truths they hold, but because this type of research accesses the processes whereby ‘truth’ categories are brought into existence.

This positioning begins to represent my deeply-held assumptions about the world and Charmaz (2017, p.4) argues that “these assumptions shape our standpoints and starting points” in research. “Our assumptions shape what we do during research and affect whether, when, how and to what extent our standpoints change throughout the research process.” Within these standpoints, epistemology refers to ‘what I can know’, the constitution of knowledge and what researchers believe about how we come to know and understand the world. For me, to ‘know’ is partly about participation (Davies, 2000; Dillet 2017). Rather than seeking a truth, knowledge is engaged with and subjectively constructed. To view knowledge as subjective and personal means that this research would involve participants and engage with their subjective views about working and living as an early childhood professional. My epistemology initially inspired the need to understand how the work of early childhood professionals shaped their lives, and their lives shaped their work. This interpretivist or poststructural influence was in favour of interpretation and agency, embracing “a move from [understanding] the self as a noun (and thus stable and relatively fixed) to [understanding] the self as a verb, always in process, taking its shape in and through the discursive possibilities through which selves are made” (Davies 2000, p.274).

However, rather than prioritise human subjectivity and agency, I also wanted to understand the abstract laws or broad beliefs that individuals bring into existence or that are taken-for-granted about the nature of the(ir) social world. Here existence, or ontology, means the nature of reality and poses questions about what kind of relationships, structures or broad beliefs form patterns or are taken for granted when narrating lives. Alderson (2016) provides an example of shared meanings being entwinned with varied individual differences by considering the theories of childhood and a unique child.

When meaning is detached from direct living (epistemology from ontology), connections between research data and conclusions and between recommendations and later policy making may look like tenuous connections. … real children and their practical daily lives cannot wholly be reduced into concepts of childhood, although they are affected by the concepts. … The theories may partly illuminate, but they also limit and fragment, research about children’s complex lives.

(Alderson 2016, p.202)

This extract speaks to the uncertainties, inconsistencies and limitations being raised about the binaries between agency and structure (see Seale 1999). Alderson (2016) raises questions about collapsing ‘being into thinking’, where being a child is collapsed into thinking about concepts of childhood for example, or what is known as epistemic fallacy. Also, Alderson (2016, p.201) draws upon Bhaskar (1998, 2008, 2010) to argue that “western philosophy and science tends to reduce existing things into thoughts, ontology into epistemology”, where attention to epistemology has been at the expense of ontology. In this research, an appreciation of both was sought, where individual lives, agency and an ability to influence change was embraced alongside an appreciation of career structures, conceptual resources and an enduring transferable reality.

Conceptual resources within this research referred to recognised pathways of work or careers that exist about the early childhood education and care profession, because for an individual to socially recognise a career, there have to be activity-dependant social structures that are visible, or becoming visible, to an individual. According to Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989) such socially recognised careers must contain attributes that several previous people have followed, or been associated with, that are being used as a reference.

Career lines can exist only when a number of individuals have followed the same path. For only when the path is socially recognised can the individual draw from the career a ratified identity … But at the same time that the career made the individual, the individual instantiated the social reality of the career and, by extension, the collective that underwrote its terms.

(Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989, p.51).

It is this combination of explanation and interpretation, particularity and contextualisation, that was sought through using a narrative methodology to capture the career stories of four early childhood professionals. Both individual agency and recognised social structure were appreciated, but one was not placed in ascendancy to the detriment of the other. The individual narrating their career story may place more prominence on agency or structure, but this research aspired to allow both – individual lives, agency and ability to affect change, alongside an appreciation of structures, conceptual resources and an enduring everchanging transferable reality – to make claims about reality which are relatively justified, while still being historical, contingent and changing (Archer 2003). Having respect for both agency and structure does not mean though that both happen together (see Giddens 1979 theory of structuration), but rather there is a ‘tensed difference’ (Buch-Hansen 2005, p.61).

… the agency comes after the structure. So, there is a 'tensed' difference: There was structure; there is now that agency; and there will be the structure that this agency produces. … I think that unless you understand pre-structuration, then it makes it too easy to change the social world when in fact it is very, very difficult! It can be done, but we have to take the weight of the past seriously if we want to overcome it. You have to work at the totality, and it's important that we know this if we have aspirations to change society.

The impact of my positionality is continually considered throughout the study, including in the next section which expands on my interpretation of visual narrative storytelling as an approach to research.

**4.3 – A visual narrative approach to research**

This research seeks to appreciate the career stories shared by early childhood professionals, and how their work influences their life and their life influences their work. Whilst this research subject does not dictate how the research should be conducted, the subject does suggest the research is intensive. Intensive research has a focus on highly concentrated, in-depth interactions with a small group of participants, rather than a far-reaching study over a long period of time with many participants. This intensive style of research informed the decision to use a narrative methodology, yet there are varied ways to interpret a narrative lens (Polkingthorne 1988; Bruner 1986; Clandinin and Connelly 2004; Witherell and Noddings 1991; Riessman 1993; Carter 2018; McAlpine 2016). The next section debates the approach taken within this study.

**4.3.1 – Narrative storytelling**

In 1988 Polkingthorne (p.36) wrote that “at the level of a single life, the autobiographical narrative shows life as unified and whole, … through which the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts”. Articulating this relationship between the structural and the personal, Stenhouse (1975) coined the phrase ‘stories of action in theories of context’. This conceptual language was further developed by Goodson (2013) who emphasises the inherently and explicitly agentive nature of narratives and how stories become tools through which individuals attempt to navigate their intensions, desires or wishes amongst the structural forces that shape their lives. More recently, Goodson, Antikainen, Sikes and Andrews (2016, p.6) argue that:

… storytelling has always been a distinctive feature of humankind, so the recounting of narratives itself is nothing new but an immemorial practice. Rather the question becomes what sort of narratives are predominantly current and how are narratives being constructed and deployed in contemporary life.

It is this combination of a narrative being understood as a representation of a single life and a narrative being understood as a window into the social context within which it was constructed that is an important distinction. Goodson (2013, p.30) writes that “the great virtue of stories is that they particularize”, but an individualised story has very little power on its own. A narrative becomes powerful when seen as contextualised rather than individualised; where a story becomes a window to access the social construction of contemporary life. If we see stories as shaped by the contexts in which they are told, stories become more powerful.

This approach of an individual story opening access to a contextualised life is how narrative inquiry guides this research. Yet both these aspects bring strengths and challenges. The particularised nature of stories links with a poststructuralist stance, as it invites the contextual details of life to be explored that can be overlooked within neoliberal, homogenising standard discourses. Embracing the particularisation is important because, as Stronach (2010, p.172) suggests, it “empowers contradictions and lets history, ethics and desire back in”. Similarly, Bullough (2008) highlights a narrative approach as embracing openness and imagination but claims this can be a risky task, as portraying the mundane details of life can become just that – mundane and uninspiring. Just because the ‘storyteller’ or the researcher finds a story meaningful does not ensure a wider audience will, which leads us to the strengths of narrative research that seeks to understand wider contexts, through guiding principles or underlying generalisations.

In social science research, any generalisations will be ‘soft’ (Bullough 2008) which refers to guiding principles that hold resonance for others, such as conceptual resources or invisible structures, rather than ‘hard’ binding rules. Research that approaches and represents the lived world as a series of causal relationships or overarching principles finds strength in the ability to orientate people and offer a place to begin when considering new experiences, transitions, or career choices. Broad contexts or generalising principles offer some tools for individuals to forecast their lives, providing a window through which a link to an imagined future can be considered. However, this approach becomes dangerous when the simplified linkages or generalising principles are taken too tightly and dominate debates, where the complexity and nuanced nature of living becomes narrowed or lost. When embraced as a pair though, narrative stories can help find the limits of generalising principles; whilst generalising principles can offer a place to begin, a starting point for orientation when contemplating working lives, which can then be moved beyond and personalised by an individual’s agency.

Therefore, my rationale for using narrative inquiry was to gain insights, connections and perceptions about the participants’ own lives and career stories as early childhood professionals and to appreciate the wider social context of this reality. Or, as Bochner (2001, p.53) remarks,

“… it is not the facts themselves that one tried to redeem through narrative tellings. Rather it is an articulation of the significance and meaning of one’s experiences. It is within the frame of a story that facts gain their importance.”

According to Bochner (2001), the frame of a story becomes important, which means the approach, interpretation or style of narration an individual may use to express their narrative. How an individual may frame a story can be shaped by structural influences and/or a person’s own agency. Goodson, Loveless and Stephens (2012) researched how individual expression and narrativity is influenced by an already on-going socialisation of a country’s mode of being or citizenship – such as a country’s expression of how it views professionalism or work. The influence of an English understanding of professionalism shaped this research as it was based within England (see Chapter 4). Yet it is not just cultural capital that shapes storytelling but also an individual’s “narrative capital” (Goodson, Loveless and Stephens 2012, p.7) or ability to curate stories (Fernandes 2017). Active narration embraces a diversity in understanding how an individual would approach the task of storytelling, especially when related to their own working lives. Research by Goodson, Loveless and Stephens (2012) summarised that:

…there was a spectrum – from those people who essentially described their lives as something that happened to them – to others who elaborated their own story, drawing on a range of storylines and cultural resources to develop their own personal mosaic. … [People with] a kind of birth right script…were fine, but because they were unpractised in defining their own courses of action sharp transitions often left them in difficulty.

The capacity to elaborate a storyline, responding flexibly to emerging situations or life events especially for the promotion of a political narrative is explored by Fernandes (2017) through the Obama election campaign and subsequent administration, amongst other examples. But Fernandes (2017) also problematises the space of narrative storytelling, as there is a difference between abilities to curate stories and mobilising stories that deepen the work of social justice.

Overall though, the value of individual stories opening access to contextualised lives can enable an individual or “a subject to see not just the object it appears itself to have become, but to see the ongoing and constitutive force of language (with all its contradictions)” (Davies 1997, p.274). Within a narrative, possibilities are opened up or leakages emerge about the power of constitutive discourses that shape and inform an individual’s identity, to recognise how a human being is social constructed and subjectified, whilst also leaving space for “rebellious spontaneity” (Deleuze 1995, p.176) within the interactive particularities of life. This refers to identity and individual lives as a process of becoming, a life in the process of travel or movement, never fully captured by overarching categories (e.g. female, professional, teacher etc.), even when categories are considered in multiples. Pulsford (2016 p. 77) states “it is not a matter of adding up all the categories and calculating their sum”. Embracing life as becoming has “neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination” according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p.323), as an understanding of an individual is embraced as fluid, multiple, complex and never complete. It is this view of an individual as transient, constructed and always re-authoring him/herself, amongst the assembled forces that shape his/her experiences, that informs this research’s approach to narrative inquiry.

The approach to narrative storytelling within this research was also challenged by a move towards using visual narratives, locating this research on the edge of narrative methodologies. The next section considers the visual narrative methodology adopted for this research.

**4.3.2 -** **A Visual tool within narrative storytelling**

Literat et al. (2017, p.565) suggest that “we are witnessing a challenge to the hegemony of text-based knowledge in academic scholarship, brought about by newly available modes of expression and a cultural shift in our notions of reading and writing… and knowledge production”. Alternative forms of knowledge representations are being explored across a range of research fields (Sousanis 2016; Barry 2017; Mannay, Staples and Edwards 2017; Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Knight et al. 2016; Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006; Law 2004). Whilst the concept of a visual culture is not new (see Lacan 1978) there is a growing discourse problematising the use of narrative approaches and words alone as “highly insufficient and unsatisfying” (Klein and Miraglia 2017, p.25) when trying to convey the complexities and differentiated understandings of lived experiences. The use of visual narrative approaches aspires to capture some of this messy, non-linearity within research, which for this study, meant using drawing as a tool with participants before a narrative discussion.

Law (2004) has suggested that ‘method assemblages’ are a set of practices that make certain knowledges present and others absent. The implication of this here is that if we only have methods that allow for verbal articulations of things, things which cannot be verbalised will be ‘absented’. Discussing the use of different disciplines’ methods allows us to be reflexive around what specific method assemblages make ‘absent’.

(Woodward 2016, p.363).

Following this issue of absence, in his seminal text *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1979 p.77) argued for the multimodality of interactions, detailing the way social structures can “impress themselves through bodily experiences … as profoundly unconscious as the quiet caress of beige carpets or the thin clamminess of tattered, garish linoleum”. Visual narratives do not claim to capture bodily experiences but there are many challenges and lingering questions that remain about the multimodality of this methodology. This presents an interesting space for examination (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Literat et al. 2017; Vigurs and Kara 2016; Mannay 2010). I also align with Knight et al. (2016) who argue that the examination of creative methodologies becomes even more pertinent to research surrounding early childhood education and care as drawing is given high regard within early childhood practices and associated research, which is at odds with the dearth of activity investigating visual narratives involving early childhood professionals as participants.

Researching on the edge of a methodology is described as “a little unnerving” according to Knight et al. (2016, p.329) as it can involve making meaning through an unfamiliar process. Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018) also suggest that whenever we work or focus on unfamiliar processes in research, or society, we can experience elements of that un-familiarisation or marginalisation ourselves. To counteract some of these worries, the methodology of visual narratives used in this research aligns with the techniques or material engagement known as auteur theory (Rose 2001; Mannay 2010). Auteur theory centralises the meaning-making of participants and focuses on the participants’ understanding of the visual data they create. In this research, this approach was guided by the work of Mannay (2016, p.347) who stated that “to gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, it is imperative to acknowledge the image-maker; and the notion that the most salient aspect in understanding a visual image is what the creator intended”. The quality of the visual creations was not the focus: in this research drawing was the conduit for a social and communicative process enabling the expression of multiple positions, such as personal, professional and political stances within the current context of living and working as an early childhood professional.

Multimodal or art-based methodologies like visual narratives gain strength via their approach to working *with* participants (Mannay, Staples and Edwards 2017; Knight et al. 2016; Gauntlett and Holzwarth 2006; Fairey 2017). As a participatory approach to research, creativity is argued to stimulate a strong sense of support amongst the people involved (participants and researchers) where views are shared, and contributions valued, which can expand across past, present and future projections (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018). Vigurs and Kara (2016) describe creative participatory methods as able to contain conflicting narratives, which in this research study, meant that the visual drawing provided a holding space for a participant’s reflections on their life and work as an early childhood professional, before their verbal narrative expanded on certain stories and participants’ intended meanings. A space was opened for participants to express themselves in a broad range of different forms, where participants could go beyond a singular position and compile various vantage points in one drawing, whilst being able to (re)present (dis)connections simultaneously in ways which may not be easily verbalised.

Embracing elements of creative approaches to knowledge translation within a research methodology was characterised by uncertainty. Within the research subject, this uncertainty acted as a tool for defamiliarisation (Mannay 2016, p.1) – for me as a researcher and each participant – “making the familiar strange” again, as the early childhood professional was re-imaged through each visual narrative. As a research methodology, the uncertainty helped to problematise the space, opening up routes into multisensorial knowing and unsettling any simplistic understandings of visual methods that needed disrupting (Pink 2009).

The way participants engaged with the visual element of the method is considered within the data analysis chapter. But the use of materials and object storytelling is explored further within the next section.

**4.3.3** **Material storytelling**

The inclusion of artefacts, materials, or material objects within research approaches is a growing area of study within the critical post-humanities and especially within research about early childhood education and care (Braidotti 2018; Osgood and Ruby 2015; Hackett, Procter, and Kummerfeld 2018). Tools and materials such as small chairs, highchairs, junk play or carpets have been researched (Bone 2018; Bradley et al. 2012; Odegard 2012; Kim and Kim 2017; Hackett, Holmes, MacRae, Procter 2018) within early childhood studies to consider how “matter and meaning are mutually constituted” in the production of knowledge (Barad, 2007 p.152). Hackett et al (2018) argue for the active role played by place, space, time and materiality in sense-making:

the figure of a post-human child opens up new possibilities for thinking about children’s meaning-making... By taking non-human aspects and qualities more seriously, they acknowledge the way that place, matter and time are entangled with and act on human bodies. This approach recognises how research data that has remained stubbornly resistant to analysis when seen through well-trodden developmental frames, also has the power to ‘speak back’ and re-orient us in the ways that we conceptualise children.

This speaks to the posthumanist and new materialist approaches being utilised to rethink research within children, materials, place and space. These studies relate to Lenz Taguchi’s (2007) awareness of knowledge generation as inseparable from the materials used in an assemblage, and this approach was embraced as meaningful within this research study too.

MacLure (2013, p.231) believes that the “wonder of objects” can take us “to new places”, opening discursive possibilities within storytelling and aligning with poststructuralist, new materialist and posthumanist approaches to knowledge. As MacLure (2013, 2013b) advises, researchers cannot know where wonder resides, but this research approach was open to the opportunities that listening for the material world may foster, for a storyteller or a story receiver. For Arvidsen (2018, p.279) wonder emerged whilst researching den making and considering an approach to research as materially aware.

the analysis suggests that children’s relations to dens cut across taken-for-granted subject–object binaries and go beyond common notions of nature as inert materials. I find that dens are growing in an ever-becoming meshwork comprised by human and non-human intra-actions, and that agency or vitality can be ascribed broadly to the material world.

In order to envisage how this material thinking could work within the bricolage methodology informing the research, the following section outlines the key research questions being considered when exploring the career stories of early childhood professionals.

**4.4 Summarising the research questions**

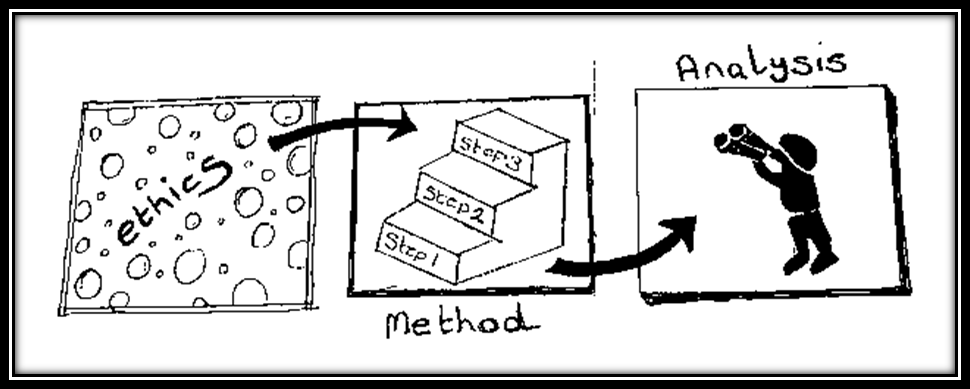
Illustrating the career stories of four early childhood professionals was the central purpose of this research, illuminating who they perceive themselves to be, and how they are affected by the work they do. Examining how early childhood professionals become early childhood professionals was a driving force that shaped these key research questions:

* What do early childhood professionals say about their lives and careers working in early childhood education and care?
* What professional transitions are identified by early childhood professionals as shaping their career trajectories and approaches to practice?
* What factors do early childhood professionals identify as influencing their professional transitions and career trajectories?
* (How) do early childhood professionals express their lives impacting on their practice, or their practice impacting on their lives?
* (How) can a bricolage of creative art based, poststructuralist, new materialist and posthumanist approaches contribute to the study of the lives and careers of early childhood education and care professionals?

To achieve an up-close understanding of how early childhood practices impact on the lives of professionals, and their lives impact on practice, the research took an affirmative approach informed by the methodological thinking explored in this chapter. My positionality shaped the research questions and how evidence, storytelling and knowledge construction was understood. Through a visual narrative methodology, knots of experience and the layered entanglements of cultures, materiality, space and affects (Moxnes and Osgood 2018) were embraced as possibilities that could be analysed within a single story. Making and aligning methodological decisions was not straightforward (Sikes 2004) nor was it a process solely confined to this chapter of the research process. The methodological implications of this research continued to be considered throughout the data analysis process, into the findings and implications chapter, and included within the contributions to knowledge proposed in this research.

Overall, the philosophical assumptions that influenced this research and my positionality as a researcher were crucial to the methodological decision-making processes. Yet, the implementation of these decisions was just as challenging as their conception. The following chapter considers how these methodological decisions shaped the method, ethics and analysis of data within this research.

**Chapter 5 –Ethics, methods and analysis**



(Postcard 5: Ethics, method, analysis)

**5.1 Introduction**

This chapter is informed and entangled with the previous literature review and methodology discussions and details the particularities of the research production, data collection and data analysis. The data were co-created with each individual participant using the same method, whilst being flexible to the needs of each person. Following a discussion about participant selection, the ethical approach is considered within the second section of this chapter, along with ongoing participant representation. The third section details how data were co-created with each individual participant. This involved working through a similar three-step process (preparation, discussion and re-looking) with each individual participant to co-create a visual narrative of their career story working and living in the early childhood education and care profession. The third section details the processes of data analysis, discussing the dilemmas of MacLure’s (2013, 2013a, 2013b) ideas about glowing data and how data can have ways of becoming intelligible to us.

In summary this chapter includes the following sections:

* 1. – Participant selection
  2. - Ethics
  3. - Data gathering methods
  4. - The processes of analysis
  5. - In summary

5.2 Participant selection

When the research was first being devised, many decisions were not straightforward (Sikes 2004) but the remit of the participants required for the study was relatively pre-defined by the research subject. The participants required for this research were early childhood professionals, which within an English context (DFE 2017) is defined as practitioners with at least a level 3 qualification (or equivalent) as this is the minimum English requirement for a qualified early childhood professional. These participants would have experiences of living and working within the field of early childhood education and care, so they could speak to the research aims and objectives. The length of experience required by early childhood professionals to become participants was not stated in terms of time, as every story is considered unique and able to offer valuable insight into exploring the research aims.

The research was initially designed to have a small number of participants, with 5-6 people stated on the research application approved by the university. This small number of participants was due to nuanced experiences and understandings sought by the research. Many researchers (Goodson, Sikes, Andrews, and Antikainen, 2016; Liamputtong and Ezzy 2005) agree that research needs to have an appropriate sample to meet the needs of the study, although there is less clarity about how this should be achieved. During the course of the research, I found that four participants created enough data to achieve the aims of the research and began to feel anxious that more participants would limit the depth of analysis. Therefore, the research became focused on the career stories of four participants – Sarah, Tony, Charlotte and Kate.

The four participants were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2011; Hickson 2015) that included contacting early childhood professionals within my networks and using invitations sent to direct emails. In line with the BERA (2018, p.13) guidelines, “dual roles” were also considered as a source of explicit tensions in areas such as confidentiality, so participants were approached and chosen away from any other projects taking place at the time of the study involving myself as a researcher, lecturer or explicit power relationship. Potential participants were able to discuss taking part without any obligation to proceed, and it was made clear to participants that they could withdraw at any point without needing to provide explanation.

5.3 - Ethics

In line with the university’s ethical approval process and the BERA (2018) guidelines, a participant information sheet and a consent letter detailed the research study (see Appendix 1), and I signed these documents as well as each participant before any data were gathered. These documents detailed issues regarding the confidential and anonymous treatment of data co-produced with participants, and this was also a subject discussed in person. Each participant became identified via a pseudonym and anonymity regarding the visual task was discussed in order to negotiate an ethical course of action. No personalised, identifying information was to be included in the participants’ visual tasks, yet when discussing a career map with one participant, it became clear that there was information included that could become ‘risky’. In discussion with the participant, an ethical course of action was agreed where I traced over the image to reproduce it, except for the three words which could become an identifying label. This highlights the potential trickiness of exploring visual methods or participatory methodologies and the benefit of working towards an ethics of engagement (Pickering and Kara 2017).

It was not only the visual task that needed careful thought in terms of presenting and re-presenting the stories created. Cunliffe (2017 p.13) cites Ricoeur (1992) to propose that “there are no ethically neutral narratives because our research and writing is replete with our assessments and choices about what to do and say”. These choices involve the ethics of representation in relation to participants and this was a constant presence throughout the research, whilst also bound up with future readers and audiences. “The presentation of research is always embedded in relations of power” according to Pickering and Kara (2017, p.303), and I interpreted this to include how I wrote about each participant, as well as how I will speak about each participant in future conferences, events or papers. With this in mind, the participant information sheet, consent letter and discussions with participants included how the co-created data could be used after this initial research. Critical to these discussions was the concept of authenticity, where I would aspire to convey each participant’s experiences authentically. Yet authenticity is complex and variable. An ethics of engagement enabled these complexities to be considered from the start of the research process and will continue beyond the study into future disseminations.

These considerations of ethics are focused on the human participants within this study and I felt this was most suitable at this time following the university’s ethical approval process and the BERA (2018) guidelines. Other ethical perspectives that deploy post-humanist thinking decentres the human and instead insists upon a worldly ethic-onto-epistemological response-ability (Barad, 2007). This approach considers the ethics of human and non-human beings that intra-actively co-constitute the world, with ethics not restricted to human-human encounters because the boundaries of the human are continually being reconfigured. This post humanist thinking regarding ethics does shape part of the bricolage methodology and highlights the complexities of ethical engagements.

**5.4 Data gathering methods**

This section explores the methods used to co-create the career stories of four individual professionals working and living within the field of early childhood education and care. In addition to the ethical processes detailed above, the approach to co-creating the data with each participant involved a three-step process. This process was followed in the same order with each participant, whilst being flexible enough to accommodate individual needs and bespoke timescales as required. Pickering and Kara (2017) and Fletcher (2017, p.4) suggest this responsiveness to individual participants allows ethics to be embedded into the research design, as a “continual and emergent communicative act”, whereby ethical decision-making is situational.

**5.4.1 - Step one: Preparation**

The first step began with a review of the research process, confirming the (formal university) ethical procedures and discussing the participants’ right to withdraw from the research at any time (BERA 2018). From these early discussions, I really liked the four participants who were involved with this research. This was not because they shared ‘good’ stories, but they were warm, generous, interesting people and I genuinely enjoyed each reciprocal discussion (Trainor and Ahlgren Bouchard 2013). This thinking about reciprocity connects with one of the definitions used within feminist research methodologies, “where the placement and recognition of the researcher [is acknowledged] as a subject who exists in the same moment as the subject matter she is researching (Harding 1987; McCormick 2012, p.23). Whilst this study is not solely located within a feminist research methodology, this comment about reciprocity is an example of the bricolage type approach to adopting notions, approaches and theories as they work for this study. I do not know if this reciprocity was enhanced by the visual element of the method, but no participant was perturbed when they were asked to create a map, drawing or visual representation of their working life within the early childhood education and care profession. The participants were asked to make their visual image for the next time we met (step two) when the participants would discuss their creation and explain their thinking.

During this first discussion, I explained my perception and reasoning for the use of visual methods as a way for them to step back from their everyday activities and reflect on their working lives. The visual task allowed for participants to pause-think-reflect and then make via a drawing, doodle, or creation. This time for reflection is acknowledged by other visual researchers (Pink 2011; Mannay 2016, Davies 2014) as a space where possibilities (e)merge, where participants think about representing their experiences of the world before sharing them verbally or spontaneously. This visualisation process is a method I had used before with professionals in a variety of contexts and I was aware it could elicit a deeply personal response and some initial scepticism. These previous experiences helped me understand if participants were comfortable to proceed with the research and informed my decision to *ask* participants to ‘create a map, drawing or visual representation’ of their life and work. This keeps open an element of choice for the participants about how to proceed with the visual task. Mannay (2016) and Fairey (2017) stress the ethical need to ensure participants are comfortable with engaging in creative tasks, and I was aware that drawing may have seemed odd or uncommon to some participants when compared to the more dominant counterpart of using words. The focus was not on artistic talent, but on a participant’s freedom of expression and their own explanation of their creation. The option not to take part was always available and what Vigurs and Kara (2016, p.1) describe as “improvised methodologies” during creative research was always an option, where alternative approaches would have been embraced if proposed by a participant.

To aid with the visual task, three examples of maps, drawings and visual representations were available if the participants wanted some inspiration, with one participant taking up this option. These examples were made available if a participant thought they would be helpful, rather than as a routine procedure, because examples can sometimes limit a participant’s imagination and confine them to a certain style, which was not the intention of having examples available. The map, drawing or visual representation was positioned as the first-step in the process of data creation as it represented non-linear ways of knowing, or the messy processes of knowing (Law 2003) that were being valued within the research. As Law (2003) argues, this tool may have created a mess, that seemed vague or unruly to some people, but the map, drawing or visual representation created by each participant was not taken in isolation; it was for elicitation. Once each participant had taken some time (a day, a week, a month) to create their visual map, the next discussion involved each participant explaining their visual image – step two of the data gathering process.

**5.4.2** **Step two: Discussion**

Following step one in which each participant created a visual image of their working lives, step two was a verbally recorded conversation or narrative that began with a discussion about what they had created. The starting point for step two of data creation involved me asking the same open question – tell me about your image? This starting point acted as an invitation for the participant to speak about their creation. I would say little during this time. I would listen. Unhurried listening made me consciously consider my body language and allow silences to be valued and unfilled. It was a challenge, as understanding when and how to prompt further discussion is a complex task. I did not want to interrupt a participant’s flow of ideas, and articulation requires pauses in conversation. Yet I was consciously aware of not making any pauses seem too long, or unfulfilled without a purpose. This approach to listening connects with Davies’ (2014 p.1) work which considers “an openness to being different in one’s encounters” and how relating to the position of the participants would help to inform my own actions*.* I started to use the language that each participant used – for example a map rather than an image – and I spoke about areas of a map in the same terms used by a participant.

As a participant shared their thoughts, I asked questions to clarify ideas, I probed for further understanding, and we worked through this process together. Sometimes events from a participant’s visual image were explored in detail and, on other occasions, the image became a catalyst for accessing wider events and professional transitions not captured in the drawing. Sometimes the discussion focused on events from the past, whilst some conversations spent more time discussing current situations. As Clandinin (2007) suggest, using narrative conversations as the method enabled choices to be made in the moment, inspired and shaped by both the participant and the researcher’s past experiences.

Step two of the method was verbally recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed shortly afterwards. Each participant was asked about using the Dictaphone at the start of the discussion and it was left clearly visibly in front of us. Each participant was reminded at the start of the conversation that we could stop for a break or stop the verbal recording at any time without the need to explain (Cohen et al. 2011). If there were aspects of a topic which a participant did not want to discuss, or the researcher felt a subject was uncomfortable for a participant, these boundaries were respected.

Each discussion lasted less than two hours and ended on a positive topic. Each participant was thanked for their time and contributions. At the end of this step-two discussion, each participant had the opportunity to asked questions, before step-three of the research process was recapped and future timescales agreed.

**5.4.3 Step three: Re-looking**

Step three of the method involved transcribing the verbal conversation and electronically copying the visual image, before these data were shared with each participant, allowing them to agree the content and make any changes as required.

In line with the guidance from BERA (2018) and the university’s ethical approval process, after each verbal recording, the file was transferred from the Dictaphone to a password protected system as soon as possible. This is where all data were stored. All the information created with each participant during the course of the research was kept strictly confidential. To address this, during the transcription process, any identifiable characteristics were altered so a participant could not be identified in any transcriptions, with the participant’s chosen pseudonym used. Furthermore, when participants received copies of the transcribed conversation, each person was asked to further adapt any aspects of the script that they felt could still reveal their identity or they were not fully comfortable including. Participants were able to discuss any of the content or their reflections on being part of this research. This process of agreeing transcription is described by Hickson (2015) as a process of clarification and approval. Within this research design, if the participant and researcher agreed, aspects of these reflective discussions could be included as data and used to enhance the analysis process or debate the findings of the research methodology. McMillan and Gordon (2016) used a similar process when clarifying narrative data with participants and found the ability to include these discussions as beneficial data sources, but only with participants’ approval.

All four of the participants replied when the visual narrative data were shared with them and all participants agreed the content. Each participant was thanked again for their contributions. Contact details were checked or updated in case any future communications were required. The four career stories – consisting of visual and narrative data – co-created between the researcher and each of the four participants were then analysed individually through a process of data analysis.

**5.5 The processes of analysis**

This section explains how data analysis was approached in this research. This follows on from the data collection section and remains consistent with the overarching theoretical framework and research questions. When discussing data analysis, MacLure (2013a p.660) writes that researchers “are no longer autonomous agents, choosing and disposing [of data]. Rather, we are obliged to acknowledge that data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us”. Through the work of MacLure (2013, 2012a, 2013b), I understood that the researcher, the participants and the research materials all (e)merged in the same moment, via an “intra-active entanglement” (Allen 2015, p.950) and this is a description that summarises how I came to appreciate the process of data analysis. The process of re-organising data – from transcription through to summarising and (re)presenting each of the four stories – involved moments of wonder and discovery where data ‘glowed’ for me (MacLure 2013b). Yet, I have to acknowledge that another researcher may have engaged differently with the data, followed different ideas and become entangled in alternative thoughts through the relationship of “data-and-researcher” (MacLure 2013, p. 228). My process of interpretation is discussed in the next section, to illustrate how I engaged with data, developing and refining analysis that was speculative and intuitive, and shaped by affective charges, wonder, serendipity.

**5.5.1 - Analysis informed by the theoretical framework**

In this research, the stories co-created with four early childhood professionals were analysed in line with the approaches taken throughout the study. Adopting a poststructuralist perspective and a bricolage methodology the aim was not to control and define knowable evidence as an objective connector of ideas, but to ride the waves of slippy, uncertain possibilities and to ‘know by being’ involved with the data. “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world” (Barad 2007, p.185, Davies 2014). What Barad calls the practice of knowing in being, and my being – my reading/ seeing/ imagining/sensing – was interwoven with the analysis of this data. This means that the relations between the participants, the research materials and me as the researcher all contributed to the stories created, and in adopting a diffractive approach to analysis, it is acknowledged that alternating any of these elements would have created other possibilities and imaginings.

The data were co-constructed through the entangled relation of data-and-participant-and-myself-as-researcher (MacLure 2013a) and similarly the data were analysed in a relational way, with a focus on the data material that exerted a kind of fascination to me. Data had the “capacity to animate further thought” (MacLure 2013, p.228) and whilst these thoughts may be different for each individual, “our task is to experiment and see where that takes us” (MacLure 2013, p.231). This experiment began with the data organisation.

**5.5.2 Data-and-myself**

After meeting with each of the four participants, the visual images co-produced with participants were scanned for electronic storage. When discussing narratives, Silverman (2017) draws on the work of Holstein and Gubrium (2016) to reinforce the view that conversations are interactional accomplishments and that any robust analysis must begin with robust transcription. This process needed to preserve the serve and return of the conversations, along with any pauses, nonverbal responses or overlaps in speech. Enacting this approach was challenging when transcribing verbal sounds into written forms. Representing a pause in speech was not fully captured by an ellipsis, as this lost the length of the pause, or the visual interactions that may have occurred during such a pause. However, transcription acknowledged the entanglement of a participants’ speech and my own contributions as the researcher, respecting the choreography of interactions and the interactional nature of the account. Furthermore, following Silverman’s (2017, pp.151-2) advice, it was through the on-going engagement with the data that each of the four stories gained their identifying characteristics, instead of drawing upon pre-defined identities to describe the participants.

When researchers choose particular identity-characteristics to offer their reader… (age, occupation, marital status, and offspring) they neglect numerable others (number of friends, siblings, leisure activities). … The attempt to link pre-defined identities to what people say has its home in quantitative research.

With this theory in mind, each participant’s chosen pseudonym and identity characteristics were those evoked by the participants during their interactions.

Following transcription, the data haunted me. Data were ever present in my thoughts, in my sleep, creeping in to everyday events. Thinking about and processing the data was an activity that I never became abstracted from (MacLure 2013). I was in the ‘middle’ of the entanglement created in the moment that I met each participant and that ‘middle’ remained with me until I found my way with(in) the data, finding ways to account for and interpret our relational entanglement. This process is the focus for the next section.

**5.5.3 Processes of analysing data**

After transcription and the scanning of visual images, a process of repeated reading began. Research in ECEC by Cousins (2016) and earlier Page (2013) both endorse a slow, recursive approach to re-reading narratives to establish a critical, analytical approach. This idea of a slow method of analysis was something I experienced in the early stages as I lived with the data, because I felt I was not ready to begin unpicking data in a logical or considered way. I wanted some time to sit amongst and absorb each visual narrative, with no “rigid purpose or fixed terminus” (MacLure 2013b, p.164). Yet I became aware that by acknowledging a slow approach to analysing data and seeking themes I was confirming the passivity of data and (re)prioritising my position as a researcher – with control over the speed of engagement. I was trying to fix the data in a place by slowing the analysis down to aid my own understanding.

A sea change occurred when I realised that the data were still moving during this time; the data assemblage was living and moving with me. The data were still ‘becoming’ with/in/ me, rather than me “digging behind or beyond or beneath [data], to identify higher order meanings, themes or categories” (MacLure, 2013a p.660) that I could justify as a considered method of analysis (reasoned through interpretation, classification and representation). The movement and chaotic richness of data had engulfed me. The data were no longer “an inert and indifferent mass”. In a materialist ontology, researchers are “no longer autonomous agents, choosing and disposing [of data]. Rather, we are obliged to acknowledge that data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us” (MacLure, 2013a, p.660). I began to appreciate that it was the intra-action that mattered, the relations that produced certain knowledge and that knowing was “in being” (Barad 2007, p.185).

During the analysis, both the visual and narrative data were considered together, entangled with each other, and fragments of data began to be labelled with tentative interpretations that made themselves intelligible to me. A diffractive approach was deployed to analysing the data, that was iterative and non-linear. Diffraction is described by Barad (2007, p.30) as not fixing “what an object is and what the subject is in advance, … diffraction involves reading insights through one and another in ways that help illuminate differences as they emerge.” Davies (2007, p.2) deploys diffraction within her work and writes that it is the researcher’s ‘intervention’ and analytic work with that data that is the key – it is an ongoing production. Diffraction “does not try to fix those processes so that they can be turned into a methodical set of steps to be followed. Rather it opens the possibility of seeing how something different cones to matter.”

I began to learn from the ruptures within the narratives. Inspired by Silverman (2017), I began to analyse the way positions were adopted or conceptual structures were utilised through what was said or not said, drawn or not drawn. Within stretches of talk, the warrants were analysed, with warrants meaning the justification for a course of action or the reasonings for a line of thought. Questioning the local function of such a warrant, in that position amongst the data, began to open-up access to both agency and structural reasonings used by a participant. Sometimes I found this a challenge and finding the outcome of a stretch of talk and then working backwards towards a warrant helped the analysis process.

Also, aligning with my interest in visual thinking, connections were made through mapping or drawing with data in a multi-directional manner. This approach allowed my position in the ‘middle’ of these data to be visualised. The middle is “the necessity of plunging into particularity, of getting down and dirty in the empirical details” (Taylor 2013, p.701). From the middle, I re-read extracts of glowing data (MacLure 2013) which kept pulling me in, which led me to question my place within these data – and with this particular glowing data. I began to avoid interpretive questions (such as, what does this mean?) and began to embrace the uncertain questions (such as, how does this work, or what does this data produce) which was more closely aligned with the framework underpinning the research.

In tandem with analysing data, a process of refining occurred to reduce the data to four individual career stories (see Chapter 6). Each story is organised in the same order in which the conversations unfolded, but the analysis became more than the participants’ visual narratives; through a process of diffractive analysis each story became my interactions with each of the visual narratives that were initially co-created with the four participants. The analysis of these stories is shared in the next chapter.

**5.6 In summary**

In summary, this chapter has detailed the particularities and processes undertaken in this research to create an ethical study, that shares a transparent method and a serendipitous and personalised approach to data analysis. The dilemmas of research are discussed with support from MacLure (2013, 2013a, 2013b) and Silverman (2011), and the approaches taken are justified within the context and remit of the study.

Building from the processes discussed in this chapter, the narratives co-constructed with four early childhood professionals as they discuss their life and work are shared in the next chapter. Each narrative – Sarah’s, Tony’s, Charlotte’s and Kate’s – are presented and analysed individually and seek to gain a deeper understanding of how early childhood professionals become early childhood professionals, and question if life influences work and work influences life.

**Chapter 6: Analysing data**



**(Postcard 6: Four visual career stories)**

**6.1 - Introduction**

This chapter analyses the visual narratives co-constructed with four early childhood professionals working and living in England. The stories shared by Sarah, Tony, Charlotte and Kate are each analysed individually, and each section begins with their visual creation and an introduction to their working lives as early childhood professionals.

In summary, this chapter includes the following sections:

6.2 - Sarah, paint, spaces, vulnerability, luck: “…working with children is more than work for me; it’s something different every day. I may be helping the children to learn and explore but they are doing the same things for me too.”

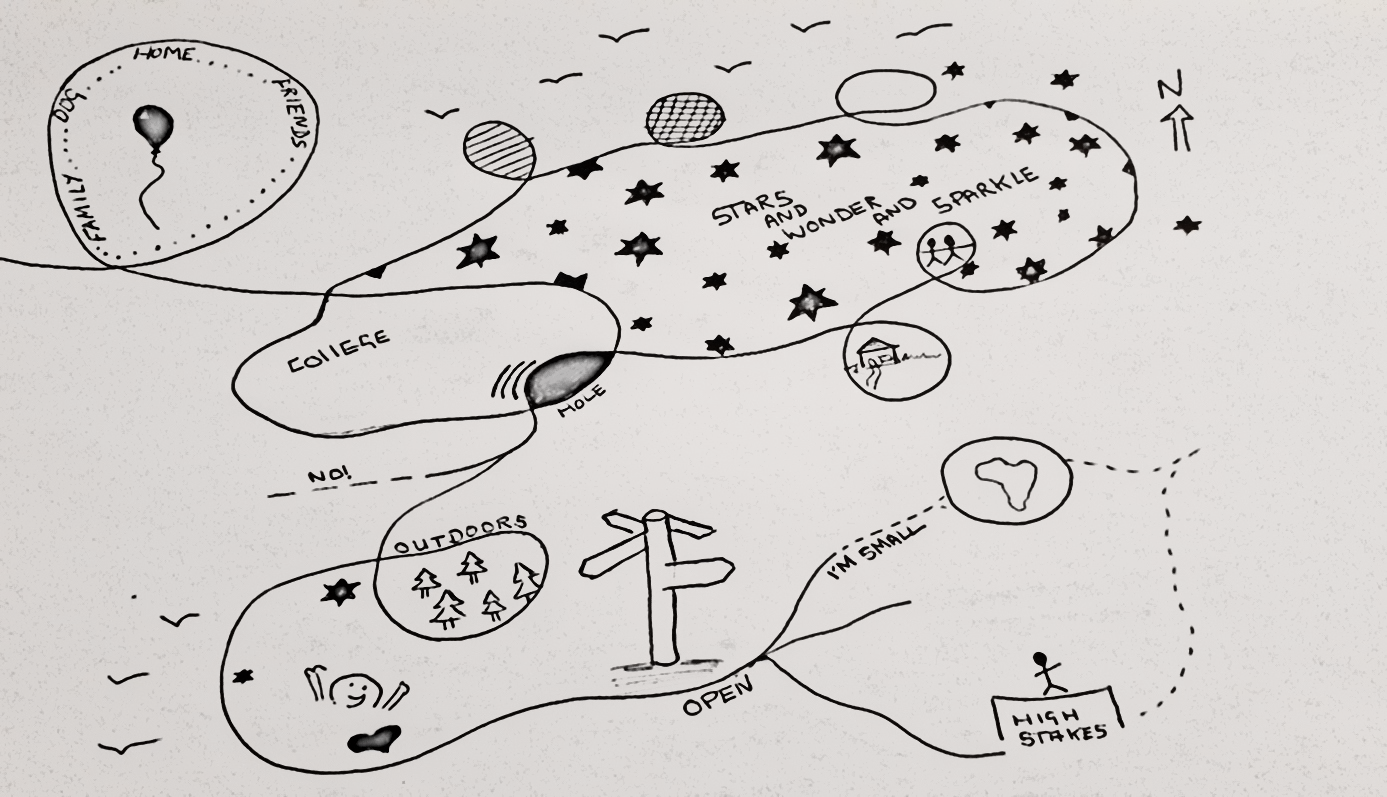
6.3 – Tony, map, death, stereotypes, shoes: “My big thing, being a male working in early years, is that I have come across a lot of hostility … I want to contribute to changing people’s perceptions. … I have a focus … this is who I am now, and this is reflected in what I wear. I haven’t bought a pair of trainers in 12 months... I walk around in shoes; my feet hurt constantly.”

6.4 - Charlotte, family, connectedness, hope, illustration: “I look for new ways I can develop the staff through what they have a talent for. I want my staff to stay. ... I want to help their work fit in with their wider lives and lives fit with their work … We used to try and say that what happens at home stays at home; we tried to work that way, just come to work, get on with work. But if it’s working with children that is not an approach that works.”

6.5 - Kate, passion, two ladies, qualifications, achievement, social networking: “I didn’t want to be excellent in tennis and train those to become more excellent, that wasn’t it for me; I wanted to see the young children achieve and follow on from that achievement. … It’s a passion to make a difference … Follow your passion, I think; follow what is important to you. That’s why people should work with young children; it needs society getting a bit political and needs to be a vocation that is valued.”

**6.2 Sarah, paint, spaces, vulnerability, luck**

**“…working with children is more than work for me; it’s something different every day. I may be helping the children to learn and explore but they are doing the same things for me too.”**



**6.2.1 Introduction**

This section analyses the visual narrative co-constructed with Sarah. Sarah described herself as an early childhood professional working with 2-3-year-old children (toddlers), and their families, within a private nursery. Part of Sarah’s responsibilities included leading the provision for the 2-3-year-old children; in Sarah’s words this meant she needed to ‘organise the spaces so they work well for the children and families and practitioners... (She had) key children to support and an overview of the staff’. Analysis of Sarah’s visual narrative is presented through three linked sections. The first section explored Sarah’s perception of an early childhood professional as continually becoming (Fairchild 2017; Hakim and Dalli 2016; Deluze and Guattari 1987), where her lived experiences and everyday knowledge were actively constructed and reconstructed amongst theoretical knowledge, to shape her approaches to life and work. The second section explored how Sarah’s sense of belonging within and as part of the nursery’s community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991; Ratner, et al. 2017) was a factor that influenced her professional transitions and the narration of her professional trajectory. Furthermore, it seemed the interdependent relationship between Sarah and the nursery environment enabled a mutually supportive ownership of vulnerability, where the nursery culture embodied support for Sarah and Sarah supported the embodiment of nursery culture. Owning vulnerability is explored as the third section, before I end with a summary emphasising how multiple, fragmented and socially produced knowledge (Campbell-Barr 2017) shaped the ways in which Sarah narrated, acted upon, and made sense of her life and work within ECEC.

**6.2.2 A professional who is continually becoming**

I met Sarah in the evening after she finished work. She arrived apologising for her paint-splattered appearance and as she invited me towards her to see the small droplets on her jumper, it was her enthusiasm and passion that also drew me closer to her. By offering (unnecessary) words of apology for the paint, this action also afforded Sarah the chance to present herself to me as someone who had enjoyed her day with children. It gave Sarah an opening to share her delight in experiencing powder paints being mixed by two-year-old children, which also highlighted the types of knowledge she valued. Hakim and Dalli (2016, p.3) refer to this as “the essential insights about the lived experiences” of being an early childhood professional and the behaviours that are socially valued as part of her professional reality. I began to worry how research using a single image and one conversation would (re)present Sarah’s lived experiences. Yet I found Sarah’s ever-evolving sense of self and continual professional becoming radiated throughout our conversation, beginning with her opening description of her drawing (located at the start of Sarah’s section):

I loved doing this [drawing]; it really made me think about what I wanted to add and what was important, but then I started to think about how I wanted things presented and ordered so I could explain things to you. I started with a line, but really, I made spaces, spaces of my life. … I started with my childhood, my mum, my friends [top left of the drawing] and I saw that as being important because everything I am, the way I think, grew from those years. There was no ‘event’ as such but I wanted to recognise that part of my life, so I started taking a line for a walk and I started there. … I think of that time as being free, floating and exploring but still connected. I knew my family wouldn’t let me get lost and float off into the night sky! Then I went to college and studied early childhood for my level 3 (qualification).

There are many possible readings and interpretations of any story, including Sarah’s. One reading of this extract suggests that the drawing of a balloon helped represent the freedom that Sarah valued from her own childhood which informed her work now as an early childhood professional. This supports Britzman’s (2003, p.1) assertion that “teaching is one of the few professions where newcomers feel the force of their own history of learning as if it telegraphs relevancy to their work”. A second reading notices that Sarah chose to verbally explain her own thought processes as she considered how to make this representation of her life and work. Sarah chose to explain how she sensed the image, how she thought about the order and connection of ideas, and how she visually and cognitively considered how the image may be perceived by myself (and maybe yourself) as a reader. This suggests an awareness of constructing herself as an early childhood professional in that moment, but a moment that would be re-interpreted by others too. By verbalising her thought processes, Sarah demonstrated an ethic of care, which Witherell and Noddings (1991) and Page (2014) describe as attentiveness, responsibility or compassion to stand in the shoes of another and to help meet their needs. Drawing on Campbell-Barr’s (2017) work, Sarah was making decisions grounded in the current context, rather than applying particular pre-defined Kantian rules of what is considered right or wrong conduct. This may suggest an insight into Sarah’s relational perspective, by which I mean an awareness of being part of a network of relationships and an active participant in shaping knowledge which is less dependent on technocratic measures.

A fourth reading of this extract suggests that Sarah also demonstrated her experiences of understanding documentation – such as drawing or story-telling – as material with meaning, where materials are active agents intermingling in the construction of knowledge (Barad 2008; Lenz Taguchi 2010). An awareness of the potential for tools and non-human materials – such as small chairs, highchairs, junk play and carpets – to amalgamate with human interpretations and make new possibilities or connections is discussed within ECEC by Bone (2018), Bradley et al. (2012), Odegard (2012) and Kim and Kim (2017) respectively. These research studies build upon Lenz Taguchi’s (2007, p.278) awareness of knowledge generation as inseparable from the materials used in the assemblage:

We are already speaking and performing theory into existence of practice … as we talk and materialize ourselves as teachers into existence… as we handle books, learning-material, furniture … that are themselves already constituted by knowledge.

When Sarah showed consideration for the use of patterns and how she made marks with the pen on the paper – ‘I started with a line, but really, I made spaces… spaces of my life’ – Sarah showed an active understanding of how everything, including materials and shapes, had significance in her experience of assembling and sharing knowledge. By ‘everything’ I mean her knowledge-base, relationships, and interactions with human and non-human tools accessible at that moment. Sarah showed an awareness for not only what she drew but the way she drew the marks too – the shapes, the patterns, the spaces. By demonstrating an awareness of the multiple and competing discourses involved in her use of the materials – the visual narrative – she demonstrated knowledge of continual becoming, continually being (re)made, and that one such becoming would be the representation she made of herself in this image.

The multiple readings of how Sarah described her drawing and approached the creation of her drawing indicate that Sarah viewed herself in a process of becoming, where her “identity is in constant flux rather than being seen as fixed or stable” (Fairchild 2017, p.3; Arndt et al. 2018). Deleuze and Gauttari (1987, p.239) describe becoming “as a verb with consistency all its own”, a doing word that expresses a process rather than a being. For example, Sarah was active and productive in curating the impact of her family history on her current work as an early childhood professional, but Sarah was also aware that the creation of the visual narrative was another re-make of her continual professional becoming. This demonstrated autonomy and creativity which are skills that Hakim and Dalli (2016) found as ‘expectations’ amongst the ‘insider’ understanding of early childhood professional pedagogy but which is debated within technicist expectations of qualifications (Osgood 2012; Campbell-Barr2017).

Sarah discussed the impact of technicist knowledge in her work with young children when recognising her time in college achieving a level 3 qualification (the minimum level to be considered a qualified professional working with children in England) (DFE 2017). Yet this was only one of the competing discourses that informed her knowledge base for working with young children, as Sarah also discussed her subjective experiences:

… I liked that [College] but I liked the hands-on experiences with the children more. I went full time to college and in placement for two days per week in a nursery (0-5-year-old children). My placement turned into a full-time job and this is the wonder and sparkle and all the stars (on the drawing). I love it. The three shapes above the stars are to show that I tried other work whilst I was studying – I needed the money – but they were smaller things to me, so I show that in size. They made me realise how lucky I was to work with children in the nursery. … I have been at the nursery for five years, just over, and I started as an early years practitioner whilst at college … and now I lead the toddlers’ spaces (2-3-year-old children approximately). … Working with children is more than work for me; it’s something different every day. I may be helping the children to learn and explore but they are doing the same things for me too. I get new things every day, new experiences. Maybe that’s why I drew stars, like the night sky, you never know what you are going to get, but it’s always wonder.

Here Sarah attempts to make sense of her experiences by playing with “multiple discourses that compete with one another for a dominant position in providing language and frameworks to describe… lived experience” (Kim and Kim 2017, p. 292). Sarah entangles the discourses of qualifications and practical experience, but drawing on the work of Deluze and Guattari (1987), Fairchild (2017, p.9) describes these binary discourses as segments “that form flexible operations of ordering and control, but can also interfere with each other, creating complex spaces of navigation”. The qualifications and training pathway for the ECEC workforce in England implies a segmentary, linear route moving from novice, to student on placement, to paid professional employment, and this segmented revealing is present in Sarah’s narrative. Yet she ruptures these segments with experiences of work beyond ECEC and insights into the economic reality of her world – ‘I needed the money’. This interconnectedness of slippery discursive experiences shows an openness to continual ‘professional becoming’ (Arndt et al. 2018; Strom and Martin 2017; Fairchild 2017; Deleuze and Gauttari 1987), by which I mean an ever-moving process that embraces both the rigid segments of qualifications and practical experience with children, whilst remaining bonded through the messy navigation of a person’s life.

Sarah could also be viewed as resisting a rigid construction of order and control as an early childhood professional through her verbal and visual representations or descriptions of space – ‘they [other jobs] were smaller things to me, so I show that in size [on the drawing compared to her work in ECEC]’. Or again when describing ‘the wonder and sparkle and all the stars’ as a summary of her work in the toddlers’ spaces with young children. Sarah’s descriptions embrace a messy entanglement of sizes, shapes, textures, expanse, movements, distances, perspectives and differences when narrating her life and work in ECEC. This could be perceived as embracing movement, fluidity and an ongoing process of becoming (Deleuze and Gauttari 1987) as a person and a professional, rather than a segmentary linear understanding of knowledge (in qualifications, for example).

Another reading of this extract may suggest that the practice in Sarah’s work setting, how the nursery produces itself and creates a culture, may also have influenced the way Sarah makes sense of her life beyond ECEC. This sense of community emerged when I asked Sarah about her use of the term ‘spaces’.

**6.2.3 Becoming whilst belonging to an evolving more-than-human community**

I asked Sarah about her use of the term ‘spaces’ as this was used to describe the drawing of her career-life trajectory and her descriptions of the physical areas, materials and forces within the nursery. Sarah’s response indicated that work terminology had seeped into the way she sought to make sense of her life beyond ECEC.

Well some nurseries say toddler rooms, but a while ago, a few years, we had open free flow play [where children can move between indoors and outdoor play as they choose] and the term toddler ‘room’ didn’t seem to fit anymore. We were using labels that didn’t fit what we did, so the nursery still uses age groups, but we talk about spaces rather than rooms. Indoors, outdoors, family spaces, children’s spaces, our spaces. … I called this space wonder and sparkle [on the drawing] because that’s what it is. My work is messy; I can be tired after a long week, but the families are worth it. The stars are different sizes for different children and different interests and needs. I drew a big space as this takes up a lot of my life. I work full time but more than that my work shapes how I live, and I live around how I choose to work.

Transformations in the nursery to the physical layout, materials, flow and associated terminology has seeped into the way Sarah is choosing to make sense of her life beyond ECEC. By layout, materials and flow I mean the affective forces within the nursery as a more than human community, because in diffractive analysis Sarah is not the only agent – others include toddlers, regulations to abide by, free flow, play, indoors, outdoors, mess, colleagues, wonder, sparkle – each is overlapping, without a clear beginning or an end. “Ideas and matter simply affect each other… each action we engage in and each interpretation is, therefore, an ethical matter and mattering,” according to Davies, who draws on the work of Barad (2007).

This reading supports the earlier ideas that Sarah views herself as something being constantly reproduced, but the change in terminology (from rooms to spaces) following a rethink of nursery practice also led to (unintended) personal consequences. This may not have been intended as a career-shaping encounter, but reflections and reforms do not just change what people do, they change a person’s lived experiences, they can change their environment and materials, all with the potential to change who they are becoming (Collet-Sabe 2016; Leach 2016). Sarah’s working environment – the nursery, the flooring, the walls, the air, the resources for children, the entrance for families, the staff room – was part of an assemblage that shaped her lived experiences. This professional change in terminology may not have registered as a ‘career developing behaviour’ (Prior and Bright 2014), but this does highlight the linkages between early childhood professionals seeking to make sense of their lives and careers working in ECEC. This also highlights that unlike Prior and Bright’s (2014) theorisation, it is not just people that can affect and develop human behaviour in communities. In the words of Barad, “mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance” (Barad 2007, p.3).

The theorisation of work communities was also developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) who proposed establishing a community of practice to embrace collaboration, co-operation and reciprocal relationships through the process of sharing information and experiences, benefiting the professional development of individuals, settings and professions. Wenger (1998, p.232) described learning in a community of practice as “the right people … at the right place in the right kind of relation to make something happen”, and this was advocated as an approach within ECEC settings by Ratner et al. (2017). For Sarah, being a member of the nursery and their reflective approach to practice – by belonging as a member co-creating a community of practice – she may also have learned how to reflect on and reconfigure her own identity as a professional who is continually becoming. Within a school setting, Barnatt et al. (2017, p.23) describe this interconnection as an evolving self within an evolving community. “In a very pragmatic way, … [the teacher] embodied the ways of speaking, acting and interacting … within the social and cultural construct of their figured … environment.” Yet the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), Ratner et al (2017) and Barnatt et al. (2017) keeps the focus upon the human agents within communities of practice, with less attention to the more-than-human influences that shape a community. If I listen/read differently to what Sarah shared, I begin to notice the movement of many materials and matter that make up the community *within* which Sarah is one of many agents. There is an unfolding and a co-creating of experience that Sarah could not have accomplished without the human and more-than-human community.

I summarise Sarah’s connection with the nursery in the term ‘belonging’ to represent an acceptance of Sarah being part of the setting and the setting responding to Sarah, where both are separate and co-joined. A reciprocal and co-dependant relationship existed, fluid and dynamic in nature, including when embracing challenges perceived by an individual or/and the collective context (Davies 2014). Sarah’s visual narrative suggests an active effort to share, respect and accept differences that rupture between Sarah’s professional becoming and the nursery’s community becoming. This pattern of support is enforced through mutual validation and support during times of vulnerability.

**6.2.4 Owning vulnerability: As a professional, a community and a profession**

Campbell-Barr (2017, p.7) proposed that “the workplace and its culture is an important aspect for building experience, but the professional expertise that is generated/required may not be explicitly expressed, symbolised by metaphors and patterns of beliefs”. One pattern of beliefs that can emerge is named by Papaux (2016) as communal and individual responses to vulnerability. “Vulnerability is a multidimensional concept … to be vulnerable is to be laid open to something undesirable or injurious, to be exposed” (Papaux 2016, p.332). Within ECEC practices, practitioners become a secure base to support young children when they are exposed to various emotions and times of vulnerability – such as separating from a parent/ carer, the newness of mixing powder paints for the first time, or conflict with peers (Davis and Dunn 2018). However, Sarah described how personal vulnerability outside work was supported by relationships and the culture inside the nursery.

My work is enjoyable to me and has enabled me to get a place to live with my friend. It looks nothing like that (points to the home on the map) but you get the idea. My work made that happen and for some people – like me when I did those other jobs – work is for pay and I think I get more for my work than money. … I’m glad I had nursery when me and my boyfriend split up. This is the black hole here. … I saw my life going one way (on map) and it didn’t. I saw the wedding and the family and it stopped. The ripples from that wandered into my work and numbed me for a while but it did fade away. I found myself re-focusing on my practice and like they say ‘throwing myself into work’. There was some forest schools training available and I went and I loved it. It re-energised me. It bettered my practice in the toddlers but it also re-energised me again. I think my passion for early childhood helped heal my broken heart.’

The idea of professionalism can convey an invitation to avoid acknowledging vulnerability, especially when this involves events beyond the scope of work, like the breakup of a relationship. Appearing vulnerable can be risky and exposing; it may lead to worries of being perceived as not worthy because the narrative of ‘doing one’s best’ is stronger. Yet Sarah described a protective and permissive work culture where the ever-evolving professional will have a range of experiences and emotions – including vulnerability. Sarah believed she could embrace the vulnerability and thrived thanks to the experience and support received. Papaux (2016, p.333) describes this culture as one where professionals can be ‘seen’ when they experience difficult times and rather than excluding this emotion as a non-work issue it was embraced and supported – it was owned – as part of a person’s ongoing process of becoming.

This personal change in circumstances and exposure to vulnerability was also recognised by Sarah’s manager/ nursery owner and the optimistic response they offered led to Sarah describing a greater clarity and sense of purpose in her life and work in ECEC.

What I have been offered is a two-week trip to our sponsored setting in (Africa). As you know, the nursery has a ‘sister setting’ which we help sponsor. The nursery owner went out there years ago and maintained a link and now the nursery helps other staff to go each year. Well, I was talking to the owner about the breakup (with boyfriend) and she asked if I would consider going on the next trip later this year. … I think at work my managers want the nursery to do well but to do this they want happy, motivated people. I have come to really appreciate this. It sounds really simple, but I don’t think it is. … I’m lucky that this is where I work and when I hear about other nurseries, I wonder if that’s why I love early years so much. Is it because I am in such a great workplace? Or would I still love it elsewhere?

The unexpected change in personal circumstances ruptured into Sarah’s professional work, but this was owned and embraced by the nursery as an opening, where Sarah may appreciate a new experience. A change in personal circumstance was not dismissed within the nursery community, but it was interpreted as a factor to simulate new professional opportunities. This perspective opened up possibilities and allowed Sarah to own and explore a time of vulnerability, creating an opportunity (for Sarah and the setting) to grow. By the nursery embracing Sarah’s personal experiences as important in shaping her becoming, an optimistic version of vulnerability is promoted (Papaux 2016). I suggest this is an ‘optimistic’ view of owning vulnerability for many reasons. Firstly, the response supported Sarah’s sense of belonging to the nursery community, that she was valued and worthy, which people can fear when feeling vulnerable. Secondly, this supports the culture of the nursery to make decisions grounded in the current context rather than applying pre-defined rules of conduct or modernist measures of professional career development that would miss the linkages between a professional’s life and career working in ECEC.

Thirdly, Sarah indicated that having the support of the nursery had led to discovering a new perspective about how her life impacted on her practice, and her practice on her life – ‘I think at work my managers want the nursery to do well but to do this they want happy, motivated people. I have come to really appreciate this. It sounds really simple, but I don’t think it is. I’m lucky that this is where I work…’ Sarah appears to be constructing an understanding of her career trajectory that extends beyond technocratic knowledge and interconnects personal and professional transitions. In doing so, Sarah draws upon the concept of luck to help narrate her experiences, rather than conceptualising her understanding as learning from experience, practical wisdom or a legitimised knowledge-base from the ground upwards (Campbell-Barr 2017). Sarah may be lucky in this experience, as other workplaces may not be as supportive, but another interpretation is that by referring to luck, Sarah is devaluing her knowledge creation.

Referring to luck in her construction of knowledge and the narration of her career trajectory it minimises or silences the practical wisdom and caring experiential knowledge which Sarah has come to value. Ensher et al. (2017, p.113) describe compelling insights or moments of clarity as internal experiences that can create career defining transitions in knowledge formation. These reflections can be “of both the mind and the heart” and reflect the coming together of both theoretical and experiential knowledge. Through referring to this coming together as luck, Sarah has implied that “only codified knowledge is important (and has legitimacy), whilst everyday knowledge is disregarded (symptomatic of the modernist construction of professionalism and quality)” (Campbell-Barr 2017, p.9). Expanding on this distinction further, Campbell-Barr (2017, p.10) writes:

Knowledge that has strong boundaries can be described and therefore shared, the sharing being a part of the legitimisation, but as the boundaries are weakened the knowledge becomes more closely tied to the context and can become context dependent, lacking the ability to be shared and legitimised. … In particular, knowledge that comes from practice that lacks articulation (such as beliefs, dispositions and attitudes) struggles to be shared and therefore evaluated as it has weak boundaries. However, … knowledge is social and given legitimisation due to a need for a common body of knowledge that binds people together, then it is the social that will give rise to the legitimisation of beliefs, dispositions and attitudes as a form of knowledge for ECEC.

As a knowledge boundary has weakened in Sarah’s narrative, she refers to luck rather than articulating the impact of the setting’s culture or disposition as a legitimate body of knowledge, shaping her choices and values in work and beyond. This moment reinforces the notion that “careers are beautifully personal possessions” (Ensher 2017, p.122), with individuals having their own thresholds of interpretation. By threshold I mean that Sarah could have her work place culture as an important aspect in shaping her experiences and responses to vulnerability, yet she stopped short of narrating the wider ECEC profession as having these traits.

**6.2.5 In summary**

As Bullough (2008, p.6) describes, there are two very different intensions when representing the lived-experiences of early childhood professionals. “The first [intension] is narrative … and concerned with storylines and particulars, while the other is paradigmatic … and concerned with … forming generalisations that, while in the social sciences are inevitably soft, represent a nodding acknowledgement of … validity, predication and control.” In the visual narrative co-constructed with Sarah, the storyline interconnects her work and life choices, describing her career as ‘more than work’, where she experiences ‘something different every day’. Sarah perceives learning and exploring as a mutual event that she, the children, and the materials all engaged with as part of the shared space. More paradigmatically, Sarah’s visual narrative emphasises how multiple discourses shape the ways in which she acted upon, understood, and made sense of her life and work within ECEC and how her work ‘acted back’ on her life. By sharing this story, the research creates an opportunity to begin talking about careers in ECEC and talking in a way that provides some resonance to others (Bullough 2008).

Amongst the variables of Sarah’s narrative, there are some casual relationships that glowed at me as I analysed the data (MacLure 2013a). Regan and Graham (2018, p.18) theorised that people remain in a profession “because they feel a connectedness to the place, the people and purpose of the institution” and Sarah’s views endorse this thinking, as her visual narrative exudes a sense of belonging and co-creation with the assemblage around her. Sarah shows an awareness of constructing and reconstructing herself with and amongst the more than human community as an early childhood professional who is responsive to and entangled with the spaces, places, people and materials. Sarah appeared to be comfortable with continually becoming professional within her community of practice. This aligns with the approach of Hakim and Dalli (2016) whilst also embracing a hybrid of dominant discourses and local sources of knowledge (Campbell-Barr 2017) to inform her professionalism and career decisions.

Sarah describes how her personal vulnerabilities outside work had been supported within her workplace, and this is an example of life influencing work and work influencing life. Papaux (2016, p.336) posits that, “accounting for one’s own vulnerability requires the courage to be imperfect”, and Sarah’s sense of belonging to her community of practice appeared to nurture the courage to own vulnerability as an opportunity for growth and further becoming. Yet it is not enough to note that being professional involves vulnerability; there is still a need to explore how this is materialised and responded to within the lives of early childhood professionals and the theories of professionalism. This visual narrative is only one unfolding story, yet it contributes to the aims of this research to examine human experiences when living and working within the early childhood profession.

**6.3 Tony, map, death, stereotypes, shoes**

**“My big thing, being a male working in early years, is that I have come across a lot of hostility … I want to contribute to changing people’s perceptions. … I have a focus … this is who I am now, and this is reflected in what I wear. I haven’t bought a pair of trainers in 12 months... I walk around in shoes; my feet hurt constantly.”**

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**6.3.1 - Introduction**

In this section, I analyse a set of narratives co-constructed with Tony where he discusses becoming an early childhood professional teaching in higher education. Analysis of Tony’s visual narrative indicates how morality and gender, mediated through diverse experiences, shaped his career trajectory. Like with Sarah, Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) construction of a professional in a process of becoming resonates with Tony’s stories of professional movement, changes and transitions. This includes his use of clothing and footwear as material objects to express re-dressing himself as he made sense of his life and work. Firstly, though, I begin with a discussion about Tony’s visual map (above) because the unflattening sense of movement (Sousain 2015) created through the spiral pattern began to make me wonder (MacLure 2013b), wonder if the pattern of the data transcended its constitutive parts.

**6.3.2 Making a beautiful map**

Tony described the image he created as a ‘beautiful map’ that was located on the table between us whilst we talked. I felt like this map acted as a lighthouse, allowing our conversation to move and jump around as needed, with the ever-present map reminding us both of the focus for the conversation and alternative directions where Tony may wish to take the discussion. This approach resonates with Literat et al. (2017 p. 7) who cite Hull and Nelson (2005) to describe this approach not as “additive art whereby images, words and music by virtue of being juxtaposed, increase the meaning-making potential of a text. Rather… a multimodal text can create a different system of signification, one that transcends the collective contribution of the constituent parts.”

Tony referred to the map regularly throughout our conversation, pointing out certain locations with his hands or through his use of words (i.e., see here, I added this because). Tony began discussing the map from the bottom left corner of the image, rotating our attention clockwise in a spiral movement as indicated in this extract where Tony described his career trajectory beginning in school:

Well I started back in school because I didn’t bother trying at all… After that I added (on the map) what looks like a big fancy college, but it wasn’t… I had never been committed to anything. Went to this job or that, until I was 18 then my parents sat me down and told me I had to get a job and do something with my life… I went into retail and I hated it. I genuinely hated life around here (indicated to the top-right side of the map). I had no pride, no interest. I needed to do something with my life or I would have stayed sat down all day. … I came across the post office role; I was serving and talking to people. I could help people and through that watch people. My mum was a dinner lady at a primary school and I remember going in when I was off school. … It was on my mind. Then I met my girlfriend, who is now my wife. She is the one who said if I wanted to teach, I should go back to college. So, I did.

The influences of work and family representations were an interwoven pattern through Tony’s narrative, but what glowed (MacLure 2013a) to me was the imagery and movement created by the spiral pattern in his visual narrative. MacLure (2013a, p.660) writes that “data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us”, and in agreement with Literat et al.’s (2017) thinking, the spiral pattern in Tony’s narrative was an aspect of data that, to me, transcended its constitutive parts.

The spiral shape illustrated in the map wound in a continuous and gradually tightening curve. Mathematicians call this shape a logarithmic spiral, or a self-similar spiral, and I felt it unflattened Tony’s narrative, offering a sense of movement to his professional trajectory before and during his work in ECEC. Whilst Tony discussed many transition points – such as gaining an ECEC degree qualification, or moving workplaces to school and later higher education teaching – because of the spiral shape, there was no assumption that these transitions were a linear process, or a linear progression, as discussed by Leach (2016). Alternatively, the spiral imagery could be interpreted as embracing a “humbling recognition” that there is always an unknown (Arndt et al. 2018, p.6):

No other person in my family has a degree; it was unknown. I’m treading uncharted territory for my family and I’m not stopping. I have written about the future (on the map) and I have those goals. I see this as still becoming and that’s not a bad way anymore. ... I have to be practical. I’m married now; I haven’t got time to give up and volunteer. I did for a long time. I hadn’t had a wage for six years. I need to use those wages for my family now.

One reading of this may suggest that the heteronormative masculine expectation of providing financially as a husband became justification for Tony to focus on paid employment. A second reading may suggest what Bullough (2016) describes as economic instability as contributing to his changing of views. The story may indicate Tony feeling powerful about his abilities to earn a wage after his degree and his enhanced sense of self-worth, or alternatively he may have been feeling quite disempowered because he had volunteered for six years. There are multiple factors that have shifted and changed within Tony’s (re)configuration of these events, but it is through Barad’s (2007) theorisation of diffraction that a richer reading emerges to explore the entanglements between life and work decisions and the differences each can make.

Tony’s story captures the complex relationship that Kelemen, Mangan and Moffat (2017, p.1) describe “between volunteering work and outcomes at a personal and collective level”. Leach (2016) argued that careers built around unpaid work and voluntary opportunities, when supported by a strong sense of professional identity and family motivations, can promote adaptability and a strong sense of wellbeing. Despite doubt, or challenges, career sustaining strategies like those implied by Tony where he kept focused on movement, may have enabled him to envisage, plan and manage his career trajectory. This approach endorses what Kelemen, Mangan and Moffat (2017) theorise as active and planned volunteering resembling paid employment. Furthermore, Tony showed an awareness “about the ends worth pursuing” (Pring 2012, p.753) in the context of his life, when he repositioned his views about paid work in relation to his new subjectivity as a husband. This acknowledged the strong relations between Tony’s life and work within the ECEC sector and his multiple and competing discourses that shape his understandings, relationships, interactions and decisions.

The influences of work and family representations was another strong pattern in both the visual image and verbal narrative created with Tony. Tony frequently discussed how his work influenced his life and, also, how his life influenced his work. For Tony, his family life was represented by his parents and his girlfriend, now wife. His working life was represented by ‘this job or that’, then implementing the EYFS curriculum (DFE 2017) in a primary school and university teaching. Career choices and later professional transitions (such as further voluntary work reducing a wage) began to be considered through the impact it would have on his wider family life. This repeatedly endorsed the view that “the processes of career and employment sense-making are both cognitive and emotional” (Leach 2016, p.9), and for Tony this included his perception of moral worth.

**6.3.3 Death and moral worth**

For Tony, his family featured as a motivational factor throughout his professional trajectory, but within this narrative there was a focus on morality and work providing a purpose in his life. Moral debates have been recently discussed by Arndt et al. (2018) as often silenced within professional discussions, but this was present when Tony described entering the ECEC sector.

I wanted to be a year 4/ 5 class teacher and placements were a strong part of the degree, but I couldn’t get one in that age group. Then they found me one within the early years unit, with the EYFS. … I will always remember my first day – a Friday. I had been at a concert the night before and I wasn’t in the best way that Friday. I went, and when I came out, oh my God, this is what I want to do! … It was seeing a child develop. They weren’t snotty little kids that got dirt everywhere. It will sound crazy, but they grew, I saw them grow. … On day one I was put with a boy with limited language … and by the end of reception (year) he was a joyful little boy. It makes a difference. … From my first afternoon I was hooked. When my mum died, I had the support to stop me quitting, and I was kept focused and I wanted to do that for someone else.

Here Tony displays a mixture of complex motives shaping his actions, especially during harder times. A bereavement seemed to rupture or acknowledge a sense of belonging (whether conscious or unconscious) in the supportive and caring relational assemblage that was his community of practice (Wenger 1998). This thinking begins to reconfigure what constitutes a community of practice, moving away from a human orientated group and towards a community of practice that is a relational assemblage, attending to the non-human and more-than-human objects and forces, like time and things. Osgood (2005) described the strong commitment to caring as a key characteristic of the ECEC profession and not just towards the children, but a reciprocal characteristic that Tony described as ‘the support to stop me quitting’. The time (out from professional matters) could be understood as an actor within a broader assemblage of this community of practice, that can provide comfort to Tony. This indicates the more than human elements within a community of practice and could help reconfigure Leve and Wengers’s theory of communities of practice in a post-human lens.

When Tony described his work as a lecturer teaching ECEC to undergraduate students, there was a similar willingness care and have a positive impact on the lives of others.

I have the commitment now to help people get into this profession, and that means my life has stopped floating about too. I have stopped moving from this to that, hoping for a next job that pays well. I get paid peanuts right now, but I show up at half seven and leave at half six. I am that guy right now. … I don’t want to let my mum and dad down. They always wanted the best for me, and my mum saw me start my degree but didn’t see me finish my degree. My dad saw me start my teaching but didn’t know I got a job. My wife and my kids will be the ones that see me progress.

There are many personal and professional transitions entangled within both these extracts, and many objects, forces and events shaping human choices. Tony appeared to discuss his drive to continue, especially during harder times, and the will to make some self-sacrifices in return for a sense of wellbeing and contentment, rather than concrete rewards. Helping children and/or adults made him feel good about himself, as he sees a competent and caring image of himself mirrored in the positive reactions of others. Yet understandings of self-image can be produced in many different ways. Vincent and Braun (2010, p.203) argue that “the morally worthy nature of early childhood education and care makes it an excellent site in which students who had been at the margins of their schools, sought to reinvent themselves as mature and responsible,… to recreate their own biographies”. This may relate to Tony as he did discuss his ‘lack of commitment’ during school, but these stories also endorse his preference for a sense of wellbeing and belonging, his commitment to ‘doing good’ and ‘having a focus’ in a shared repertoire of practice (Wenger 1998) instead of focusing on concrete, measurable rewards such as pay. Rather than being a career where Tony is able to re-write his own biography as Vincent and Braun (2010) suggest, this is also a career where Tony can use his practical wisdom, and everyday learning from his life, to aid others. This responds to Arndt et al.’s (2018) call for more research to question the moral factors shaping the lives and work of early childhood professionals, rather than allowing moral debates to be implicit and de-valued contributions to the process of professional-becoming.

Self-interests, whether motivated by individual, cultural, gender or family factors, intermingle in our actions and rupture in ways that curate many possible stories. Drawing on the work of Skeggs (1997) and Vincent and Braun (2010), one reading of these phenomena may be that Tony’s sense of moral worthiness was constructed upon the powerlessness and dependency of young children and/or undergraduate students. It could also be a result of the way gender is produced within this assemblage – ECEC, history, female dominance, low pay, care, sand, play. The support he describes offering to others may be interpreted as making him feel capable and responsible, and/or a way by which gender is produced – ‘I have a purpose now.’ Yet, Tony does not construct himself as ‘protecting children’ or ‘protecting new(er) students to the profession’ by drawing on innocent narratives of childhood (Osgood 2012) or the vulnerability of adults learning. There is an acknowledgement that children/ adults are capable and competent in their own rights, layered amongst his altruistic goals and sense of moral worth. Yet as Barad (2007) reminds us, this intra-activity is not linear; there is a continual relational dance occurring between Tony, death, the children, the building, the school ethos, gender, the team, the students, the materials to teach, his family, morality, myself as a researcher, drawing and now you as the reader of the research. Mannay (2016, p.122) describes such a group as “non-consenting others” who are narrated within Tony’s story but their own views were not sought directly. I do not know the outcomes or impacts of these events from their perspectives. This research forefronts these events in a way that emphasises Tony’s professional trajectory and understanding of becoming an early childhood professional.

This understanding of professional trajectories and ‘becoming’ is further elaborated when Tony discussed gender as a factor that influenced his professional transition into higher education teaching.

**6.3.4 - Navigating gender stereotypes through career trajectories**

In conversation with Tony, his identity as a male was entangled in many of the stories.

Tony - When I was in the classroom and a child needed some care, had had an accident and wet themselves. I wanted to help that child; being in wet clothes is not nice, but I didn’t have the confidence to be that person that the child needed. I was more scared about the child going home and saying, ‘Tony helped me today in the bathroom.’ Do you know what I mean? … It’s a scary mine-field, there are perceptions here and that limits what I think I can do. I didn’t know if it would be frowned upon if I helped change a child. When the children did PE and they were all getting changed, happy chatting in their underwear, I’m thinking, I’m getting out; I didn’t know if I should be there watching them, supervising.

Clarrie – Was this questioned by teachers or the school?

Tony – No they didn’t question it. Not in the slightest. … I did discuss it with my mentor and she said not to worry about it. She had been in the school for three years and in three years they had never had a male in early years.

Jones (2001) describes this behaviour as self-surveillance, where Tony is led to doubt if his actions and intensions would be perceived as innocent due to the highly gendered perception and powerful discourse of viewing “males in the early years/primary school settings as suspicious” (Mistry and Sood 2015 p.115; Brownhill 2015). Conceptualising the value of male professionals in early childhood education and care has recently been debated by Warin (2019) who calls for a feminist poststructuralist approach to upholding equity and de-gendering society, rather than re-gendering through a focus on binary fe/male discourses. Yet Warin (2019) also acknowledges, like Mistry and Sood (2015), that support is needed for males, such as Tony, who experience the feeling of being othered by a (female) majority due to gender. The dialogue between Tony and myself shows that I steered the conversation to question the support available for Tony from his community of practice – a relationship that Tony had already indicated was beneficial to him. But it appeared that navigating gender was not an issue for his mentor and her response could be read as somewhat dismissive of the issue, or, a reassurance of gender’s insignificance. Hogan (2012) considers a dismissive approach as gender blindness, which is a term that implies a need for greater gender awareness within society.

Greater gender awareness, gendered career transitions and the impact of negotiating gender stereotypes in professional trajectories is not an area isolated to working in ECEC, as Papafilippou and Bentley (2017) discuss in the case of engineering graduates. For Tony though, he explained that gender was a factor that motivated his professional transition away from working with young children in a primary school environment to working in higher education teaching ECEC students. Tony described this transition very calmly:

Tony - My big thing, being a male working in early years, is that I have come across a lot of hostility. … I have been called names. I have been called a paedophile, ‘Oh, you must be gay’, I must be weird, all because I am a man working in early years with young children, three- and four-year olds.

Clarrie – Where did that come from?

Tony – It’s the parents, which was most shocking for me, the most shocking thing in my life. For a parent to come and ask if I am gay because I work with three-year olds. No, I am not gay, but would it matter if I was?

Clarrie – Did being asked if you were guy echo beyond your work life?

Tony – Yes, definitely, very much so. That personal questioning in any context is not something that I had experienced. You just don’t. Gender isn’t linked to sexuality. … The only thing I could see if I was a primary school teacher was that I would be on the front line, taking hits about being male … I want to use that experience for better now.

Clarrie – Was adult teaching a response to this experience?

Tony – Yes, because I don’t care about any of those issues… I don’t want my work questioned on a daily basis; I don’t want that in my daily life.

Stereotypes, perceived or real, of gender inequality and homophobia and the impact on professional identity need to be challenged and addressed by organisations and leadership across the ECEC sector (Mistry and Sood 2015). The complexity of these events is highlighted when Tony described this as ‘the most shocking thing in my life’, evoking all his work and life experiences for comparative measures.

McGillivray (2011, p.98) indicates that “how we see ourselves in the workplace and the influence of others in creating a self-image are both significant”. Within this narrative, Tony responded to his feelings about the images being created by/of him through imagining possible future selves, evoking a cognitive and affective interplay of his aspirations, goals and motives. He curated an image of a professional career that he dreads (a feared self) and was motivated to seek an alternative pathway that aligned with his emerging moral worth. May (2017, p.6) describes this approach as foreshadowing, where a person brings anticipated future events that have not yet happened into the present, “the consequence of which is that the present becomes a preparation for the hypothetical future”. This is a concept for career decision-making that means “choices are not only contingent upon what takes place in the present but also on how one feels about the past and one’s hopes for the future” (Taber 2012, p.200). Tony’s sense of moral worthiness and belonging to a community with a shared focus appeared in jeopardy and resulted in substantially altering the trajectory of his career. This is what Ensher, Neilson and Kading (2017) classify as a career defining moment, with growth from (perceived) adversity.

Tony prioritised his emerging moral worth and desire to ‘have a focus’ and ‘help others’ by repositioning himself and his work away from a community assemblage that began to crumble when an aspect of his professional (male) becoming was challenged and/or needed support. As Mistry and Sood (2015) propose, the importance of mentoring for those experiencing the feeling of navigating gender stereotypes can be beneficial, as “deeply held gender stereotypes are alive and well” in ECEC (Warin 2019 p.3). These unplanned events had a significant impact on Tony’s career trajectory. Tony described this transition as an opportunity to channel his experiences of navigating gender stereotypes into helping others, reinforcing his emerging moral worth.

This is third time in my life that I am committed to something, and I want to contribute to changing people’s perceptions of males working in early years. I have gone into teaching adults to show guys that they can study children; they can work with children and go into practice without being scared. I’m not saying there should be loads of men in early years but there shouldn’t be hidden barriers stopping any men who choose to. … This is about showing the profession as one that is open to everyone.

There is a role for acknowledging and understanding chance events in career trajectories and here Tony has narrated a version of seemingly unexpected events that he can live his life by. Through Tony’s sense of agency, he believes he made choices and took control to construct his own trajectory. Another reading of this professional transition may indicate that Tony behaved in a way that does not break the boundaries of what seems possible or acceptable within a socially structured (dominantly female) profession. His professional transition from teaching young children to teaching adults may have been narrated as unexpected and an act of resistance by Tony, but the transition also reinforced the continuing gender-based nature of inequality in the assembled (female) formation of the ECEC profession. It may therefore be more accurate to see the ECEC profession as a site of agency and moral worth whilst also a site of boundaries and synthetic shortcomings, “A flux of forces or ‘affects’ fully immanent within events” (Fox and Alldred 2017, p.1). What may be important to document is that Tony created a sense of capacity – ‘a commitment’ – through his navigation of gender stereotypes amongst the transient assemblages of the ECEC profession. This connects with Fox and Alldred’s (2017, p.11) description that, “at the level of an event the flux of forces in assemblages can often shift the capacities of bodies or collections of bodies from moment to moment”. It is this shift of capacities that ruptured a transition from working with young children in ECEC to teaching adults in higher education.

Tony further expanded upon his shifting capacities and understanding of becoming-professional when discussing his work teaching ECEC in higher education, and this story entangled his agency and subjectivity with the materiality of footwear and clothing.

**6.3.5 Shoes**

When Tony discussed his transition to teach undergraduate students about early childhood education and care his narrative took a material turn (Taguchi 2007; Osgood and Robinson 2019; Pulsford 2016; Jackson and Mazzei 2012) describing how the objects that he wore were part of a network of forces interweaving and re-dressing himself for life and work.

Tony – … professionalism dictates I must look a certain way. … I try to differentiate myself from me before.

Clarrie – Your identity has changed … and this is shown by how you look?

Tony – Well put it this way, when you walked up, you said, ‘You look smart.’

Clarrie – I did; you do.

Tony – This is what I am like now, because I am in a position where I should look like a lecturer in early childhood should look. I don’t even go to the supermarket in a pair of shorts in case I bump into someone.

Clarrie – So, how you dress professionally at work is now how you dress all the time; the lines have blurred.

Tony – Yes, very much so. … It’s time I grew up. I am proud of what I do. This is reflected in what I wear now. I haven’t bought a pair of trainers in 12 months; I love trainers. I walk around in shoes; my feet hurt constantly. But I prefer to look smart than look like a student.

Clarrie – Has your clothing become a tool to show your self-worth…

Tony - … I turn up smart, professional but relatable. A shirt and shoes, jumper and blazer. It humanises me. Rather than being a stuffy lecturer at the front, I’m trying to show I’m accessible.

Here Tony discusses his ‘discursive’ notion of professionalism with the use of non-human materials such as shoes and clothes, whilst embroiled with social ‘relations’ (the connections with the students he teaches). One possible reading of this implies that the shoes and clothes worn by Tony open up the possibility he will be perceived as ‘accessible’ to students in his work as a lecturer, but the shoes and clothes appear to become more than one-directional signifiers of meaning. “Clothes as materialities become with us as we become with them in an open, contingent unfolding of mattering’ (Taylor 2013, p.699). For Tony, this mattering unfolds into his life beyond the classroom – ‘I don’t even go to the supermarket in a pair of shorts in case I bump into someone’ and ‘I walk around in shoes; my feet hurt constantly’. In actively (re)creating a relationship between these elements – professionalism, Tony himself, shoes, clothes, students, supermarket – an assemblage has arisen that has leaked between Tony’s work and his life beyond work, literally re-dressing his body in response to his approach to human/ non-human materials. For me, this returns to the Deleuzian (1988, p.19) explanation that “when a body ‘encounters’ another body, or an idea another idea, … the relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole” (Osgood and Robinson 2019; Pulsford 2016). But, more than this, Tony also captures the painful leakage that such combinations can create. His acknowledgements of the physical discomfort from his shoes constantly hurting his feet may also signify an ideological discomfort or disequilibrium as he transitions to this new professional becoming and/or new material mattering. Therefore, the re-dressing of Tony’s bodily self and the toleration of pain may read as a re-assembling description of Tony’s life and work as well.

A third reading of this extract has become apparent to me though, and this is the impact of myself as a researcher entangled within this co-created discussion. I was part of Tony’s remembering, where the researcher, the participants and the research materials all emerged in the same moment, via an intra-active entanglement (Barad 2007). I also chose to include stretches of talk and the serve and return of conversations between a participant and myself in the data analysis because I perceive meaning as an interactional act. Therefore, to create robust research, I must pay attention to the conversation as a social process, “as a choreography of interactions” (Silverman 2017, p.156). In this moment of discussion between Tony and myself, there was a flux of forces or affects at play and it was Tony who verbally acknowledged this – ‘When you walked up, you said, “You look smart”.’ Here Tony was recalling my first words to him when we met to conduct the interview. My interest in visual narratives reminds me that as researchers “we are subjects that see but also objects capable of being seen, and vulnerable to the gaze” (Mannay, Staples and Edwards 2017, p.346). I was looking and seeing Tony, but he was also looking, seeing and responding to me. In doing so, Tony was looking at my existence from all sides (Lucan 1978) and whilst in this research I tried to explain my positionality and methodology, I cannot, however, detail how Tony assigned meaning to me.

Tony’s discussion about shoes, clothes and material entanglements amongst his stories about living and working in ECEC may be a consequence of the participatory methodology that embraced co-produced data and therefore was influenced by my own presence. I did not ask Tony if he talked about shoes and clothes as a way of making sense of his life and work because he was in discussion with me and this was something he thought I valued, so this will remain unknown. As Kara (2017) writes “democratising research is not and cannot be as straightforwardly positive as much of the literature would like us to think”. Co-produced data is a limitation of the method I chose, but this is not a co-produced thesis, so I can choose to imagine possible configurations presented in the data and learn from such ruptures.

**6.3.6 - In summary**

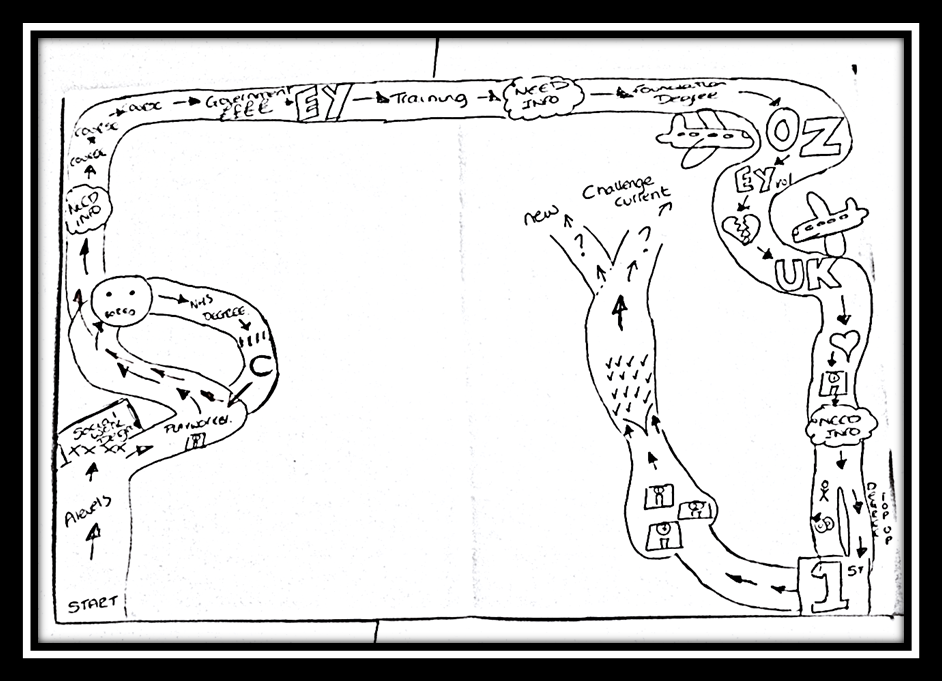
The visual narrative co-constructed with Tony discusses his career trajectory of becoming an early childhood professional teaching in higher education. This is a story that captures many interesting lines of inquiry and allows the ordinary to be seen in fresh ways. Firstly, the style Tony used to present the visual element of his narrative ‘glowed’ at me (MacLure 2013a). The data made themselves intelligible, transcending their constitutive parts by emitting an overarching conceptual framework for his professional becoming. The shape of the logarithmic spiral unflattened his career trajectory, embracing movement and continuing becoming within his professional transitions. Whilst movement should not be mistaken for progress, this visual narrative illustrates how life events such as bereavement rupture into working practices within ECEC, yet in response, the assemblage of work also ‘acted back’ by opening-up fresh possibilities that shaped his life (Horton and Kraftl 2006).

Secondly, factors such as emerging moral worth and navigating gender stereotypes help reveal the particular and nuanced experiences of Tony’s career story, which help find the limits of generalisations within theories and government agendas regarding careers in ECEC (Arndt et al. 2018; Taylor 2018; DFE 2017). Yet the generalisation of a career in early childhood education and care, as promoted by the DFE’s (2017) workforce strategy, does resonate with Tony’s story, providing a starting point for understanding his experiences and facilitating discussion. Researching career stories requires the careful balancing of both narrative interpretive approaches and generalising principles (Bullough 2008). What I learn from interacting with Tony’s visual narrative is that it is ‘in the living’ that we can find criticisms with generalisations, principles and policies of a profession; but the principles and ideals of a profession may be the catalysts that attract people to this working life in the first place and help them understand experiences such as gender stereotyping.

Finally, the material entanglement interpreted within Tony’s visual narrative offers an example of life and work assemblages combining to create something new. Tony’s discussion of re-dressing himself for work, which leaked into his life beyond work, highlights that decisions are always embedded and can breach binary thresholds (life/work, personal/professional) which may not always be comfortable or expected. How materials such as clothes, shoes and objects are embroiled within notions of professionalism and career stories within and beyond early childhood education and care is an area of growing research (Pulsford 2016; Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2017; Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake 2018) and requires further investigation. This visual narrative is only one story, yet it contributes to the debates calling to widen rather than narrow discussions about careers in early childhood education and care.

**6.4 Charlotte, family, connectedness, hope, illustration**

**“I look for new ways I can develop the staff through what they have a talent for. I want my staff to stay. ... I want to help their work fit in with their wider lives and lives fit with their work …We used to try and say that what happens at home stays at home; we tried to work that way, just come to work, get on with work. But if it’s working with children that is not an approach that works.”**



**6.4.1 Introduction**

This section analyses the visual narrative co-constructed with Charlotte. Charlotte describes herself as the director of a nursery, including a before and after school club. She is one of three voluntary governors leading the community group and she was in the process of incorporating two other local nurseries under the group’s leadership (shown on the bottom right of the map by three small boxes). Charlotte referred to her job title (director) as ‘just that’ – ‘I forget I am a director, in my day to day work, I’m here doing things … For me I just like the day to day, and the leadership style that I choose is about relationships and pushing for the best out of people through knowing them.’

Analysis of Charlotte’s visual narrative is presented through four linked sections. The first section incorporates the ‘push and pull dynamic’ shaping her early career trajectory and this is considered amongst a flux of forces such as family influences, illness and a sense of ‘going with the flow’. ‘Encounters with career shapers’ (Bosley, Arnold and Cohen 2009) emerged as a second section and this also informed the third section where Charlotte’s leadership style of ‘hope-full succession planning’ is considered. The fourth section from Charlotte’s visual narrative returned to her use of drawing as a method, interpreting how she reflects on looking and seeing *a new* through ‘a method that makes the familiar strange’. In summary, analysis of Charlotte’s visual narrative captures the ruptures and entanglements of her career story through everyday events where people are making their lives together.

**6.4.2 Pushes and pulls shaping early career choices**

In similar ways to Sarah and Tony, Charlotte narrated her career development entangled within the rest of her life, drawing on factors such as family needs, chance encounters and pathways considered and not taken. Peak and McDowall (2012 p.395) described a sense of drifting or ‘going with the flow’ within their research about early stages of careers, where people try out different jobs and career paths. This is an approach documented within Charlotte’s early career trajectory when she discussed doing ‘a round circle’ back into the early childhood education and care profession due to ‘family ties’.

I made a map. I started here (indicates bottom left of map) and after my A levels, I was signed up to do a social work degree. Where I work now (a nursery with before and after school play provisions) that was set up by Mary, my mum; she was a parent governor of the school. She set up the before and after school club. … I finished my A levels (at the same time) as their play leader had a lot of disciplinary issues, so I ended up coming here. So, I started in play work and did all my play work qualifications, and then got a bit bored (on map). So, I decided to do my nursing degree. I did two years of my nursing degree and got a bit of a setback as my mum was diagnosed with cancer. The ties to here meant I quit my degree after two years and came back into play work. I did a round circle back in really. … After that came a big push by the government about early years and all the money, so that promoted a lot more early years provision here, because the nursery at the school was full and needed an overflow nursery. … So, I went on and did my foundation degree (in ECEC) and then went to Australia to work in some early years settings over there. I went over there with my partner and we split up so I made the decision to come back here. … I came back here but in many ways, I hadn’t left because I am also a voluntary director for the settings. The setting is a community group that is run by three voluntary directors. So, I never physically left.

Clarrie – And do you like that? Does it make a difference?

Charlotte - Yes, it does. It’s quite grounding actually. And I think when I went over there (to Australia), and I had to get references, the reference was, ‘She will be coming back to us’; you can have her for a bit, but she will be back. … Work put a lot of investment into me and they need to get things back, I think.

Charlotte described training for different jobs in her early career, first social work, second playwork and thirdly a nursing degree. This is a process that Peake and Mcdowall (2012) called false starts, before an unplanned event had a significant influence on Charlotte’s career trajectory. Her mum’s cancer diagnosis was a key precipitating factor in Charlotte’s career transition to work in early childhood education and care. Yet rather than narrating this transition as unanticipated, Charlotte also began narrating multiple lines of flight to understand this change. She reflected on a sense of inevitability that she would return to the nursery that her family had created – ‘I came back here but, in many ways, I hadn’t left.’ As in Sarah’s story, this is an attraction that Regan and Graham (2018, p.14) describe as feeling “a connectedness to the place, the people and the purpose of the institution”. Ensher et al. (2017 p.119) describe such reflection and introspection as a career-defining moment shaped by internal insights. Insights can develop gradually over time or “can be experienced as an illuminating lightning bolt that provides instantaneous clarity”. This complex negotiation of factors shows that Charlotte conceptualised her career through an integration of pushes and pulls from within as well as outside the profession. Charlotte’s trajectory led her to a leadership role managing the setting, but Charlotte frequently discussed the part played by other people in shaping her career.

**6.4.3 Encounters with ‘career shapers’ – people, places, things**

Bosley, Arnold and Cohen (2009) created the concept of ‘career shapers’ to reflect the range of people that provide advice, support, or access to developmental opportunities, which the receiver perceived as consequential for their career trajectory. Formal Human Resources (HR) or career services can shape a person’s career choices but Bosley, Arnold and Cohen (2009, p.1488) argue that these approaches are based upon a HR/ career adviser’s view of what is supportive or useful. This approach provides a “fragmented understanding that fails to reflect adequately the lived experience of individuals who construct their careers using their learning from encounters in different contexts”. Yet, when viewed through a new materialist lens the concepts of career shapers can move beyond solely recognising people in this role, to considering how spaces, places, and things can also be career shapers. Research about career trajectories needs to listen to participants and take their lead about what encounters they define as career shaping. Charlotte regularly credited other people who shaped her career as well as places, events, belonging and feelings.

I feel that if there is ever something I want to do, like forest schools training for example, then I can go and do it (in this nursery). Work put a lot of investment into me and they need to get things back, I think. … The head teacher at the school passed away … and he was really pushing me, telling me to get my degree knowing it would help me here. So, he used to lecture me about it, so when he did pass away it motivated me more to get a first (class degree). Little things like that make me work harder. … So, going back to when my mum had cancer, yes, I could have stayed in nursing and someone else would have stepped in here, it would have been fine. But I felt that it was a need to come back and help her. She doesn’t own it; she is a governor, but she was here at the start and I felt a need to come and help her.

In this extract above, Charlotte appears to learn from a range of encounters with people and a range of different spaces and places. Firstly, the supportive culture from her own managers in the early days of working in the nursery are acknowledged, which I interpret as the influence of a person but also the space(s) around them, maybe a comfy chair to talk in, or a welcoming cup of tea. Then the influential relationship with the headteacher and the place of his nearby school, and finally the attachment with her mum and all the events, associations and feelings that come with this relationship. By acknowledging these ‘career shapers’, Charlotte recognised the value of relationships with people in her career trajectory (Ensher et al. 2017) but she is also recognising much more than the people, as places, spaces objects and things are also being described, indicating that encounters can grow from any opportunity. This approach moves Bosley, Arnold and Cohen (2009) and Ensher et al.’s (2017) proposals even further, appreciating career defining moments as incorporating objects, spaces and behaviours, as well as people. Ensher et al. (2017, p.123) suggest recognition of defining moments can be “beneficial for three groups of professionals – the individuals themselves, their managers, and career counsellors”. Yet the narrative from Charlotte blurs these categories somewhat and leads me to appreciate a fourth beneficial group – the professional (ECEC) community. I suggest this because Charlotte did not stop at acknowledging the people who shaped her own career in ECEC, the visual narrative also illuminated how Charlotte used succession planning to shape the careers trajectories of other ECEC professionals too. This is further unpicked in the next section.

**6.4.4 Hope-full succession planning**

Charlotte herself has become a career shaper, fostering hope and career adaptability (PeIia-Shuster 2018) for the development of those around her.

A student who has gone to do her degree now was a little unsure about the idea at first. In supervision I asked her how she would feel if I employed someone above her because they had that higher qualification and she didn’t really like that idea. It was enough to make her try a degree and she loves it. I said to her she could do the work and she is doing it. … [She] said recently, well you did this, so I can too. It’s that role modelling and seeing it happen. … I look for new ways I can develop the staff through what they have a talent for. I want my staff to stay. I always think of something else to keep people invested in this setting, so we benefit from their talents. We got to a point where we were really quiet (with numbers of children attending) but we started to run crèches across the county to help with parenting classes. This helped keep staff in a job but also they could benefit from working in different geographical areas, with different advantages/ disadvantages.

Charlotte supported the transition to degree study for one staff member and provided opportunities for her team of early childhood professionals to experience different geographical areas during a time of financial uncertainty for the business. This openness to ideas during times of difficulty broadened the team’s experiences and opened a space for them to think and practice differently. These are not events that Charlotte ‘had’ to create or encourage, but she described wanting her staff to stay working in the nursery and so actively created career-shaping events and spaces to hone their talents as part of her leadership approach. By being surround by a career shaper like Charlotte and the recognition of the spaces and objects around the setting, a flux of forces benefit the careers of friends, colleagues, mentees and the wider ECEC community. Charlotte has learned from the career shapers - people, places and objects - that influenced her own career trajectory and has built a space with a business model that incorporates succession planning, to support and embrace career-shaping opportunities for her team.

I want my staff to have a relationship with me and if something was having an impact in their life it can influence their work too. I want them to come and talk with me; we have it set up in the business plan that we can take staff off contact time (with children) and offer different tasks whilst they process other issues in their life. If a member of staff is anxious or upset, we can work in a way where they have time to ‘get their head right’ and then come back to the children. … It’s just a bit of time to help and not add to the stress. We are never under or on ratio, so we can work this way; we prioritise it. … We used to try and say that what happens at home stays at home; we tried to work that way, just come to work, get on with work. But if it’s working with children that is not an approach that works. It doesn’t work; so we take the approach that they can take five minutes out if needed. They may go to the staff room and have a cry for 15 minutes and it can’t fix their worries but may offer some help. It happened this morning actually; one staff member had a bad driving lesson before she came to work. Another staff member – a member staff in her room – said she has just gone to the staff room for a good cry and will be back soon. And that’s fine. She just needs a little space rather than have that with her whilst working with children. She was much more focused afterwards.

Charlotte used her own experiences of encountering career shapers and career shaping events to create a business model (money and time), physical space (comfy chair and tissues) and environment which recognises the all-consuming nature of ECEC (driving lessons and emotional balance) to aid her staff members to have a place to go when times were challenging. The divide between work and life issues has been reduced/removed by considering succession planning in a holistic manner, where all issues are nursery issues – ‘it can’t fix their worries but may offer some help’. This is proactive career-shaping behaviour through two approaches. Firstly, Charlotte supports her staff’s life and work issues as a strategy in daily practice because artificially imposed boundaries between life and work lead to an unrealistic autonomous view of professionals. Secondly, Charlotte shaped the careers of ECEC professionals by embracing what May (2017, p.1) calls the temporary nature of belonging.

Belonging is defined as “a sense of ease with oneself and ones’ surroundings that is fundamental to our sense of self” (May 2018, p.306). But belonging is never still. Belonging means embracing the shifts of time which Charlotte was proactive in planning for. Rather than accepting staff will move onwards in their careers, or not thinking about the future at all, Charlotte was constantly looking for new ways to support and develop her staff, so they felt like they belonged even as they grew – professional becoming within succession planning. Charlotte embraced her team’s personal and professional development within her own aspirations for the nursery. She brought their anticipated future (personal and professional) trajectories into the present and provided career roles for people to grow into, or progress to, believing the business would benefit. Charlotte’s behaviour as a leader was constantly seeking and supporting career-shaping opportunities and folding these talents into the nursery’s business plan to make them achievable and realistic.

This leadership style indicates a preparedness for uncertainty, where Charlotte anticipated the unexpected as part of her team’s professional career development (Arndt et al. 2018) and their continual becoming as professionals. This is an approach Charlotte described as:

These v’s (to the right on the map) are not me making people do stuff. I see myself as the V behind everyone else, my staff the smaller v’s. I want to push them to follow what they are interested in and I will weave that into what we do here. This may not be normal leadership stood at the front, but I see myself as stood behind them, pushing them. … the whole lives I see them change. I want to help their work fit in with their wider lives and lives fit with their work. Everything in general, I notice a difference in one staff member as she got more confident here, someone believing in her; she has more confidence with her own child now. She is now linking with other people in other settings and as a confident practitioner she builds more connections and that’s great too.

By being aware of how the lives of early childhood professionals impact on their practice, and their practice impacts on their lives, Charlotte’s leadership style and career-shaping behaviour became beneficial for her ECEC community. Charlotte created a space for new opportunities and “unrehearsed events to emerge” (Salin 2017, p.92). She kept a space for hope in the career trajectories of her staff, with hope understood as a powerful construct fostering motivation, improvement and resilience even during hardship or difficulties (Boddy et al. 2017). Charlotte’s hope-full succession planning facilitated a ‘bottom up’ professional becoming (Fairchild 2017), individualised for each person through their personal and professional transitions. Salin (2017, p.91) writes that “it is challenging … to sustain a sense of hope in a worried world…” and in the context of ECEC a worried world includes increased regulation and limited recognition for the profession (Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake 2018). Yet Charlotte appeared to establish trusting relationships and immerse herself (and her business) in the life and work of her team – she offered early childhood professionals the comfort of belonging and becoming, without demands for answers and contributions, or prioritising professional over personal needs. This approach to hopeful practice within teams is championed in the social work profession:

Groups are important in providing hope (Ardent et al. 2009), visualising a better future with a positive sense of self (Long and Frederico 2014) and developing an inner sense of temporality and future (Nedderman et al. 2010). … A narrative approach with the externalisation of problems enables people to engage with hope and hopelessness fluidly.

(Boddy et al. 2017, p. 6).

As Boddy et al. (2017) indicate, the use of a narrative method may contribute to participants’ engagement with hope, which could be interpreted as occurring within this research. For me, Sarah and Tony’s visual narratives are positively orientated towards imaging the world differently, through re-dressing for work, navigating stereotypes and owning vulnerability. Furthermore, the visual drawings themselves radiate hope when conceptualising a career in ECEC – for Sarah and Charlotte through the unfinished pathways on their maps and for Tony through the logarithmic spiral always becoming. Therefore, not only did the narrative approach enable the engagement with hope as Boddy et al. (2017) suggest, but by communicating through multiple modes in the research (Literat et al. 2017), hope could radiate through the visual methods too. This is a concept Charlotte discussed when reflecting on the visual narrative method.

**6.4.5 A method illustrating familiarity differently**

As I analysed Charlotte’s visual narrative, my attention was (re)drawn to the method, because this approach highlighted “the everyday processes and associations whereby people make their lives together through their interactions with each other” (Rosen and Twamley 2018, p.10). be a structural design pattern, out of which empirical phenomena can be explained and put together consistently.

Charlotte also commented on her interactions with the method of visual narratives, and the process of drawing as a route to re-considering her life and work.

Clarrie - How does your work life mix with your home life?

Charlotte – The only problem I’m having right now is family life. I work every day from half seven – six; I go home, put my son to bed and then work for another few hours at the night. So, it is having a massive effect at home at the minute. My son’s behaviour is horrific… I said the other day all I seem to be saying is ‘(Name of son) will you hurry up and get dressed. Will you hurry up we need to go. Will you hurry up and…’ I’m always rushing. I know I am missing out on life, but I can’t seem to cut down on work and stop what I’m doing at home. I know this will bite me in the bum, but it’s here. … What we hope is that once a stronger leadership team is in place, I can cut back… Then hopefully I’d like some more time for my home life.

Clarrie – Is that the goal to have more balance?

Charlotte – It wasn’t at first. Until I drew this out, I hadn’t thought about it. My whole thing is to get to next summer creating more services for children and families through the strengths we have.

Charlotte stated that she had not thought about the relations between her home life and her working life in this way, before the method amplified her senses. The process of exploring everyday events through a visual narrative made the familiar strange (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Strom and Martin 2017) and new ways of seeing, knowing, being and feeling interrupted previously curated patterns of thinking about her working life. The drawing element of the visual narrative embraced a complex perspective where the multiple moving parts of Charlotte’s life could be seen simultaneously and in an entangled way. The method derailed the positivist agenda within early childhood education (Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake 2018) and enabled Charlotte “to see and be in the world differently”, even for one conversation (Strom and Martin 2017, p.i). The method enabled Charlotte to question her norm, to illuminate previously un-seen knots and imagine new opportunities with refreshed awareness.

This engagement with the method opened new spaces for otherness and other ways of thinking, contributing to the debates about creative research methods (Mannay 2016; Mannay Staples and Edwards 2017). Lenz Taguchi (2007, p.278) stressed that knowledge generation is inseparable from the materials used in the assemblage. For Charlotte, the assemblage of the task and the materials in the method, enabled her to re-think, re-see and re-feel her working life in a way that decentred reliance on other individuals for career shaping encounters. Charlotte had the “ability to make matter intelligible” (Lenz Taguchi 2012, p.267) and to imagine other possible career narratives. The visual narrative method could be embraced as a process to appreciate professional-becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) with other early childhood professionals, as it can be viewed as a tool to evoke career-shaping encounters without relying on happenstance events or other individuals for career-shaping encounters.

**6.4.6 In summary**

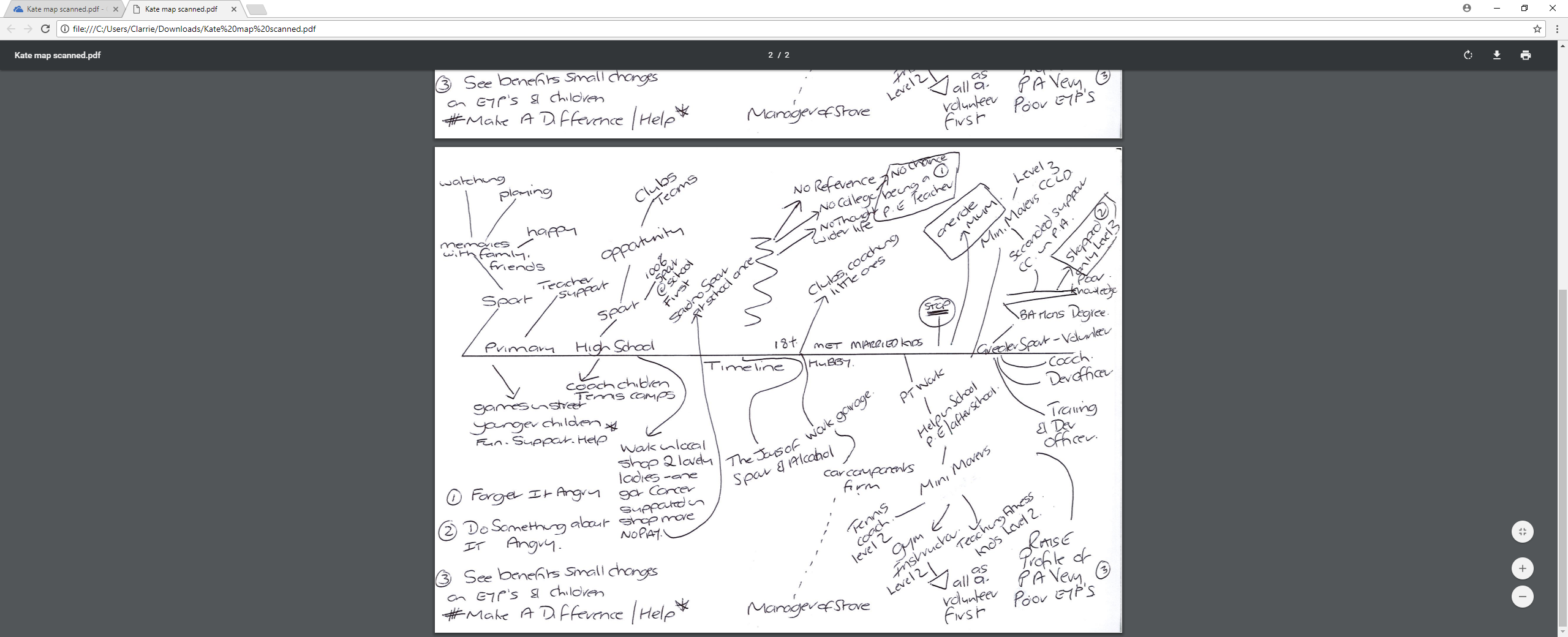
The visual narrative co-constructed with Charlotte captured the story of becoming a nursery director and the everyday events that influenced her patterns of thinking about life and work in the ECEC sector. In similar ways to Sarah and Tony, Charlotte narrated her career story entangled with transitions from her wider life. This supports the generalising pattern of career theories that considers life holistically, as this appears to be a causal relationship amongst the variables of life. For example, the push and pull dynamic shaping Charlotte’s career life story reveal a flux of forces such as family influences, illnesses and human relationships that intermingle between the binary of life and work. Yet, the events, the emotional turbulence and speed of internal insights supports an interpretive approach to understanding career stories, where a connectedness to places, people, objects and a purpose of a setting are deeply personal particulars (Regan and Graham 2018).

Analysis of the visual narrative co-constructed with Charlotte indicates that this is a story that champions career shapers and the value of relationships with people and objects in defining or refining career trajectories (Bosley, Arnold and Cohen 2009; Ensher et al. 2017). Charlotte recognises and credits people and places whom she perceives as career shapers throughout the visual narrative and learns from reflecting on these defining moments. But Charlotte goes beyond the theory proposed by Ensher et al. (2017) by foreshadowing career-shaping behaviours into hope-full succession planning within her nurseries, which benefits the trajectories of other early childhood professionals and wider narratives about the profession itself. By fostering career adaptability within the profession, Charlotte’s behaviour is sustaining a space for hope within the “worried world” that could swamp the assembled team around her (Salin 2017, p.91; Pelia-Shunster 2018). This highlights the generalising approach that “a career is a process not an outcome” as summarised by Pelia-Shuster (2018, p.453), where the process ontology is viewed as a design pattern, out of which empirical phenomena can be explained. This coming together of people, places objects and things can support the interpretive theories of ongoing bio-graphical professional-becoming to understand the career stories of early childhood professionals (Hakim and Dalli 2016; Deleuze and Gauttari 1987).

Another force which emerged through analysis of this story involved the space created by the use of a visual narrative method, as this approach seemed to aid Charlotte in making familiar everyday events seem strange (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Strom and Martin 2017). The process of having to re-orientate her thoughts into a visual format interrupted previously curated patterns of thinking about her working-life, opening-up opportunities for new ways of seeing, knowing, being and feeling. For me as a researcher, this story allowed me to see the method of a visual narrative in a fresh way. The method knotted with the issue of career encounters, and I came to more fully appreciate how drawing and narration as a tool could be used as a career shaping encounter to support the promotion of career discussions in the early childhood profession. Lenz Taguchi (2012) may describe this as the matter (the assemblage of a visual narrative) making itself intelligible to me and acting back on my knowledge generation. However, this connection needs further research as I do not want to assume that my own experience is a universal world view. Charlotte’s story does contribute to the aims of this research though, by advocating the need to balance generalising narratives and the space for individual flexibility when theorising and disseminating career stories of early childhood professionals. Both approaches – generalising principles and the individuality of life – need to be in attendance without swallowing each other.

**6.5 Kate, passion, two ladies, qualifications, achievement, social networking**

**“I didn’t want to be excellent in tennis and train those to become more excellent; that wasn’t it for me. I wanted to see the young children achieve and follow on from that achievement.** … **It’s a passion to make a difference … Follow your passion I think, follow what is important to you. That’s why people should work with young children; it needs society getting a bit political** **and needs to be a vocation that is valued.”**



**6.5.1 - Introduction**

This section analyses the visual narrative co-constructed with Kate. Kate worked for a regional sports charity as a training development officer specialising in physical development for children aged 0-5 years. Kate called the visual image above a timeline. It explores the forces that shape her life, with sport as a central, recurring passion that started in childhood. For Kate, playing sports led to coaching sports. Then she specialised in early childhood development and physical learning which became the bedrock of her career trajectory.

Analysis of Kate’s visual narrative is presented through three emergent trends that kept re-occuring as I re-read the narrative. The first section pursues Kate’s passion for physical learning through her own childhood and into her current role as a trainer and consultant where she works with early childhood professionals based in nurseries, children’s centres, schools, childminders and the strategic leads within children’s services. The second section focuses upon how Kate’s narrative can be read as disrupting simplistic notions about qualifications in ECEC, with her views supporting research by Elwick et al. (2017, p.1) who describe a “considerable disquiet amongst early childhood practitioners with regards the current qualifications and training landscape”. The third section centres on Kate’s drive to acknowledge achievement beyond formal qualifications and emphasises the impact of social networking as a space that shapes professional dialogue and becoming in ECEC. In summary, Kate champions the need for early childhood professionals and society to get ‘a bit political’, to focus on making small differences that infect the fibres of dominant narratives and seek out opportunities to produce different types of knowledge about living and working in ECEC.

**6.5.2 Passion**

Kate called her visual image a timeline, evolving around a central line to be read from left to right before cascading downwards towards her present day. Kate was the only participant to use linear time so strongly as a structuring factor within the visual narrative. By linear time I mean the perception of moving from the past into the future in a straight line, drawing time as a sequence that moves in one direction. For example, Tony’s map indicated a ‘spiral temporality’ (May 2017) to make sense of his life and work, but Kate called this image a timeline and presented life as linear. There are moments though where ruptures appeared in this thinking. The most distinctive rupture is the vertical wiggle mark located above the word timeline. This mark sits in opposition to all other marks on the image and could be read as causing ripples amongst all the other events too – as there are mainly straight lines used on the left side of this mark and slightly curved lines used on the right. This could be read as a symbol that Kate’s linear approach to time was shaken or questioned by her experiences in that period. A second reading may suggest that the importance of linear time may have wavered as she was leaving formal education, which had provided a structured linear habit. Yet visual data needs to be analysed with accompanying narration from the creator (Literat et al. 2017) and Kate’s narration indicated that the vertical wiggle mark depicted an experience where she made a choice and the (unexpected) impact of that choice refigured her perceived future.

…from childhood it is just about remembering games in the street, … you just made every game work for everyone … I was good at sport, so I got a lot of teacher’s support… to play in all the sports. And that followed through at high school, and then, when I started playing tennis, … I was probably about 13, and I started coaching children and I set up on a Saturday morning and ran competitions. … it was all about sport. Until, I used to work in a local shop... And it was two lovely ladies, and I really, really liked them. One got cancer, so it meant one was in hospital and one was off a lot, so I ended up doing more in the shop... So, I put that there (on timeline). I’m not sure why, but it was quite important, and it meant I said ‘no’ once at school. And then that was it, I didn’t get a reference. She (teacher) wouldn’t give me a reference for college. … that relationship just broke down completely. So that meant … at 15/16 … there was no chance of being a PE teacher. So, this bit here (on the timeline) ‘Forget it; I’m just angry. I’m done. I’m done with you guys; I’m just messing about round here.’ … But then I spent more time at the clubs, so that was my way into coaching the little ones. Hockey, tennis whatever. … I left school and sort of fell into a job really… I went to work in a garage … this was the time of enjoying the frills of sports and alcohol. … I went there (the garage) and I met my husband… I had given up work for three years with my daughter … so I did a bit of work there at the toddlers group doing activities. … I really liked the way they did things. The things they were saying made sense and the person doing it didn’t have an early years background but had a PE background. … And I sort of drifted into part-time work to fit in around the family. I had my son… I took him to tennis and the tennis coach said do you want to come and help out on the courts. And then I worked with her and got my level two in tennis (coaching). … I didn’t want to be excellent in tennis and train those to become more excellent; that wasn’t it for me. I wanted to see the young children achieve and follow on from that achievement. … I got quite renowned at the local activity sessions (run by local charity). I was allowed to do more and start to change things. I did all of these things (indicated on timeline), volunteering first as it is the only way you can get in.

Through Barad’s (2007) metaphor of diffraction, many readings could emerge from Kate’s entanglement of life and work in her early career trajectory. One reading may highlight Kate’s career-defining moment (Ensher et al. 2017) of not gaining a reference to attend teacher training. This may connect with ideas emerging from Sarah’s visual narrative about ownership of vulnerability, which for Kate included the transformation of pain into courage to pursue her passion for sport (Papaux 2016). A second pass through the data may focus on the influential relationships – the ladies in the shop and the school teacher – where career- and life-defining moments were precipitated by experiences with influential people (Bosley, Arnold and Cohen 2009). This connects with ideas discussed within Charlotte’s visual narrative about encountering career shapers. A third reading, and one I chose to focus on here, is the role of volunteering as a factor shaping professional transitions and career trajectories in ECEC.

Volunteering was a repeated factor in the creation of Kate’s career trajectory, interspersed with part-time temporary work, which eventually led to her current role as a training development officer focusing on children from 0-5 years. Kelemen, Mangan and Moffat (2017) explain that definitions of volunteering are diverse and complex, spreading much wider than a divide between neoliberal designations of paid or unpaid work. Kate referred to a lot of her early work as voluntary which was similar to Tony’s visual narrative, but his family motivations enabled him to envisage, plan and manage his future career trajectory through voluntary opportunities. A study by May (2017, p.2) would interpret Tony’s orientation towards the future as offering a more “meaningful temporal horizon than the past”, whereas for Kate, the past ignited her passion. It is from the past that her passion for sport radiated into the present, into her current role and her goals for the future. Her passion is everywhere and all the time (Taylor and Gannon 2018) which, in many ways, contradicts Kate’s linear construction of time.

Kate’s passion for sport and coaching young children became her hope (Boddy et al. 2017; Silin 2017); it appears to give a richness to her life and work which also became a career-sustaining strategy, serving as a motivating factor despite doubts or challenges. Kate may have experienced the false start (Peake and McDowall 2012) of training to be a PE teacher, and volunteering may have started as an act of generosity to help others but volunteering also became ‘instrumental’ in her employment (Kelemen, Mangan and Moffat 2017). Instrumental volunteering is defined by Kelemen, Mangan and Moffat (2017) as recognising the benefits of volunteering For Kate, it helped her immediate family; it helped her learn new skills and ultimately supported her employment within a regional sports charity. Volunteering should not be perceived as all beneficial though as there are many forces assembled within Kate’s visual narrative, including gender, part-time employment, family care and work life balance. A “greater recognition needs to be given to the sacrifices, challenges and conflicting commitments” (Dunne, Goddard and Woolhouse, 2008 p.57) that face working families when balancing life and work transitions, especially in care-orientated professions like ECEC. An issue Kate herself championed:

…there is no point in making the sacrifices as a family back then (indicates on timeline) to now, go, it doesn’t matter. It can’t be all about the money now. If that (money) is your passion, then follow the money. But I don’t think early years is... It has to be because you want to make a difference.

Kate’s role as a training development officer primarily focused on narrowing the gap within nurseries and children’s centres regarding the importance of movement and physical development in supporting all areas of a child’s learning. When discussing this role, Kate explained how her work had grown out of her voluntary, part-time employment delivering activity sessions with families and evolved to focus on upskilling the knowledge of early childhood and healthcare professionals who work with children and young families to get children moving more.

At the sports charity there are different hubs; we are the 0-5s hub. There are workplace hubs, activity hubs. … Our aim is to raise awareness of child development and the way we sold it to a council is to have everyone who meets children to have the same message. We brought coaches into the equation, they brought childminders, children’s centres and nurseries, it could be lunch time staff or after school clubs, doctors, community sectors. … I think getting into nurseries and with practitioners and getting to see what they are doing has become more prominent. I’m not really focusing on the supposed deficit in the child anymore, I am looking at what the practitioners are doing, and their capabilities and their beliefs, and how their confidence is going to impact on the child. It’s the best way to reach our end goal, to raise the capabilities of the staff, to overall help the children … I want to change people’s minds who have the big budgets, … I want to influence their ideas. …. I could work seven days a week, but is that work or is that interest? It’s a passion to make a difference. If you asked me what I got paid, I couldn’t tell you… Follow your passion, follow what is important to you. That’s why people should work with young children; it needs society getting a bit political and needs to be a vocation that is valued. … My mates asked what I do for a job, and I think a photo went on social media and a friend went ‘I didn’t know you did training.’ She was impressed by the training word not the early childhood words. There was something attached to it, the training. There wasn’t for the early childhood bit. I don’t really know what you call that.

For me, Kate’s passion for sport and ECEC illuminate through this extract. Her professional becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) has also begun to include advocacy for the profession, as she recognised the different forms of knowledge, values and assumptions that surround and saturate ECEC within society – ‘She was impressed by the training word not the early childhood words.’ Kate seeks to make sense of her life and work in ECEC within the same narrative, yet acknowledges the competing discourses that operate on, through and around early childhood professionals. An example of these multiple and competing discourses became visible when Kate discussed her qualifications.

**6.5.3 (Disrupting simplistic) qualifications**

When researching in England, Elwick et al. (2017, p.1) describe a “considerable disquiet amongst early childhood practitioners with regards the current qualifications and training landscape, particularly with regards to what many viewed as ideologically-driven policy-making, not informed by proper dialogue”. The research refers to the relentless change and policy attention ECEC has received over the last 20 years (Jackson 2017, Jones et al. 2016, Osgood and Giugni 2015, Dalhberg, Moss and Pence 2007). “The pursuit of ‘quality’ provision is one of the foremost drivers of government policy” (Elwick et al. 2017, p.1) and includes a specific focus on increasing qualifications to improve the professionalism of the workforce, when professionalism is viewed through a technocratic lens. The quality of provision for children, the qualifications of adults and “the silencing of the knowledge-base” (Campbell-Barr 2017, p.1) by practitioners working in ECEC are all entwined within the following extract.

Kate - … I was in this role (delivering activity sessions for families) and at a meeting with the local authority, talking about ways forward (to improve quality) … The conversation went quieter and someone shared they were starting this qualification, just in passing chatter. So, someone asked, ‘Kate what qualifications do you have?’ and I said I had done my level 3 Child Care Learning and Development, and the room went quiet. Silence. That was it; in their heads they were going, ‘We have been taking advice from a level 3’. Even though I have all those experiences and coaching qualifications (indicates on timeline) that meant nothing to them, they started to back track. Never got invited back.

Clarrie – Where does that come from?

Kate – A fear of going to someone and saying we have made all these changes because a level 3 said…. Or, I can’t be seen to be taking advice from a level 3, even if it’s right. I should have come up with those ideas. I could have chosen to stay a level 3 or not seen the benefits of doing a degree… But then I was angry. I was angry that those people who I had worked with dismissed me. This time, unlike when I was at college, I was going to do something about it. I thought about doing a degree before, and I probably googled it before. But here I got so angry, so annoyed. They (the people in the meeting) were worried for their own roles too. If they were seen to be taking advice from a level 3 then they were worried about how they would look. They were in fear of the qualification structure and the dominance of that idea. Regardless of something being a good idea, they had a fixed idea about intelligence, or knowledge and now I was not that. Not everyone needs a fixed type of knowledge but that has become assumed by people, it was here. It was a key moment when I chose to do my degree. …. When I started my degree this (job) was a goal that I wanted but had no idea how I would achieve it, or the extent, now, where I am changing the way the sports charity works across the region.

The ’silence’ described by Kate when she told the room about her level 3 qualification relates to what Elwick et al. (2017, p. 6) portray as the quality agenda creating an assessment criterion for professionals’ performance, prioritising a preoccupation with some ‘quality-degree’ qualifications over experiential knowledge (Jackson 2017). The experience Kate described is based around a “modernist construct of quality (which) focuses on qualification levels rather than considering knowledge obtained via the qualifications.” This also leaves to one side the ethical and empirical knowledge shown through multiple forms of intelligence (Campbell-Barr 2017, p.1) or processes of becoming quality as discussed by Jones et al. (2016) and Dalberg et al. (2007).

Simplistic narratives about qualifications improving the quality of the ECEC workforce do not consider the existing empirical knowledge of early childhood professionals or their life stories (Arndt et al. 2018). Favouring systemised knowledge was raised by Kate in the narrative extract – ‘I could have chosen to stay a level 3 or not seen the benefits of doing a degree.’ Here Kate shows her awareness of what Jackson (2017, p.799) calls “the rules of game” which “helped to situate educators with higher-status qualifications in positions of relative advantage”. Kate studied through those higher-status qualifications to achieve a position of ‘relative advantage’ but she could also identify a beneficial construction of professionalism that was outside technocratic models of measurable, standardised knowledge. Kate acknowledged using her practical wisdom, the process of learning from experiences – learning from her encounters at school – to inform her future choices, this is what Dahlberg et al. (2007) referred to as meaning making.

meaning making can be construed within the notion of evaluation where it is implicated within and an integral part of a democratic process of interpretation. As such it is a process that involves making practice visible and thus subject to reflection, dialogue and argumentation, leading to a judgement of value, contextualised and provisional because it is always subject to contestation.

(Dahlberg et al., 2007: ix)

Similarly, in the extract below, Kate shows her use of meaning making. This is a knowledge that Campbell-Barr (2017, p.11) describes as emerging from experience.

Like with tennis, we used to say next week we will have a game, and the parents would say the child can’t count, they can’t count. And we would say its fine don’t worry. There are many ways to count. When the child scored, they won a cone; they built up a pile of cones; whoever has the biggest pile at the end of the game has won. They could count each cone, but they can also see it visually – two piles of cones. There is more here, than there – that’s achievement. We could count and work it out together, but also visually see a winner too. The achievement comes first and ignites the future learning.

Kate’s prerequisite for achievement igniting learning not only disrupted simplistic narratives about qualifications, but it is an approach that informed Kate’s use of online social networking as a basis for agency and political discussion. This is further explored in the next section.

**6.5.4 - Social networking**

Bergviken Rensfeldta, Hillmana and Selwynb (2018) discuss the rise in online social networks over the last 20 years and the impact this is having on the way people reflect on their work, careers and professions, especially those with low-status occupations. Online social networks were “found to provide a powerful platform … to gain social recognition” from within a professional community and beyond (Golan and Babis 2017, p.1). This approach is a virtual grassroots approach to a community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) and it was commented on by Kate as a strategy to maintain support with professionals after accessing training in physical movement.

…the practitioners just don’t trust themselves. Whether that is because they are squashed down, they are not allowed freedom, they have too much red tape to jump through. They have too many strategies and buzz words being thrown at them. … Talking things through and believing in yourself can do things. (My mentor) believed I could do this role at sports charity more than I did. … talking to a mentor means neither side is 100% in control; there is a space in the conversation for discussion and ideas. … Practitioners now, they don’t have someone to listen and talk to, to have that conversation. This is lacking in early years now. There doesn’t seem to be a time or a place for it…. After training now, I keep in contact online and the way (practitioners) speak, they are so keen to do this. They are so keen to be active and doing; they are so engaged. They are better than me at evaluating with early years wording.

Whilst Kate acknowledges her use of online social networking to continue contact with practitioners after their training, there is little research about how professionals navigate these virtual communities of practice or how beneficial they are as spaces for professional-becoming and career development (Bergviken Rensfeldta, Hillmana and Selwynb 2018). There are also questions about what, or how, social media produces within a community of practice assemblage. In their research Golan and Babis (2017) summarise that social networks do create a knowledge web where participants can access and contribute to a growing occupational repository, which captures a ‘bottom up’ swell of agency. But what this knowledge is, how the knowledge is produced or formed and the value it is given by community members is under-researched. What emerged from the visual narrative co-created with Kate is her encouragement of online networking, like Twitter, as a method to the raise the profile of ECEC. She suggests social networks can champion early childhood practice as it happens, providing direct access to organisations or political power through hashtags (tags).

Kate - I listen to their goals and blend that with my skills. Like (at one nursery) my advice was for them… when they tweet to tag in the council, tag in whatever is going on with national charities, tag them in. It’s about getting the message out for them. …

Clarrie – It takes a long-term commitment to see the impact of your work. It takes 10 years for a five-year-old to do GCSES.

Kate – That’s the difficulty … when (progress) does happen, is the person reading that data going to go, oh, this could be because a, b, or c… or will they credit a cause closer to home. … Everyone is going to want to take some credit for this (progress in children’s physical movement). The health visitors will want to say it was because of their work, the children’s centres, the OT themselves will say it’s because of the work they did with those children that came to them. People will also be treated quicker because there are less referrals, and those that are referred will be treated quicker, so the impact of their need will be less, making it an easier need to support – it is hard to track what works for young children. The problem with early years is we don’t get any credit for what we do, or what is done.

Networking via social media may be one method through which early childhood professionals receive recognition for their practice, with instant feedback from the community that values moral, personal and emotional traits (Osgood 2012) or the “the socio-epistemic properties of different kinds of knowledge” (Campbell-Barr 2017, p.2). Lave and Wenger (1991) theorised that establishing a community of practice to embrace collaboration, co-operation and reciprocal relationships through the process of sharing information and experiences was beneficial for the professional development of individuals, settings and professions. Communities of practice may not have originally been online and virtual, but online networks do provide access to people and professionals in ways that would be hard to access in a physical world – especially a global world. However, how social media exercises agency and acts back on those involved is beyond a signal users’ intentionality, social media behaves like a virus, algorithms etc – it is beyond human intentionality. This area is less researched, but Kate did share some of her experiences.

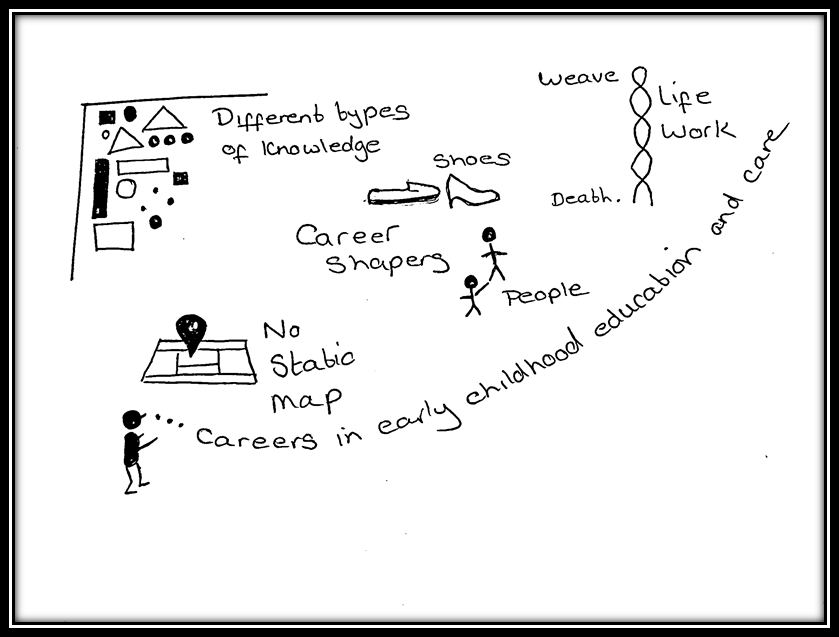
In a similar way to the disquiet Kate shows about qualifications and technocratic professionalism, Kate also shows ways of navigating social media to challenge the values and assumptions that surround and saturate ECEC within society. This is what Kate refers to as ‘society getting a bit political and … (early childhood education and care becoming) a vocation that is valued’. A second reading of Kate’s words highlight a creative use of online networks to forge social connections. Kate encourages early childhood professionals to engage in political dialogue and express political views about the entangled influences shaping practice – ‘tag in the council, tag in whatever is going on with national charities, tag them in’. Kate is championing “online creative participation to express political stances” and communicate within and beyond the profession (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018, p.75), but how this participation ripples into wider events or shapes the assemblage is unclear. In research examining youth online networks during the 2016 US presidential election, Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018, p.75) called this form of agency “distributed creativity as political expression”. This is a process they summarise as having the potential to support people in “(re)claiming agency towards the political process, providing social support … and (re)imagining the political” (Ibid). Kate’s position endorses these research findings about the use of online networks, whilst also critiquing Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat’s (2018) narrow focus on youth involvement online, as I doubt Kate has identified herself as a youth for many years (…or decades!). The question still remains though about how social media produces agency, how it influences humans’ capacity for making judgements, and what it adds/ develops/distracts from the assemblage. These questions reach beyond the scope of this study, and raise ideas for possible further research.

**6.5.5 In summary**

Analysis of the visual narrative co-constructed with Kate tracks how her passion for sport and physical development has driven her career trajectory, resulting in her current role as a training development officer for a regional sports charity where she specialises in the physical development of children aged 0-5 years. Kate holistically and creatively considered the relational world around her when discussing life and work as an early childhood professional, not accepting the dominate narratives and “the current order of the world” as the way it must be (Strom and Martin 2017, p.6). Kate thinks differently. She disrupts simplistic narratives about qualifications and knowledge in similar ways to Campbell-Barr’s (2017) research and argues that professionals ‘needs to get a bit political’ in order to break the silence and infect the fibres of dominant narratives about working in ECEC.

The discussion with Kate details one method she has found to action her call ‘to get a bit political’ as she reaches out beyond social barriers or issues of physical access to the people deemed as associated with power. Kate considers the material and virtual relations of social networking (eg. Twitter) as a communication tool which connects, expands and opens-up a space to platform the talents and voices of early childhood professionals from within the sector. Wider research on the use of social networking as a factor shaping career trajectories and professional decision-making is an emergent field within twenty-first-century research (Golan and Babis 2017) and so is the use of social media as a tool for creative political discussion (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018.)

By embracing different types of knowledge and being open to creative possibilities, the narrative co-created with Kate indicates she is open to hope (Salin 2017) and open to ongoing-becoming – as an individual and for the wider profession. What I learned through analysing Kate’s career story is that she does not dispute the existence or value of generalising principles to help frame or forecast a life working in the early childhood education and care profession. Yet, I think she actively encourages professionals to move beyond the limits of these generalising principles once orientated to the sector. Kate encourages individuals to find and voice new influences that shape people’s experiences, which in turn, can contribute to the evolution of generalising narratives about career stories in early childhood education and care.

**Chapter 7: Research findings**

(Postcard 7: Visualising the research findings)

**7.1 Introduction**

This chapter begins with a recap of the research background and rationale, before subsequent sections summarise the findings of the research. The implications for theory and practice in the early childhood education and care profession are considered, as well as reflections on the methodological process.

In summary, this chapter includes the following sections:

7.2 - Outlining the research questions and summarising the findings

7.3 – Finding methodological influences

7.4 – In summary

**7.2 Outlining the research questions and findings**

This section briefly summarises the background to the research and the main findings in response to these research questions:

* What do early childhood professionals say about their lives and careers working in early childhood education and care?
* What professional transitions are identified by early childhood professionals as shaping their career trajectories and approaches to practice?

• What factors do early childhood professionals identify as influencing their professional transitions and career trajectories?

• (How) do early childhood professionals express their lives impacting on their practice, or their practice impacting on their lives?

• (How) can a bricolage of creative art based, poststructuralist, new materialist and posthumanist approaches contribute to the study of the lives and careers of early childhood education and care professionals?

The research sought to gain an insight into how four early childhood professionals narrate their lives and work as they navigate a career in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) profession. According to Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2017, p.x) the ECEC profession is “largely and widely devalued … and what it entails is often invisible”. Lash and Caster (2018) state that the work and lives of early childhood professionals are often clandestine, with Elfer et al. (2018) describing them as a complex mix of love, satisfaction and exhaustion. This research offers a contribution to this growing area of study by exploring the experiences of four people who work in the early childhood education and care profession in England.

The research offers three key insights into how early childhood professionals become early childhood professionals. Firstly, the research finds an absence of theorised or recognised discussions about career pathways for early childhood professionals. This is an absence of career discussions within the literature and also from the four participants involved in this study. My reading of the four stories found a limited engagement with the term ‘career’ when the early childhood professionals discussed their lives and work, yet each individual story utilised career concepts and spoke of entangled decisions shaping professional transitions and career trajectories. This second finding focuses the similarities in the way the four participants discuss life factors as influential when talking about their work experiences. The stories indicate that the view of the profession within society influences their professional behaviours, career decisions, or transitions. This aligns with Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997, p.28) approach to understanding careers, where they theorise that external influences are an integral part of the decision-making process and this research joins their calls for “a sociological look at career decision-making”. The third finding advances the ways of thinking about career trajectories and professional transitions through the adoption of a bricolage methodology using creative art and materialist approaches, by which I mean how the participants refer to clothes, shoes and objects within their accounts to express their career decisions and career-shaping behaviours. Each of these findings are unpacked in more detail in the following sections.

**7.2.1 - An absence of theorised or recognised discussions about career pathways**

Analysis of the four visual narratives co-created with Sarah, Tony, Charlotte and Kate highlight a deficit in dialogue and discourse regarding careers within the early childhood education and care profession. Sector organisations such as CACHE, AllAboutCareers, EarlyYearsCareers.com and Nursery World do use the term career when discussing professional development, yet this term is not unpacked, and its recognition does not continue within research or academic publications. An absence of career terminology was found within the research literature and within the discussions co-created with the four participants. This section explains why this absence of career dialogue may be created through the symbiotic relationship occurring between those working within the profession and the influences on, and from, wider society.

Within this research, careers were not understood as a linear predetermined pathway and universal routes were not sought to plot career trajectories in ECEC. Through a sociological lens, the term career becomes less focused on a single career decision and instead becomes used in a broader sense. A career becomes contextualised within society, as well as being individually woven. As discussed in chapter 3, careers are understood by embracing the influences between the person and the public, between an individual and society, between humans and more than humans. In this research, external influences are an integral part of understanding career transitions and trajectories Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997).

The sharing of a career story, incorporating transition and trajectories, appreciates how individuals navigate the(ir) changing landscape, how a person’s life is affected by contested professionalism, or how life events rupture into the complex experiences of love, satisfaction and exhaustion (Elfer et al. 2018) in the ECEC sector. This research found that the process of becoming was discussed in both the literature and with the participants through the umbrella term of professional development. Yet the process of professional development was not connected or conceived as a ‘career’ trajectory. Dyer (2018), and similarly Taylor (2018), contribute to the debates about professionals and professionalism in ECEC with small, rich narrative-based studies, yet they default to discussing careers within a nationally recognised structure. Dyer (2018, p.356) discusses the lack of a “nationally recognised career structure … which might offer [professionals] a clear career pathway … and temper some of the inconsistencies”. But this approach endorses the power of the government to dominate the agenda in ECEC, missing how individuals navigate their changing landscapes amongst personal circumstances and the influences of external factors. Defaulting to the opinion that a career needs to be a generalising nationally recognised structure created through the power of those outside the profession further exasperates what Urban (2010) called the epistemological hierarchy in ECEC. Research by Urban (2010), and similarly Osgood (2012, 2006), describes ECEC as having a reliance on external measures such as policy reform, government agendas, qualifications and shifting understandings of professionalism. Whilst these external discourses will remain influential, this research calls for more experiences of career stories from individuals within the profession to also be championed – to keep considering how early childhood professionals are growing and changing as human beings within the ecology of the early childhood profession.

This recommendation is made because the four stories analysed in this research do not align with a generalised understanding of a career like Dyer (2018) is suggesting. When talking about their careers, Sarah and Charlotte offered:

I liked that [College] but I liked the hands-on experiences with the children more. I went full time to college and in placement for two days per week in a nursery (0-5-year-old children). My placement turned into a full-time job and this is the wonder and sparkle and all the stars (on the drawing). I love it. The three shapes above the stars are to show that I tried other work whilst I was studying – I needed the money – but they were smaller things to me, so I show that in size. They made me realise how lucky I was to work with children in the nursery. … I have been at the nursery for five years, just over and I started as an early years practitioner whilst at college … and now I lead the toddlers’ spaces

(Data analysis extract, from Sarah 7.1.2)

I finished my A levels (at the same time) as their play leader had a lot of disciplinary issues, so I ended up coming here (nursery). So, I started in play work and did all my play work qualifications, and then got a bit bored (on map). So, I decided to do my nursing degree. I did two years of my nursing degree and got a bit of a setback as my mum was diagnosed with cancer. The ties to here meant I quit my degree after two years and came back into play work. I did a round circle back in really.

(Data analysis extract, from Charlotte 7.3.2)

Here Sarah and Charlotte share individual experiences about their early transitions working in ECEC. Peak and McDowall’s (2012 p.395) research helps interpret Kate’s experiences as drifting or ‘going with the flow’ within the early stages of her career, where she tried out different jobs and career paths, all loosely associated with caring professions. Alternatively, Sarah indicates a commitment to working with young children from her initial training at college and she stayed in the same provision for five years. Both these participants embrace multiple sources of knowledge when making sense of their work, similar to the findings by Bosley, Arnold and Cohen (2009). There is a diversity of personal and professional events, of tacit and modernist knowledge, being mixed together to talk about their career trajectory. These diverse and bespoke events add complexity and uncertainty to their work, which I argue is at odds with a traditional understanding of a (linear) career that is being supported by Dyer (2018) and others (Taylor 2018).

Traditionally a career was understood to involve “incremental rises laid out within a respectable profession” (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1989, p.46) creating a linear style of progression. What this research indicates – especially within the visual patterns of the participants’ drawings – is that a career trajectory was not being perceived as linear, many were not even illustrated with straight lines. For these participants, a broader conceptualisation of a career was embraced, beyond that of incremental stages, where careers are understood as lived by individuals, embedded in the events of their lives and wider societal influences (Bullough 2008; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1887; Cuzzocrea and Lyon 2011)*.* The extracts from Sarah and Charlotte utilise multiple sources of knowledge to help narrate their experiences. By multiple sources of knowledge, I mean they do not just limit their career trajectory to qualifications or policy changes. They incorporate practical wisdom and events from their personal lives too; their growth as human beings influences their work.

Through the phrase multiple sources of knowledge, Campbell-Barr (2017) calls for knowledge to represent both the empirical and ethical constructs of ECEC professionalism. She urges us to reduce the dominance of modernist constructs that seek objectivity and certainty as a sole source of measurable learning or knowledge, arguing this silences the knowledge-base from ‘within’ the profession. She is suggesting that previous experiences, practical knowledge and ‘dispositions to care’ need to be valued (more) as knowledge, as this can support an understanding of ethical responsibility and continual growth. This is relevant to this research as the participants are using their previous experiences and practical knowledge as they narrate their careers, not just objective measures such as qualifications or job titles.

The value of different types of knowledge, such as qualifications, practical wisdom or experience was also discussed with Kate. Kate shared an experience where professionals changed their behaviour towards her when they learned about her qualification level and how her knowledge had been gained:

They (the people in the meeting) were worried for their own roles ... If they were seen to be taking advice from a level 3 (qualified professional) then they were worried about how they would look. They were in fear of the qualification structure and the dominance of that idea. Regardless of something being a good idea, they had a fixed idea about intelligence, or knowledge and now I was not that. Not everyone needs a fixed type of knowledge but that has become assumed by people; it was here. It was a key moment when I chose to do my degree.

(Data analysis extract, from Kate 7.4.3)

Here Kate is reflecting on an experience where she wanted to disrupt the simplistic narratives about qualifications and knowledge in similar ways to Campbell-Barr’s (2017) research. Kate argues that professionals need to break the silence of tacit knowledge that can be measured through a qualification structure and champion diverse types of knowledge when discussing work in ECEC. Kate is proposing that her diverse experience of physical development from being a sports coach is a valuable tool in this meeting, yet she believes this was dismissed because she had not studied for a higher form of measurable qualification. This appears to be a key event that shaped a transition to degree level study for Kate, but it is not a moment she conceptualises through the term career.

Drawing on multiple sources of knowledge can be seen as a strength representing the diversity of practice, yet diversity also adds complexity and uncertainty when curating a career story. The diversity and lack of consistency within the workforce and the limited use of career terminology leaks and informs the understanding of the profession within wider society. It is this diversity and complexity that may be contributing to a lack of coherent messages within society about what the work of an early childhood professional may involve, or, at least, these experiences are not challenging existing historically informed ideas that remain in society. This research finds an absence of theorised or recognised discussions about career pathways in ECEC not because these discussions are not occurring, but because the term career is rarely used by the professionals in research or in practice. If this language is not used within the profession, it is a challenge for society to embrace an understanding of careers in ECEC. Therefore, the diversity of understanding knowledge and the lack of career dialogue within the profession adds to the complexity of how careers are understood beyond the profession, within society. This relationship is symbiotic though, as the research finds that the behaviours of society also influence the thinking and career trajectories of professionals within the ECEC workforce. There is an entanglement in career decision-making processes, and this finding is explored in the following section.

**7.2.2 Navigating careers through entangled decisions**

Stories of living and working as an early childhood professional need to use language that can embrace movement, navigation, ripples and changes. Peake and McDowall’s (2012) research classed career transitions as decisions or changes that are always interwoven as part of a relational network of affects, concluding that career transitions can be planned or triggered by chance – chance encounters, chance catalysts, chance opportunities – being in the right place at the right time. In this research, professional transitions and career trajectories are conceived of as a series of choices and pathways that have internal harmonics or resonances for an individual. They are not measured against external ideals; instead changes are understood in terms of ‘success’ for that individual in line with their own measures, needs and wishes.

Within the individual stories co-created in this research, transitions are woven through each visual narrative in different ways and with different flavours. Society’s perceptions of the profession are one factor that emerged as influencing some of the professionals’ decision-making processes. In some of the participants’ stories, the (historically-flavoured) view of the profession within society impacted on their choice of transitions and career trajectories. This is an example of ‘past time still mattering’ and the past still informing the social construction of this work. This was strongly visible during the discussion with Tony when he raised the issue of gender.

When I was in the classroom and a child needed some care, had had an accident and wet themselves. I wanted to help that child; being in wet clothes is not nice, but I didn’t have the confidence to be that person that the child needed. I was more scared about the child going home and saying, ‘Tony helped me today in the bathroom.’ Do you know what I mean? … It’s a scary mine-field; there are perceptions here and that limits what I think I can do. I didn’t know if it would be frowned upon if I helped change a child. When the children did PE and they were all getting changed, happy chatting in their underwear, I’m thinking, ‘I’m getting out’; I didn’t know if I should be there watching them, supervising. … I did discuss it with my mentor and she said not to worry about it. She had been in the school for three years and in three years they had never had a male in early years.

… My big thing, being a male working in early years, is that I have come across a lot of hostility. … I have been called names. I have been called a paedophile, ‘Oh you must be gay’, I must be weird, all because I am a man working in early years with young children, three- and four-year olds.

(Data analysis extract from Tony 7.2.4)

There are two key areas of discussion to be considered here. Firstly, the career shaping behaviour being described by Tony is self-surveillance (Jones 2001), where Tony is led to doubt his current actions due to societal messages. This leads Tony to make decisions about his career based upon anticipated future events (May 2017). In terms of career trajectories, this approach to decision-making indicates that time became an influencing factor, as he made decisions based not only upon what took place in the present, but also on his hopes for the future (Taber 2012).

Secondly, Tony’s experiences chime with a long-running (historically-flavoured) discourse of gendered care (Warin 2017; Mistry and Sood 2015; Brownhill 2015; Steedman 1985), and stereotypes about gender (in)equality and homophobia that circulate within wider society. For Tony, these generalising discourses have influenced his daily experiences and shaped his career trajectory as he navigated his work away from front line practice with children, choosing to work with adults instead. Following this issue further, what also emerges within this extract is that navigating gender did not appear to be an issue for his (female) mentor and opportunities were missed for early childhood professionals to help challenge these narratives. The ECEC profession needs to recognise and develop the confidence to rise up and repeatedly challenge gender awareness (and other inequalities) as these experiences are encountered, so that positive messages infiltrate wider society’s perceptions of this work.

Through Tony’s sense of agency, he believes he made choices and took control of constructing his own career trajectory. Yet in another reading of this transition, the profession did not help champion positive (male) career stories from within the workforce, which ripple out into the wider society beyond. This is not an easy situation, and it highlights how unfounded judgements about working with young children exist in society and still have an impact on how professionals seek to understand themselves and the work they do. More research is needed about how the career behaviours of professionals are shaped by (negative) generalised narratives.

Experiences of navigating career transitions was also shared by Kate and Sarah:

… I sort of drifted into part-time work to fit in around the family. I had my son… I didn’t want to be excellent in tennis and train those to become more excellent; that wasn’t it for me. I wanted to see the young children achieve and follow on from that achievement. … I got quite renowned at the local activity sessions (run by local charity). I was allowed to do more and start to change things. I did all of these things (indicated on timeline) volunteering first as it is the only way you can get in.

(Data analysis extract, from Kate 7.4)

…working with children is more than work for me; it’s something different every day. I may be helping the children to learn and explore but they are doing the same things for me too.

(Data analysis extract, from Sarah 7.1)

This first extract highlights Kate’s passion for sport, where coaching young children became her hope (Boddy et al. 2017; Silin 2017). It gave a richness to her life and work, which also became a career sustaining strategy, serving as a motivating factor despite doubts or challenges. The interconnection between personal and professional interests was a repeating force in some of these stories, or aspects of them, indicating that working in ECEC was more than training or paid employment. This supports Cousins’ (2016, p.1) claims that “practitioners bring so much more to their work than that which they learned from their professional training or work experience”. However, the extract above from Sarah extends Cousins’ work further, reinforcing the need for a diverse, sociological lens to be used to appreciate this profession. Sarah indicates that not only is she bringing more-than modernist knowledge to her work, but that it is *her* gaining knowledge and experience from her entanglement with the children – rather than teaching being a one-directional benefit to the child. This reciprocal knot highlights an internal insight that Ensher et al. (2017 p.119) describe as a career-defining moment. It is unclear if this insight developed gradually over time for Sarah or was “experienced as an illuminating lightning bolt that provides instantaneous clarity”, but it is a thought-provoking recognition about her (working) life.

Reflections like Kate’s or Sarah’s do not just change what a person does, they change a person’s lived experiences, with the potential to change who they are becoming (Collet-Sabe 2016; Leach 2016). How they grow and change as a person is influencing the ecology of their practice, by which I mean the network of relationships, play spaces and teaching skills which they utilise daily. For Kate and Sarah, there is a sense that they ‘liked’ who they were becoming as they sought to make sense of the linkages between their lives and their work.

These stories provided a lens to understand how transitions are becoming increasingly prevalent in twenty-first-century life, where careers emerge from bespoke knots of life and work. There are elements of life that may seem disconnected, yet they become knotted together through the narration of an individual’s experiences. This research proposes that the lived experiences of working in ECEC is championed more publicly by members of the profession, challenging existing images within society and offering a more diverse range of discourses. Society will only begin to recognise (the changes in) this profession and what it can offer as a career when the people within the profession start to discuss their experiences more loudly, more openly, so these are the stories that gain social recognition. The workforce needs to have the confidence to rise up and take responsibility for making ECEC a (desirable) career, adding to the conversation and opening up spaces for diversity when discussing this work.

As I interacted with the four stories, another space appeared through which to discuss careers in early childhood education and care. I came to appreciate that transitions were not always represented by reflections or reforms, but through the assemblage of materials, spaces, and places too. Considering careers as assemblages which can be narrated through the use of objects, materials and places is considered as the next finding.

**7.2.3 Considering careers as assemblages**

How materials, spaces and places such as clothes, shoes, objects, classrooms, playgrounds and offices are embroiled within notions of professional transitions and career trajectories within and beyond early childhood education and care is a growing area of research (Pulsford 2016; Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2017; Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake 2018; Bono, De Craene and Kenis 2019). This is an entanglement that was also present in my interpretation of this research, and strongly visible through the experiences of Tony:

… this is what I am like now, because I am in a position where I should look like a lecturer in early childhood should look. I don’t even go to the supermarket in a pair of shorts in case I bump into someone. It’s time I grew up. I am proud of what I do. This is reflected in what I wear now. I haven’t bought a pair of trainers in 12 months; I love trainers. I walk around in shoes; my feet hurt constantly. But I prefer to look smart than look like a student. … I turn up smart, professional but relatable. A shirt and shoes, jumper and blazer. It humanises me.

Tony’s discussion of re-dressing himself for work shows the leakages between the binary thresholds of life/work or personal/professional. I read this extract as an example of an assemblage combining to create something new, or in Deleuzian (1988, p.19) terms an example of “when a body ‘encounters’ another body, or an idea another idea, … the relations sometimes combine to form a more powerful whole”. But the shoes and clothes appear to become signifiers for a range of meanings, with multiple lines of flight. Tony interprets this new assemblage as making him more accessible and open to the students in his care. Pryor and Bright’s (2014) approach to careers may analyse this extract as illustrating ‘career developing behaviour’, as Tony makes changes that could be perceived as enhancing his standing in a work environment, whereas a third reading of this extract may interpret this assemblage as not always comfortable. Tony indicates a physical discomfort from his shoes constantly hurting his feet, which Lenz Taguchi (2012) may describe as the matter (the shoes) making itself intelligible by acting back on the human. This may indicate a discomfort or disequilibrium with the assemblage involving Tony, which in a Deluzian sense interprets the shoes as a function of influence. Yet, this appears to be presented as a discomfort Tony is willing to ‘live with’, in the short term at least. It is this reading of future possibilities and tolerances for discomfort that leads me to a fourth interpretation of Tony’s words. An interpretation where the materials (the shoes) matter, but also time matters differently too. Tony is reflecting on his current discomfort, a discomfort in the present, and I wonder how this discomfort may be described if he were to retell this event in the future – (how) would time make this matter differently to him?

Tony’s visual narrative is only one story, yet it contributes to the debates calling to widen rather than narrow discussions about careers in early childhood education and care. This research proposes careers are considered as an assemblage of people, places, objects and things, where a web of multidirectional forces may be appreciated. For example, whilst Tony acknowledges some pain with his current working life, he stops short of openly addressing this as any form of vulnerability. Appearing vulnerable can feel risky and exposing within a workplace according to Papaux (2016). It may lead to worries of being perceived as not worthy because the narrative of ‘doing one’s best’ is stronger. Sharing a career trajectory may convey an invitation to avoid acknowledging vulnerability and I question if this may be heightened within ECEC practices as practitioners are expected to become a secure base to support young children (Davis and Dunn 2018) rather than appearing vulnerable themselves. However, Sarah described how personal vulnerability outside work was supported by relationships and the culture in the nursery, which ultimately benefited her in many ways.

I’m glad I had nursery when me and my boyfriend split up. This is the black hole here. … I saw my life going one way (on map) and it didn’t. I saw the wedding and the family and it stopped. The ripples from that wandered into my work and numbed me for a while but it did fade away. I found myself re-focusing on my practice and like they say ‘throwing myself into work’. There was some forest schools training available and I went and I loved it. It re-energised me. It bettered my practice in the toddlers but it also re-energised me again. I think my passion for early childhood helped heal my broken heart.

(Extract of data, from Sarah 7.1.4).

A similar approach to work supporting periods of vulnerability can be found within Charlotte’s narrative when she spoke of her leadership style:

I want my staff to have a relationship with me and if something was having an impact in their life it can influence their work too. I want them to come and talk with me; we have it set up in the business plan that we can take staff off contact time (with children) and offer different tasks whilst they process other issues in their life. … It’s just a bit of time to help and not add to the stress. We are never under or on ratio, so we can work this way; we prioritise it. … We used to try and say that what happens at home stays at home; we tried to work that way, just come to work, get on with work. But if it’s working with children that is not an approach that works. It doesn’t work, so we take the approach that they can take five minutes out if needed … it can’t fix their worries but may offer some help. It happened this morning actually, one staff member had a bad driving lesson before she came to work; another staff member … said she has just gone to the staff room for a good cry and will be back soon. And that’s fine. She just needs a little space rather than have that with her whilst working with children. She was much more focused afterwards.

(Extract of data, from Charlotte 7.3.4).

Papaux (2016, p.333) describes this culture as one where professionals can be ‘seen’ when they experience difficult times. Rather than excluding vulnerable emotions as a non-work issue they were embraced and supported – they were owned – as part the ongoing processes of becoming and the ecology of early childhood practice. Charlotte’s actions show an understanding of an evolving professional within an evolving community (Barnett et al. 2016, p.23), where Charlotte as a leader embraces the changing interests and trajectories of her practitioners by finding a way to benefit the community of practice too. Fostering career adaptability within the profession helps sustain a space for hope as well as embracing vulnerability (Salin 2017, p.91; Pelia-Shunster 2018). This emotional entanglement is part of the ecological assemblage of spaces, places, time, people and materials that comes with understanding “a career is a process not an outcome” (Pelia-Shuster 2018, p.453).

Furthermore, the extracts from Sarah and Charlotte both recognised the value of relationships and that career-shaping encounters can rupture from any opportunity or object. Research by Bosley, Arnold and Cohen (2009) and Ensher et al. (2017) focuses on the human influences of career shapers, but this research tries to reach beyond the human influencers to propose career-defining moments can be spaces, places objects and things too. Where shoes, a place to cry, an online community or paint speckles can lead to professionals recognising meaningful events when they occur and processing them in a way that leads to more positive career consequences. In turn, recognising career-shaping behaviours in others will support professionals and the wider profession to build up collateral as career shapers, championing the wider social construction of ECEC as a professional career.

The visual narrative co-created with Kate further adds to the conceptualisation of a career as an assemblage, reaching beyond the use of materials or places to embrace the platform of online social networks. Golan and Babis (2017, p.1) claim that online social networks have become “a powerful platform … to gain social recognition” from within a professional community and this resonates with Kate’s experiences:

Practitioners now, they don’t have someone to listen and talk to, to have that conversation. This is lacking in early years now. There doesn’t seem to be a time or a place for it…. After training now, I keep in contact online and the way (practitioners) speak, they are so keen to do this. They are so keen to be active and doing; they are so engaged.

Like (at one nursery) my advice was for them… when they tweet to tag in the council, tag in whatever is going on with national charities, tag them in. It’s about getting the message out for them.

(Data analysis extract from Kate 7.4.4)

Kate’s actions create a ‘virtual’ community of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) where a ‘bottom up’ web of knowledge can be accessed as a growing occupational repository. Kate indicates she uses social networks to champion early childhood practice as it happens, which she suggests provides direct access to organisations or political power. Yet there is little research about the impact of social networking on people or practice in ECEC, or a detailed understanding of both the wanted and unintended outcomes. More research is required about how professionals access and narrate their lived experiences via online communications, how these connections influence the behaviour of other professionals and how social media produces agency to influence human users. Also, questions remain about what knowledge is shared online and the value it is given by the assembled community and beyond. What Kate’s narrative does indicate, is that she will use these communication tools without having answers to these questions and that she will promote this behaviour among other professionals. Therefore, online platforms are becoming another network within the ecology of early childhood practice and a potential influence within the assemblage of a career.

By exploring the particularities of the stories co-created with Sarah, Charlotte, Tony and Kate, my key findings are the consideration of careers as an assemblage and the limited discussions about career stories. The use of a visual narrative method, nested within the research methodology, also needs consideration and it impacts on the outcomes of the research. These methodological influences are discussed in the following section.

**7.3 Finding methodological influences**

This section speaks to the 5th research question and considers the influences of the method and methodological framework on the findings from this research. There are two areas of the research methodology that particularly influenced the direction and findings of this research; moments that ‘glowed’ (MacLure 2013; Moxnes and Osgood 2018) as the approach of the study tangled within the shifting assemblages of each participant and myself as a researcher. Firstly, the use of drawing within the visual narrative is discussed and its ability to represent familiarity in a less familiar way (Mannay 2010, 2016). Secondly, the approach to data analysis will be considered, discussing how the entanglement of data-and-researcher produced these findings (MacLure 2013a, 2013b).

**7.3.1 Data illustrating familiarity differently**

A narrative methodology was chosen for this research as a story can represent life as both unified and broad according to Polkinghorne (1988, p.36), “where disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts”. A unified story is not neat and tidy though; a story can be messy and incomplete. Nor is a story a life. As part of the storytelling method used in this research, a visually drawn element was included as a tool to help unsettle familiarity (Mannay 2010). By unsettling familiarity, I mean prompting a process of rethinking the everyday and re-looking at daily life and the unfolding of a career as it is translated through a different (less familiar) skill. This is a process in art-based research that Clough and Nutbrown (2019, p.4) describe as bringing into focus those “often taken-for-granted parts of life”. Knight et al. (2016) describe drawing as a common mode of communication within ECEC practices, yet this focus is usually directed towards children’s messages and interactions rather than dialogue amongst professionals. This research responded to Knight et al.’s (2016) call for drawing to be utilised as a mode of communication in research with adults who work in ECEC, and in this research, the method yielded positive outcomes.

Similar to studies by Pain (2012), Knight et al. (2016) and Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018), participants in this research embraced the visually drawn aspects of the study positively, without hesitating about this approach to communication. I acknowledge this may not always be the case and agree with Pain (2012) that any adverse reactions to a participant being asked to draw visual data must be considered within the ethical processes. The strength of this method lies within its “affirming and empowering” approach, which is “intricately connected in the attainment of relationship-focused outcomes” (Pain 2012, p.303). Therefore, any resistance to the method should still be responded to with the relationships in mind, such as participants choosing not to participate or their ability to withdraw at any time.

I would recommend the use of visual methods in future research, yet I would be hesitant to affirm this tool alone creates richer data. Any reasons for enhanced or richer data need to be embedded within conversations about drawing facilitating rich communication, enabling reflection on familiarity or habit, and the expression of tacit knowledge or emotions. For example, Tony’s visual map highlighted the concentric circle rhythm to his career story which was debated during analysis:

The spiral shape illustrated in the map wound in a continuous and gradually tightening curve. Mathematicians call this shape a logarithmic spiral, or a self-similar spiral, and I felt it unflattened Tony’s narrative, offering a sense of movement to his professional trajectory before and during his work in ECEC. Whilst Tony discussed many transition points – such as gaining an ECEC degree qualification, or moving workplaces to school and later higher education teaching – because of the spiral shape, there was no assumption that these transitions were a linear process, or linear progression, as discussed by Leach (2016). Alternatively, the spiral imagery was always future orientated, embracing a “humbling recognition” that there is always an unknown (Arndet et al. 2018, p.6).

(Data analysis with Tony, extract from section 7.2.2)

I argue that the patterns and marks drawn by Tony added to the discussion in ways that I think would have been hard to achieve otherwise – a complexification. This, I believe, is what Clough and Nutbrown (2019, p.4) mean when they describe art-based research as bringing into focus “the taken for granted parts of life”. The data analysis shows that Tony did discuss his life and work as interwoven experiences, where the reach of one event could ripple into other events. Yet the image offered an expression of his life and work that may not have been verbalised as strongly; it may have been taken for granted. Or maybe, I would not have recognised this strength had the pattern of the visual data not transcended its constitutive parts.

Similarly, when discussing the use of visual data with Sarah, she shared her thinking about the use of patterns and how she made marks with the pen on the paper – ‘I started with a line, but really, I made spaces… spaces of my life’ (Data analysis extract from Sarah 7.1.2.). Sarah showed an active understanding of how materials and shapes had significance in her experience of assembling and sharing knowledge. I interpret the way she used the visual map as an awareness of documentation mattering, where the use of the pen and the paper helped her to move to a new position of understanding (Barry 2017). The materials – which include the pen, the paper, the map, and the space and place – were active agents intermingling in the construction of knowledge (Barad 2008; Lenz Taguchi 2010). By demonstrating an awareness of the multiple and competing messages involved in her use and (re)construction of herself through the materials, she demonstrated knowledge of continual becoming, continually being (re)made, and that one such becoming would be the representation she made of herself at that time. I don’t know whether these readings would have emerged without the visual data, yet in this study – where the participants were the experts in their own lives – the visual element added positively to the research.

I suggest the visual element added positively to the research because I think the drawing method encouraged pre-thought and preparation by each participant, where they reflected on their working lives and considered how this could be represented visually. In this way, the drawing was the catalyst for the reflection to occur, before the discussion with the researcher. This preparation or pre-thought may have teased out details that may have been otherwise silenced or remained silent amongst the familiarity of discussing one’s own life. This research suggests that more studies are conducted to explore what participants views are when they have taken part in visual methods, as this area of creative-based research methods remains less well researched.

Within this thesis I also used visual drawings in the form of postcards at the start of every chapter. My aim, when including these postcards, was to mirror the methodology of the study somewhat, adding a form of visual presence to all the written chapters. I argue that this consistency has been achieved, as all chapters hold postcards, yet I align myself with Knight et al. (2012) when they described working on the edge of a method as “a little unnerving”. I support Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018) who suggest that whenever we work or focus on unfamiliar processes in research, or society, we can experience elements of that un-familiarisation or marginalisation ourselves. I found that creating a suitable visual summary for a chapter, or part of a chapter, was an unfamiliar way of thinking that created methodological ‘fluidity’ (Koro Ljungberg 2015). It was one that I enjoyed and one that was isolating, in that it can be perceived as an odd process within academia (Sousanis 2016), and viewed as a technique that “is somehow … more nervous, for all concerned” (Clough and Nutbrown 2019, p.6) because presenting thoughts within research is dominated by the written word. I am grateful to Sousanis (2016) and Barry (2017) for their visual work and inspiration when ideas (and confidence) escaped me.

Some visual postcards were drawn easily, such as postcard 4 – the literature review, as the blocks of thought in the writing translated into the construction of building blocks for the image. However, the postcard in Chapter 2 - introducing myself, the research and the research context involved many re-drafts. I had many versions of postcard 2, with very different illustrations but I was not comfortable with them for a long time. I think this process helped me as a researcher to remember the reality of the method that I was asking the participants to take part in. Representing thoughts visually is not easy, but when I reached the design you see in Chapter 2, it did help me crystallise my intentions aimed for in the writing.

Additionally, for me, the postcards offered another benefit. The drawing process helped me to think differently – in images not words – but it was this difference that also helped me to stay present in the study. “Drawing gave me a place to go, so I could stay…” writes Barry (2017 p.105) and this is how I came to view the postcards. When I knew I should stay working on the research yet needed a break, or had lost focus on writing, the postcards gave me a place to go and something different to do, that was still on task and kept me (re)considering the topic at hand. I recognise the benefits in the process of creating the visual postcards for this thesis, yet there may also be potential benefits and limitations for the reader. I foresee that some postcards may be more relatable than others, just as they were to me during the study, but this difference enables space for discussions to continue.

In summary, all the visual data, including those gathered with the participants and the visual postcards drawn for the start of each chapter, helped illustrate knowledge in less familiar ways (Mannay 2010; Clough and Nutbrown 2019). I do not recommend visual methods or visual elements in research as a binary of better/worse, richer/poorer when compared with the written word. Visual drawings created space for difference in this research, where drawing held off familiarity of thoughts and provided a space, or a time, or a process (or all three) for new assemblages to form.

**7.3.2 Dancing with data**

The visual element within the narrative methodology aided space for difference when sharing the familiarity of one’s working life, yet familiarity was something that I sought and embraced once data had been co-created with each participant. MacLure (2013) describes a relationship of ‘data-and-researcher’ when discussing the processes of analysis and this is something I found occurring within this research. The data did not stop, stable and steady once they had been co-created with each of the four participants. The data lived with me. The data travelled with me and weaved through my thoughts and daily experiences. The data and I danced our way through each week, voyaging through this strangeness and exploring sequences of movements before purposely selecting the next steps. MacLure (2013 p.660) writes that researchers experiencing analysis as a *process* “are no longer autonomous agents, choosing and disposing [of data]. Rather, we are obliged to acknowledge that data have their ways of making themselves intelligible to us.”

The idea of data making itself intelligible to me occurred when considering the data co-created with Tony, and the interpretation of him re-dressing to make sense of life and work.

I don’t even go to the supermarket in a pair of shorts in case I bump into someone… I walk around in shoes; my feet hurt constantly.

(Data analysis with Tony, extract from section 7.2.5)

The visual narrative data created with Tony was living with me, and it re-emerged in a meaningful way in my own moment of (literal) re-dressing. I do not think I was consciously considering the story of Tony at the time of getting dressed, but the data and my actions combined in that moment. I align with MacLure (2013) that this was not data being treated as inert and analysis being ‘done to’ data. The data lived with me and through this process of ‘becoming meaningful’ the discussion of findings emerged. I also accept there would be different interpretations for different researchers and readers. This analysis is specific to me as the observer. Yet I recognise that different interpretations emerge for me in different time contexts, as time matters differently over time and what may have mattered to me in the present analysis may be a different mattering in the future. This multiplicity may be perceived by some as a limitation. Yet, in line with the poststructural approach of this research, a single truth was not sought, preferring constructed knowledge instead.

A limitation of using visual data and dancing through data analysis could be the questions raised surrounding ‘whose voice’ is heard (Rose 2001; Mannay 2010). Whilst this is a common barrier in other approaches to research too, embracing multiple voices can add complexity. This research was guided by the work of Mannay (2016, p.347) who states that “to gain an understanding of the internal narrative of the image, it is imperative to acknowledge the image-maker; and the notion that the most salient aspect in understanding a visual image is what the creator intended”. Beyond the image makers, this research employs a methodology where I, as a researcher, also have a voice and the distinctions are made between whose voice is being shared. This approach to living data may be a challenge in some research, or for some researchers. It was not an easy process, as data haunted me, a source of guilt when I was not considering it, and a source of bewilderment when I was. Barad (2007) calls this the practice of knowing in being, or for MacLure (2013) it is experimenting and seeing where it leads. Either way, I join the proposals for more research to be conducted about relational data analysis, owning the presence and influence of the humans involved and recognising the value of keeping curiosity visible during the research process.

Dancing with the data as a process of analysis and using visual narratives with participants to illustrate familiarity differently are used to encapsulate implementing the method and methodology in this research. It is through these approaches that the findings surfaced when exploring the subject of careers in the early childhood education and care profession.

**7.4 - In summary**

This research explores an up close and intimate view of how four early childhood professionals are continually becoming early childhood professionals as they navigate factors shaping their career trajectories. By exploring the particularities shared by Sarah, Tony, Charlotte and Kate, this research details the bespoke ways they navigate their changing professional landscape as part of their everyday lives and opens a window to further understand the contextualisation of their career trajectories. What emerges is a deficit in dialogue and discourseregarding a career in early childhood education and care, with an absence of theorised or recognised discussions about career pathways for early childhood professionals. The research found that knots of experience influence transitions and career trajectories, and these experiences are narrated through a broad assemblage of spaces, places, objects, people and time.

As professional transitions become increasingly prevalent in twenty-first-century life (Pelia-Shuster 2018; Barnett et al. 2016), this research helps appreciate the bespoke factors influencing change and the process(es) of change for professionals living and working within ECEC. The ability to recognise professional transitions can be illuminating, and in an evolving landscape like ECEC, this research offers some beneficial insights to aid the sector in counteracting generalising theories of professionalism. Embracing a sociological approach to understanding a career (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2018) allows space for multiple sources of knowledge to be assimilated when representing the diversity of the profession and through a framework that may help stabilise the uncertainty that accompanies complexity.

This study offers practical knowledge about my views as a researcher when using visual tools as part of a written thesis and the benefits of not losing curiosity even when actions can seem counter instinctual or different. The findings of this research also contribute knowledge about living-with-data as a process of analysis, where time is an active agent that can aid diffractive analysis and thinking. This study supports the insights of MacLure (2013) who brings us face to face with our own presence and influence as a researcher, and this study contributes ideas about dancing with data through an analysis process that is specific to me.

In summary, this research provides a space for learning and (re)thinking about the lives and careers of early childhood professionals. The study aimed to contribute to the gap in knowledge about career trajectories experienced by early childhood professionals and continue the debates of Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018), Lash and Caster (2018) and Elfer et al. (2018) with both theoretical and practical implications proposed. The research proposes greater theorisation of career trajectories in ECEC through a sociological lens (Bullough and Hall Kenyon 2018; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), which would mean more proactive discussions within and through the workforce about the diverse pathways and opportunities available and the influences of wider society on decision-making processes. The research also suggests exploration through a materialist approach, where career narratives are championed through object storytelling, such as shoes, clothes and spaces. Ultimately, for me, this research informs the stories I should share with other early childhood professionals as they are becoming early childhood professionals.

**Chapter 8 – Concluding**



(Postcard 8: The finish and the start)

**8.1 Introduction**

This chapter brings the thesis to a conclusion. The chapter begins by recapping the research questions and warrant for the study, followed by a summary of my findings. The use of a visual narrative methodology is reflected upon including how this shaped the outcomes of the research. The contributions to knowledge are discussed, including the implications of this new knowledge on the early childhood education and care profession and other researchers considering the use of creative methodologies. Finally, I consider the implications of this research on my own practice.

In summary, this chapter has the following sections:

8.2 – Responding to the research questions

8.3 – Contributions, implications and limitations

8.4 – In summary

**8.2 – Responding to the research questions**

This thesis examines career stories curated with four early childhood professionals: Sarah, Tony, Charlotte and Kate. These stories were gathered in response to an entanglement of factors, including Lash and Castners (2018, p.93) call for further research to explore the lived experiences and career routes of early childhood professionals.

Presumptive universalisms and prescriptive mandates impose images of professionalism that overlook the particularities of individuals’ lives and contexts. … Despite the plurality of voices and appreciation of the complexity of teaching young children, which has been embraced for decades by reconceptualisers of early childhood education, hegemonic monologues of reductionist evaluative frameworks routinely appraise and manage the daily lives of practitioners.

In line with this thinking, Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018) suggest that ECEC is a career that is generally ignored within research. Whilst there may be limited studies focused on careers in ECEC, there is a broad and diverse body of research about professionalism in ECEC. Scholars such as Urban (2014) and Osgood (2012, 2010) lead debates about how early childhood professionals navigate challenging institutional terrains, as well as broad multi-national discussions about the interpretations and implications of professionalism (Arndt et al. 2018). A study by Elfer et al. (2018, p.1) discusses how life events rupture into complex experiences of “love, satisfaction and exhaustion” for early childhood professionals, and Fairchild’s (2017) research suggests this professionalism is processes of continual becoming. There are also rich debates about the construction(s) of early childhood professionals within policy and within practice (Gaches and Walli 2018, Osgood 2009), as well as the social positioning of professionals through labels such as graduate practitioner or teacher (Taylor 2018, Dyer 2018).

This research aimed to contribute to this field with stories focused upon the career trajectories of early childhood professionals and the factors shaping their professional transitions. The research focused on stories to counteract the process that Campbell-Barr (2017, p.75) calls “silencing the knowledge-bases within the profession”, where the voices and stories of professionals are lost amongst the policy context and wider ideas about what working with young children involves. It is through exploring the particularity of individuality that this research aimed to further understand the wider context, and posed these four entangled research questions:

• What do early childhood professionals say about their lives and careers working in early childhood education and care?

• What professional transitions are identified by early childhood professionals as shaping their career trajectories and approaches to practice?

• What factors do early childhood professionals identify as influencing their professional transitions and career trajectories?

• (How) do early childhood professionals express their lives impacting on their practice, or their practice impacting on their lives?

• (How) can a bricolage of creative art based, poststructuralist, new materialist and posthumanist approaches contribute to the study of the lives and careers of early childhood education and care professionals?

In response to these research questions, four visual narratives were co-created with four participants. In summary, my interpretation of the stories found that the participants had a lot to say about their lives and work in ECEC, and their practice did impact on their lives and their lives impacted on their practice in diverse ways. My review of the literature, together with an analysis of the participants’ stories, found a deficit in dialogue and discourse regarding careers in early childhood education and care. This includes an absence of theorised or recognised discussions about career pathways for and by early childhood professionals, with a limited engagement with the term ‘career’. However, each individual story did utilise career concepts and spoke of entangled decisions shaping professional transitions and career trajectories. The entangled decision-making processes shared by participants highlighted a symbiotic relationship occurring between those working within the profession and the influences on, and from, wider society. By this I mean that the view of the profession within society was influencing the participants’ professional behaviours, career decisions or transitions. This aligns with Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997) approach to understanding careers, where they theorise that external influences are an integral part of the decision-making process regarding work. This research joins their calls for “a sociological look at career decision-making” (Hodkinson and Sparkes’ 1997, p.28) within the ECEC profession.

This outcome affirms the work of Cousins (2016, p.1) who suggests that “practitioners bring so much more to their work than that which they learned from their professional training or work experience”. When I read and re-read these four stories I found practitioners’ lives and holistic experiences shaped their practice, and their practice shaped their lives. In capturing an up-close and intimate view of what these four early childhood professionals wanted to say about their lives and work, the seemingly ordinary micro moments became visible as they rose-up and mattered within their lives. One example of this was described by Charlotte, a nursey manager, who empowered her team to be able to take 10 minutes out of practice if they needed a moment to themselves, as one practitioner did after a driving lesson on her way into work. This example highlights the potent connections and entanglement of people’s lives and work, where participants value the support received from the culture of an early childhood setting and their fellow professionals when experiencing diverse complications in any aspect of their lives.

This approach to practice, interpreted from the participants stories, may be considered as showing vulnerability. When researching vulnerability in a professional capacity, Papaux (2016) describes it as a risky feeling, because it may lead a person to worry about being perceived as not worthy – not worthy of holding or completing a role for example. This is a similar finding to Elfer et al.’s (2018) research about the risky place of emotions within the ECEC profession. Papaux (2016) suggests that her interpretation can occur because the narrative of ‘always doing one’s best’ is stronger than a narrative of professional vulnerability. However, if emotional availability and stability are to be offered by professionals to young children (Davis and Dunn 2018) then those professionals need space to be vulnerable too. In this study, all participants at some point described how personal vulnerability outside work was supported by relationships and the culture in their workplace, which ultimately benefited them and the settings in many ways. Papaux (2016, p.333) describes this culture as one where professionals can be ‘seen’ when they experience difficult times. A culture where vulnerable emotions are interpreted as a work issue and become embraced and supported – vulnerability is owned as part of a person’s ongoing process of becoming within the ecology of early childhood practice. In turn, this ownership of vulnerability was a factor that influenced participants’ career choices; it affected their actions, and for Sarah and Charlotte, it fostered a reciprocal commitment to support their setting.

Ultimately, breaking away from understanding vulnerability as an opposition to resilient strength, and providing a space to respond to vulnerability as part of professionalism, was valued when choices about professional transitions occurred. This begins to unpick the binary oppositions of vulnerability and strength within the process of becoming, as a professional and as a human being. This also supports a person to explore and ascribe meaning to their experiences, to join transitional points into a fluent narrative which is a skill championed as beneficial in the modern world of work. These interpretations widen discussions about careers in early childhood education and care and open up the problem space for further research in this area.

This research also affirmed studies by Warin (2017), Mistry and Sood (2015) and Brownhill (2015) who recognise the influences of our historically gendered society on (male) early childhood professionals. This was an issue raised within Tony’s story where his experiences of gender stereotyping shaped his life and work. The impact of negotiating gender stereotypes in professional trajectories is not an area isolated to working in ECEC (Papfilippou and Bentley 2017), with McGillivray (2011, p.98) stating that “how we see ourselves in the workplace and the influence of others in creating a self-image are both significant”. For Tony, the impact of receiving messages about negative gender stereotypes meant he curated an image of a professional career that he dreaded (a feared self) and was motivated to seek an alternative path within this broad profession. May (2017, p.6) describes this approach as foreshadowing, where a person brings anticipated future events that have not yet happened into the present, “the consequence of which is that the present becomes a preparation for the hypothetical future”. This contributes to the research questions by suggesting that career decision-making and “choices are not only contingent upon what takes place in the present but also on how one feels about the past and one’s hopes for the future” (Taber 2012, p.200). This supports the interpretation that societal influences are an integral part of career decisions and professional transitions.

Another outcome of this research was the use of a materialist lens (Taguchi 2007; Pulsford 2016) to help interpret some aspects of the participants’ stories. Tools and materials have been researched in many ways within early childhood education and care to consider how “matter and meaning are mutually constituted” in the production of knowledge (Barad, 2007 p.152) (see Bone 2018; Bradley et al. 2012; Odegard 2012; Kim and Kim 2017; Osgood and Ruby 2015). This is a process that Lenz Taguchi (2012, p.267) describes as an “ability to make matter intelligible”. Using a material lens, I interpreted that the participants were making matter such as clothes, shoes, objects and spaces meaningful when describing their experiences and knowledge of professional transitions. The objects became entangled within their descriptions of “new configurations, new subjectivities, [and] new possibilities” (Barad 2007, p.xx) within the stories of their lives and work. It was this moving, shifting and mutating that I read as part of their becoming and their professional transitions within their careers.

This interpretation of career stories embraces a network of forces interwoven with personal and multi-sensorial entanglements. The implications of this interpretation could be that narratives fore-fronting materials could be used as a tool with the potential to aid the dissemination of career stories, with a view to increasing the dialogue about careers within ECEC. The use of materials and object storytelling could offer a boundaryless, complex and multi-layered tool through which the process of becoming an early childhood professional could be discussed. This would also move the concept of a career away from the idea of a linear, pre-prescribed judgement of what a career is (or should be) that solely focuses on individual agency (Peila-Shuster 2018), to a theorisation based more towards a process of becoming – as a person and as a professional. Overall, the use of a materialist lens advances the ways of thinking about career trajectories and professional transitions and is an area worthy of further examination.

Beyond the findings that speak directly to the research questions, the poststructuralist methodology also shaped the research outcomes. The impact of a poststructuralist methodology decentred the single-self and embraced messy multiple entanglements, where space, place, material and time could matter differently to different people (Pulsford 2016; Bullough and Hall-Kenyon 2017; Heikka, Halttunen and Waniganayake 2018; Bono, De Craene and Kenis 2019). Through the research method, multiplicity continued with the use of visual narratives as a tool to co-create data with participants, acknowledging the presence of both myself as the researcher and each participant within the data. This research adds to the debates about using visual methods (Pain 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Clough and Nutbrown 2019) and provides a contribution to what Knight et al. (2016, p.320) call “the dearth of research into the drawings of early childhood professionals [which] seems … at odds with the high regard given for drawing in early childhood”. This research recommends further experimentation with the use of visual methods, and that studies are conducted to explore what participants’ views are after they have taken part in this form of data collection.

**8.3 – Contributions, implications and limitations**

As a result of these findings, it is recommended that the workforce takes responsibility for talking about their work differently. Talking about this profession as one where people can believe they could navigate a meaningful sequence of roles, rather than expect a singular job. This could be encouraged by developing the use of career vocabulary and creating a discourse about careers emerging from ‘within’ the profession – to counterbalance the dominance of narratives generated ‘outside’ the profession by government policy, qualification agendas or historical legacies (Urban 2010; Osgood 2012; Campbell-Barr 2018).

The use of creative methodologies, in this case visual narratives, needs careful justification – as all choices of methodologies and methods should – but maybe it is an approach that is best justified *in-the-making* (Clough and Nutbrown 2019). By this I mean, the study could have been designed many other ways, but it was through making this study that I realised how the stories reached my senses in many diverse ways. The visual element helped me to read the data; maybe this was a different reading than it would have been otherwise, but as Clough and Nutbrown (2019, p.15) state, that discussion “quite misses the point”. The measure of good research is to do good, to challenge those things that are not helpful and share ideas – in this case stories – that are recognisable in practice.

When, during analysis, the interpretations became my own imaginings, these were acknowledged, and, frequently, so were the many possible readings and interpretations of a story. By adopting a poststructuralist perspective, the theoretical framework for this research was not to control and define knowable evidence as an objective connector of ideas, but to ride the waves of slippy, uncertain possibilities and to ‘know by being’ involved with the data. Barad (2007) called this the practice of knowing in being. “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world” (Barad 2007, p.185). It was my being – my reading/ seeing/imagining/sensing – that is interwoven and always acknowledged within the research. Now you, as a reader, are involved with this data, you may know/notice differently; however, these differences open-up new avenues for further discussions.

The implications of this knowledge may help widen discussions about careers in early childhood education and care and lead to further research in this area. Dissemination of the study amongst practitioners may assist with the lack of dialogue about careers in ECEC or the misunderstandings about this work (Nutbrown 2012). These findings could also be of interest to other early childhood researchers when they use professional terminology in their own work or with practitioners themselves. This study offers practical knowledge about my views as a researcher when using visual tools as part of a written thesis and the benefits of not losing curiosity even when actions can seem counter instinctual or different. The findings of this research also contribute knowledge about living-with-data as a process of analysis.

This research also informs my own professional practice, and arguable my life beyond. This research has provided me with some stories that I should share with other early childhood professionals as they are becoming early childhood professionals. The research has reminded me to listen to their stories, as well as noticing the objects, materials and spaces that matter to practitioners, in order to appreciate how their past, present and perceived future(s) play a role in career choices and transitions. The findings about vulnerability will impact the modules I teach to students and the relationships which we weave. I will try and be braver myself and try to create spaces or opportunities where “the unknown can be less unwelcome” (Elfer et al. 2018, p.3).

I interpret my use of picture postcards in this research as one experiment with the unknown. The use of creative methods has challenged my practice, making positive contributions to how I acknowledge my own presence and how I come understand knowledge. Having been through this process I appreciate the ideas of MacLure (2013, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 1993) even more, when she describes thinking about and processing research as an activity that you never became abstracted from. I lived in the ‘middle’ of this research entanglement for many years and this ‘middle’ remained with me until I found this way out. Yet, as the picture postcard tries to illustrate at the beginning of this chapter, this is only one way out of this research. This is a conclusion, an end, and it can also be a start.

From this research, future research directions and publications are becoming visible. This study has helped me to rethink theory, particularly to rethink theory about emotions and vulnerability within ECEC practices, and I think there is further potential here about how subjective experiences in emotionally charged situations are acknowledged, understood and supported. This research process has altered my view of ethical relationships and strengthened my desire for research that works with people, before, during and after a research study is complete. I also want to keep experimenting with visual thinking, in research and in my daily practice. This may be a possible line of flight for a journal paper, particularly following up on the work of Knight et al. (2017) who discuss drawing as an interesting tool of expression for early childhood professionals, because there is already high regard for children’s drawing as a form of communication with this profession.

**8.3 - In Summary**

In summary, this research tracks some of the ways in which my own thoughts as an early childhood professional and researcher have grown and changed. I feel I have come to appreciate a more diverse understanding of the both the subject being studied and the construction of research frameworks. My understanding of, and the place for, vulnerability within professionalism has been expanded and this will help develop my practice supporting other professionals. My ability to articulate my positionality has strengthened and my increased understanding about research methodologies is an area I wish to keep developing within future projects. I consider my use of picture postcards within the thesis as an experimentation in visual thinking, concluding that drawing became a space where I could play with knowledge, and rethink knowledge through the process of (re)presenting it in a visual form.

This research has also provided a space for learning and (re)thinking about the lives and careers of early childhood professionals and contributes to the debates calling to widen rather than narrow discussions about careers in early childhood education and care. This research adds to debates that consider how early childhood professionals grow and change as human beings within the ecology of the early childhood profession. It is recommended that stories use language that can embrace movement, navigation, ripples and changes This continues the ideas of Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2018), Lash and Castner (2018) and Elfer et al. (2018) with both theoretical and practical implications proposed.

In conclusion, I propose greater theorisation of career trajectories in ECEC through a sociological lens (Bullough and Hall Kenyon 2018; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), which would mean more proactive discussions within and through the workforce about the diverse pathways and opportunities available, and the influences of wider society on decision-making processes. The research calls for further exploration of careers through a materialist approach, where career narratives are championed through object storytelling - such as shoes, clothes and spaces. The research also contributes to the debates about using visual methods in research (Pain 2012; Knight et al. 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Clough and Nutbrown 2019) and proposes that studies are conducted to explore what participants’ views are after they have taken part in this form of data collection.

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Downloaded: 29/04/2019

Approved: 28/11/2016

Clarrie Smith

Registration number: 140122479

School of Education

Programme: Doctorate in Education(EdD Programme)

Dear Clarrie

**PROJECT TITLE:** Experiences of career trajectories and professional​transitions by early childhood professionals **APPLICATION:** Reference Number 011866

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 28/11/2016 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form 011866 (dated 25/11/2016).

Participant information sheet 1024919 version 2 (09/11/2016). Participant consent form 1024921 version 1 (09/11/2016).

If during the course of the project you need to [deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation](https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure) please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt

Ethics Administrator

School of Education

**Participant Information Sheet**

**Research Title**: Experiences of career trajectories and professional transitions by early childhood professionals

**This is your invitation to take part in this research**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

**What is the purpose of the research?**

The purpose of this doctoral research study is to examine the complex array of factors that shape the lives and careers of five or six professionals working in early childhood education and care in England.

The broad term of early childhood professionals includes people working across a variety of educational and care provisions, including front line settings such as nurseries, schools, charity organisations, training providers or policy makers. This research aims to explore the experiences of early childhood professionals, seeking to understand how early childhood practices impact on the lives of professionals, and their lives impact on practices.

Taking an affirmative approach, and using conversational and creative methods, this research will involve at least one face to face discussion with myself as the researcher and yourself as a participant, should you choose to proceed. This main discussion will be voice recorded, for later transcription, and is not expected to last longer than 2 hours, including any pre and/or post discussion meetings. All meetings can be arranged at mutually convenient times and places. Our discussion(s) will focus on your career trajectory and experiences of professional transitions, or changes, which you identify as influencing your life as you response to the world around you. This process is explained in more detail on this participant information sheet, and please ask me if you have any queries. The full aims and objectives are:

* How do early childhood professionals seek to make sense of their lives and careers working in early childhood education and care?
* What professional transitions are identified by early childhood professionals as shaping their career trajectories and approaches to practice?
* What factors influence professional transitions and career trajectories for early childhood professionals?
* How do the lives of early childhood professionals’ impact on their practice, or their practice impact on their lives?

**Why have I been approached to participate?**

You have been approached to participate as a possible participant due to your experiences working in early childhood education and care in England. You have, at least, a level 3 qualification (or equivalent) which is the minimum English requirement for a qualified early childhood professional. Your experiences of living and working within this field will help address the research aims and objectives. The study involves a small sample of five or six participants and these potential participants are being recruited in similar ways, through snowball sampling and existing professional networks that I am associated with.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you agree to participate in this research there is flexibility in the arrangements and timings of our meetings, and our first conversations can be to discuss this. My initial thoughts are for our meetings to take place over spring/ summer 2017.

Whilst the whole research study is not expected to take more than 2 hours of your time, this can be broken down into as many as 3 meetings depending on your own preferences for communication – face or face, or online communications. To prepare for the main discussion we can meet (face to face or via online communications) to review the research process and I will share the preparation task. The preparation task will ask you to map, draw or visually represent your life and career trajectory as an early childhood professional. This task does not have to be completed within the initial discussion, and examples can be provided of other people’s maps. The quality of your art work is not the focus here, the creative method is used to support early reflection and will become the starting point for the main, verbally recorded discussion.

The main meeting will take place face to face and will be verbally recorded for later transcription. Here the discussion will take a conversational style, where open questions will encourage the sharing of stories and experiences about living and working in the field of early childhood education and care. Your experiences of changes, or re-focusing your working remit, are the aspects which will be discussed in depth, considering the reasons for making, or being made, to make such changes. If there are aspects of a topic which you do not want to discuss these boundaries will be respected. Consent to use the discussions will be an ongoing conversation, and can be renegotiated by a participant at any time.

After the main discussion, a third meeting can happen, either face to face or via online communications, to share a copy of the transcribed anonymised conversation and discuss any edits that you would like. This is one example of when consent can be revisited as an ongoing conversation, checking you still give consent to include and /or exclude any of the topics in the transcription. These subsequent discussions will be valued within the research as possible pathways for further exploration and can be included as data to further enhance the research.

**What do I have to do?**

If you choose to take part, your responsibilities as a participant are to agree a personalised timescale of meetings, review the transcribed conversation and scanned image that create your contributions to this research, and discuss ongoing consent. If you do not return the transcribed discussion within the stated time scale it will be presumed that this meets your requirements.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

If, during the research, we touch on topics you would rather not discuss bring this to my attention and we will either move away from the area or discontinue the session.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits to participating in this research, it is hoped that this work may be a reflective tool supporting your own professional learning and development. Publication of the research may support other early childhood professionals to appreciate the diversity and possibilities of the profession, therefore becoming a way to contribute to the wider community of early childhood education and care.

**What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

The expected complication date is before spring 2019. If the research stops for unexpected reasons before this date you will be informed of the reason(s).

**What if something goes wrong?**

If anything goes wrong during the research process there are different steps to handling and addressing any complaints.

As a participant if you have any concerns about your treatment during the research, in the first instance, you should contact myself, as the researcher, on the details below. We can discuss your concerns and aim to find positive ways forward. If after these discussions you do not feel that your complaint has been handled to your satisfaction, below are the details of the Chair of the ethics committee in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. Your complaint will then be escalated through the appropriate channels.

**Researcher details:**

Clarrie Smith

Email: [CSmith16@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:CSmith16@sheffield.ac.uk)

Tel: 07427 503 806

**Chair of the Ethics Committee**

School of Education

University of Sheffield

Dr David Hyatt

Email: [d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk)

Tel: 0114 222 8126

Fax: 0114 279 6236

If during the research process concerns arise about a participant that can be perceived as putting children, families or colleagues at risk, or risk participants own wellbeing, then these concerns will be discussed with the participant. If appropriate, I may share my own experiences or advice about the situation. Depending on the severity of the concerns, decisions will be made about stopping the research process and wider advice will be sought from research supervisors and the University of Sheffield. This will include decisions about what data to include or exclude from the research and also pathways of support for the participant and the researcher. If it is relevant, and the participant and researcher agree, aspects of these discussions may be included as data.

**Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. Within an agreed timescale I will provide you with a copy of the transcribed data and visual image for you to agree the content and discuss any further changes that anonymise your identity even further. All data will be stored on a password protected system which only I have access too.

**What type of information will be sought from me and why is the collection of this information relevant for achieving the research objectives?**

The information you provide will focus on your experiences of living and working as an early childhood professional, specifically starting with a discussion about your map, drawing or visual imagery about your career trajectory and key professional transitions. This will evolve into a conversational discussion about wider factors influencing early childhood practices. Stories and narratives about events are welcomed, as nuanced rich descriptions.

**What will happen to the results of the research project?**

Whilst you as an individual will not be identified in the results of the research or be asked to take part any further, the research will be considered for future dissemination and publication. Due to the nature of this research it is likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. If this does happen I will ask for your explicit consent for your anonymised data to be shared in this way and if you agree, we will ensure that the data collected about you is untraceable back to you before allowing others to use it.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

There is no organisation or company sponsoring or funding this research. It is being completed as part of my Doctorate in Education at the University of Sheffield.

**Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This research has been ethically approved via ‘the school of education’ department’s ethics review procedure at the University of Sheffield. The University’s Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University’s Ethics Review Procedure across the University.

**Contact for further information**

If you require any further information or want to discuss any aspects of this research please do not hesitate to contact me on the details below.

**Researcher details:**

Clarrie Smith

Email: [CSmith16@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:CSmith16@sheffield.ac.uk)

Tel: 07427 503 806

If you choose to take part in this research you will be given a copy of this participant information sheet and asked to sign two consent forms – one for you to keep and one for me to keep. Thank you for your time reading this participant information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

**Participant Consent Form**

|  |
| --- |
| **Title of Research Project**: Experiences of career trajectories and professional transitions by early childhood professionals  **Name of Researcher**: Clarrie Smith  **Participant Identification Number for this project: Please initial box**   1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated *[insert date]* explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. If I have any concerns I know I can   the researcher Clarrie Smith at [CSmith16@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:CSmith16@sheffield.ac.uk) or 07427 503 806.   1. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.   4. I agree for the data collected from me to be used in future research   1. I agree to take part in the above research project.   \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of Participant Date Signature  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Lead Researcher Date Signature  *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*  Copies:  *Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form and the information sheet. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project’s main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.* |