

“you don’t realise how it how it makes you feel till ya talk about it ya know like right now”: A psychosocial exploration of the emotional experience of the key person role in nursery settings in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector

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May 2023

Word Count:

32, 851

**Abstract**

This exploratory research has drawn upon a psychoanalytically informed methodology to explore the experiences of three key people who work in nurseries in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector within one Local Authority in the UK. The PVI sector has been subject to additional systemic pressures compared to Maintained Nursery Settings (MNS), which have greater access to funding, training and qualified teachers. Through opportunistic sampling, the participants who volunteered were specifically from private non-profit nursery settings and were working with preschool aged children. Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) Free Association Narrative Inquiry (FANI) and Joffe and Elsey’s (2014) Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) were utilised to elicit participant narratives that were informed by emotion rather than logic across two interviews. This research is founded on a psychosocial epistemology and ontology and therefore draws upon the understanding of *defended intersubjectivity* (Ivey, 2022) to inform the analysis of the data through the countertransference responses in the interview interactions. The data was analysed using a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) through semantic coding (conscious emotive data) and latent coding (exploring unconscious defence mechanisms) across the data set. Four overarching themes were identified: *emotional labour*, *knowing to seek certainty*, *working within a network of relationships around the child* and *promoting school readiness*. This research further highlights the influence of both individual and social defences in conceptualising the key person role. It is hoped that this research will extend the literature base for educational psychology practice in the early years to enable the profession to provide the most efficient services to children, families and early years practitioners in PVI nurseries.

*Keywords:* Key person, Early Years, Psychosocial Research, PVI nurseries, defence mechanisms

**Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like the thank the three participants for taking part in the study for giving their time to talk to me about their role and their experiences.

I would also like to thank Dr Alice Tilley and Dr Nadine Mearns for their ongoing support in early years work throughout my career and in providing me with the learning opportunities and experiences to develop a thesis idea. Your well-established relationships with nurseries were particularly valuable for the recruitment of participants for this study. Thank you to Laura Martin (Assistant Educational Psychologist) for your support in piloting the research and your reflections.

Thank you to my research supervisor Dr Anthony Williams for your support throughout working on thesis and the reflective discussions in tutorials, I really appreciated your knowledge of psychoanalytic theory.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for your ongoing support throughout this journey particularly my husband Craig.

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**Abbreviations**

AEP Assistant Educational Psychologist

CPD Continued Professional Development

ECC Early Child Care

EP Educational Psychologist

EY Early Years

EYFS Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum

FANI Free Association Narrative Inquiry

GEM Grid Elaboration Method

GDPR General Data Protection Regulation

MNS Maintained Nursery Setting

NVQ National Vocational Qualification

LA Local Authority

PVI Private, Voluntary and Independent

RTA Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SEN Special Educational Needs

SENCo Special Educational Needs Coordinator

UK United Kingdom

**1. Introduction**

**What is this research about?**

This research has utilised a psychosocial methodology to explore both the psychic and social realities of three key people working in nurseries within the PVI sector. It stems from my interest in the emotive experiences that can occur in relationships in nurseries (both consciously and unconsciously). As there is no specific way to implement the key person approach (Elfer, Goldschmied & Selleck, 2003), there is likely to be a combination of factors that can influence these relationships, which will be explored in the literature review. I have decided to focus my research specifically on the PVI sector, due to the additional systemic challenges that these nurseries can experience and the lack of currently available research in this area.

In this introduction, I will provide the reader with definitions of the different EY provisions, along with a brief overview of the history of the EY sector. I will then describe the current context of the EY sector in order to situate the research. This research has also drawn upon the researcher’s subjectivity and will therefore be written in the first person to demonstrate my active role. To conclude this introduction section, I will provide further details of my background and my experiences, which led to my psychosocial ontology.

**EY provision terminology**

EY provision caters for babies to children up until their Reception year at school. In the UK, the EY sector consists of: *private, voluntary and independent providers* (e.g., playgroups, private nurseries, independent schools and childminding networks) and *maintained nursery settings* (MNS) (e.g., Children’s Centre nurseries, nursery schools and classes and Reception Classes) (Kingston, 2004). All childcare settings in England receive government funding for children entitled to free early education; this includes 15 hours of EY education for all three and four year olds, with an additional 15 hours for working families. Some funding for two-year-old children is also available for families who experience social deprivation. MNS are maintained by the LA, which allows them access to additional funding to support families who are experiencing social deprivation and children with additional needs (Solvason & Webb, 2020). Some PVI settings (such as day nurseries and independent settings) run for profit; whereas others, mainly voluntary provisions, do not (Mathers, Eisenstadt, Sylva, Soukakou & Ereky-Stevens, 2014). These differences in EY provision will be further explored throughout this introduction.

**The importance of early childhood and EY provision**

The first three years of a child’s life are understood as a critical period in brain development in language acquisition, thinking, behaving and emotional development (Allen, 2011; Bakkenm, Brown & Downing, 2017; David, Goouch, Powell & Abbott, 2003). Research in the area of developmental psychology has provided much insight into how children learn and the value of interactions with adults in order to facilitate this (Bruner, 1986; Gopnik Meltzoff & Kuhl, 1999). This demonstrates the significant role that EY provisions can have in early intervention and their value for both families and the economy (Allen, 2011; Powell, 2010). Despite the evidence that the EY is a vital phase of development, there has been an ongoing debate regarding the value and quality of EY provision and how it may impact a child's development in comparison to parental care at home (Leach, 1994).

From 1997 to 2004, the government-funded the EPPSE (Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary Education) research to highlight the long-term effects of high-quality EY provision on children's development (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004). The study included a sample of 3000 children aged three and older from various socioeconomic backgrounds who attended 141 different preschool programmes. The factors impacting the children's development were identified through qualitative and quantitative data from each nursery setting. It was found that integrated nursery settings (Children's Centres) and nursery schools that employed qualified teachers had the most significant impact. The results from this study have since had implications for government policies, which I will discuss further in relation to the history of the EY sector.

**The history of EY provisions**

The EY sector has experienced significant changes in its policies and strategic initiatives over the past 60 years, but more so in the last 30 years (Dyer, 2017). These changes have considerably impacted the services that children and families have received and in addressing poverty, by enabling parents to seek employment (Faulkner & Coats, 2013). EY provision first expanded during the Second World War, when women were required to take up employment for a short period of time (Elfer, 2009). Since more women have been entering the workforce, there has been an increasing need for EY provision to accommodate more and more children (Mathers, Sylva & Joshi, 2007; Osgood, 2012).

From 1990 to 1997, the Conservative government prioritised education above other issues in its policies, which saw the implementation of the National Curriculum, school inspections and league tables that linked to funding (Penn, 2007). This led to the consideration of EY provision as a valuable resource for children’s development, which was understood to impact future attainment levels at school age (Elfer, 2009). The introduction of the free-market enterprise saw the expansion of the EY sector through competition between the MNS and PVIs (Faulkner & Coats, 2013). This resulted in the closure of some PVI settings, due to introducing a voucher scheme that was only approved in MNS (Tomlinson, 2005).

Throughout the Labour led government from 1997 to 2010, social inequality became an area of focus, which saw further changes to the EY sector with free education offered to three and four year old children (Elfer, 2008; Penn 2007). This involved government policies such as *every child matters* and initiatives such as “sure start, early excellence centres, the establishment of local early years development and childcare partnerships, the working family tax credits and the extension of Ofsted’s remit to include all early years establishments as well as childminders and neighbourhood nurseries” (Wolfendale & Robinson, 2004, p. 16).

Following the Child Care Act in 2006, the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) was implemented, which sets the standards for care, learning, and development for all children in the UK and is overseen through Ofsted inspections (Elfer, 2009). The EYFS was subsequently revised in 2012, 2014, 2017 and recently in 2021 (DfE, 2021). In 2010, Claire Tickell was commissioned to review the EY sector and identify the prominent areas for further training and skill development in the workforce. The information from Tickell’s review (2011) informed the coalition government’s early intervention priorities when providing services to young children. This included the continuation of Sure Start Centres and implementing free education for two-year-olds (Douglas-Osborn, 2017). There have since been changes in the Conservative government’s funding, which has meant that many of the Sure Start Centres have needed to close and that universal support is only available to families in need (Smith, Sylva, Smith, Sammons & Omonigho, 2018). This ultimately led to changes in the role of early years practitioners to include family support and multi-agency work, which was previously provided by Sure Start workers (Dyer, 2017; Hoskins, Bradbury & Fogarty, 2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the UK education system, but more so in the EY sector. In the first lockdown in March 2020, nurseries were closed to all but the children of key workers. On June 1st 2020, nursery settings reopened and have remained open ever since, despite schools closing in January 2021. The covid-19 pandemic is understood to have had a financial impact on the EY sector, with additional costs required to maintain nurseries and less two year old children attending as parents wanted to keep them at home (DfE, 2021). The PVI sector in particular, was discussed in the media as *forgotten by the government*, as they reported to have experienced more financial pressures than the MNS (EY Alliance Report from June 2020).

**The function of the nursery and the identity of the EY sector**

Due to changing political agendas and priorities, there has been an ongoing debate regarding the purpose of nursery provisions in relation to whether their function is to provide care or education for the youngest children in society (Manning-Morton, 2006; Nutbrown, 2012). Early years practitioners have traditionally been positioned within the role of carer, with nursery work understood as an extension of motherhood to enable more parents to access work (Faulkner & Coats, 2013; Smith, 1992). The historical emphasis on care in nurseries has influenced the discourses in society around the lower status of the EY profession, due to the reliance on maternal qualities for the role rather than formal training (Osgood, 2012). This has led to an ongoing debate regarding whether the function of a nursery is to replicate family life for children or offer something different (Page & Elfer, 2015). Dencik (1989) offers a different understanding of the nurseries through *the dual socialization process*, which explains how the experiences that children have in nurseries can be integrated and connected to their home life; rather than being seen as a substitute for their home life. Dencik reminds us that “what is crucial is not what is experienced in the day-care centre itself, but how this fits into the whole life pattern of experience the child has” (p. 167).

Since the implementation of the EYFS in 2006, there has been an increasing emphasis on promoting the educational outcomes of children in nurseries, with teaching knowledge seen as having more value within society than practical knowledge, such as supporting toileting (Manning-Morton, 2006; Nutbrown, 2012). In the present day, early years practitioners partake in a range of tasks to support children e.g., education, care, health promotion and supporting families), which could add a further lack of clarity to the identity of the profession (Elfer, 2009; Manning-Morton, 2006). According to Dahlberg and Moss (2005), EY pedagogy should incorporate both care and education aspects rather than an either-or approach. These different perspectives regarding the function of nurseries have led to increasing uncertainty regarding the professional identity of the EY sector and the role of the early years practitioners (Dyer, 2017; Osgood, 2012).

**The divide between nursery provisions**

There has been a historical divide between MNS and PVI settings associated with the distribution of additional funding available to the MNS settings for socially disadvantaged children and children with SEN (Moss, 2009). The government has attempted to create more equality in funding between PVIs and MNS by introducing the EY national formula in 2006 (West & Noden, 2019). Due to this additional funding, there has been a greater expectation for early years practitioners in the MNS to have a higher level of qualification in comparison to PVI settings, where the minimum qualifications outlined by the EYFS are significantly lower (Hoskins et al., 2021; Mathers et al., 2014). It is therefore not a statutory requirement for PVI settings to employ a qualified teacher, despite research highlighting the positive outcomes for children when nursery staff have higher qualifications (Nutbrown, 2012; Sylva et al., 2014). This has led to concerns regarding the capacity of the PVI sector to meet the needs of children, especially those with complex SEN (Powell, 2019). There have been some attempts by the Labour government to raise the qualification levels of PVI staff (Roberts-Holmes, 2012). However, this resulted in various job titles and training paths, further complicating the EY profession and making it more difficult to recruit and retain staff in the PVI sector (McGillivrary, 2008; Nutbrown, 2012; Rolfe, 2005). Despite attempts to integrate the MNS and PVI sectors, Moss (2009) reported that “access, funding and the workforce remain divided, reflecting a strong and continuing tendency to see ‘childcare’ and ‘education’ as separate” (p. 374).

Census data from January 2020 (DfE, 2021) was drawn upon for the planning of this research and to situate it in the current context. The data states that the majority of two year old children in the UK (81%) attend PVI settings. Children aged three to four years were also more likely to attend MNS or state funded primary school (676,645) in comparison to PVI settings (475,942) or childminders (22,893). The data showed that, despite the majority of two-year-old children attending PVI settings, early years practitioners had the lowest level of education, with just 8% of providers reporting having staff with a graduate degree.

**Researcher background and interest in the EY**

My interest in the EY dates back to my time at secondary school, when I completed a GCSE in child development. This course required me to gain weekly work experience in a nursery (over a period of four months) to complete two pieces of coursework: one focusing on the context of a nursery setting and the other observing an individual child’s development over time. This was a career that I was interested in pursuing, but I decided to explore the A-level route instead.

My specific interest and thinking in this thesis developed from my role as an Assistant EP working alongside specialist EY EPs in a LA. This role required me to work predominantly in PVI settings with a child’s key person to implement the agreed strategies following an EP consultation. During the covid-19 restrictions, this work expanded to include supporting both the key person and the parent virtually across home and nursery.

Throughout my experiences of EY work, I have often been struck by how emotive the key person role can be. I believe this is due to the multiple layers of relationships that early years practitioners need to work within (e.g., child, parents, colleagues), with often limited time and opportunity for reflection. This was particularly evident when I delivered a training workshop to two nursery settings on the topic of *working with parents within the graduated response,* following an identified training need within the LA. This topic appeared to generate a high level of emotion from the nursery staff. However, I noticed that the group discussions were often dominated by the voices of staff in senior positions in the nurseries. This led to my curiosity about the experiences of those who work on the ground in these relationships day to day.

Working with various early years practitioners throughout my career has allowed me to observe variations in how the key role is understood across individuals and different nursery provisions. I noticed a distinct difference in the experiences of key people in PVI settings. I wondered whether this was a reflection solely of this LA; however, when I joined a regional EP EY Special Interest Group, this appeared to be a wider issue than I had realised.

**Researcher’s interest in psychoanalytic theory**

This research will draw upon a psychosocial ontology of intersubjectivity, that was developed through my previous training and work experiences. After completing my undergraduate degree in psychology, I worked with children in residential care and first applied psychoanalytic theory in my practice following my reading. The formal training I had received for the role (e.g., safeguarding, managing medications and positive handling) did not prepare me for the heightened emotional experiences involved in this work. Psychoanalytic theory therefore provided me with a framework to reflect upon the lived experiences of the children I was working with, alongside exploring my own personal experiences and biography in relation to the context of our relationship.

Later in my career, I went on to undertake therapeutic training through the NHS, working with families using a number of therapeutic approaches. This training required a high level of emotional vulnerability, self-reflexivity and supervision and ultimately self-learning. The focus of this work was to enable parents to become more aware of their emotional experiences in relation to their child, so that they could begin to think about their relationship. This involved me using the therapeutic relationship to provide a corrective emotional experience for the parent, often through exploring their past experiences with their own caregivers (Fraiberg, Adelson & Shapiro, 1975; Lieberman, 1991). Through this work, psychoanalytic concepts became particularly useful for me in making sense of some of these parallel relational experiences that were played out between myself, the parent and the child.

Since beginning my EP training, I have become increasingly interested in the therapeutic value of the EP, by incorporating an affective way of knowing my interactions through the consideration of unconscious processes. The ability to contain other people's emotional experiences so that they can be thought about is, in my opinion, the most crucial component of the EP role. However, I am aware from my discussions with EPs and in what I have read, that psychoanalytic theory can sometimes be met with scepticism and is perceived as lacking evidence, making me even more curious about this theory (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021).

**2. Literature Review**

This chapter provides a detailed account and critique of the literature available on the research topic of the emotional experiences of the key person. Research literature was primarily explored through a search of relevant databases (e.g., Star Plus, PsychINfo, Psychological and Behavioural Science Collection) and relevant journals to the EP profession and EY sector (e.g., Educational Psychology in Practice, Educational and Child Psychology, Early Childhood and Care). In addition to these journals, further information was obtained from government papers and through a search on Google Scholar. Additional research papers and books were identified by looking through the references listed in journal articles. I initially used the search term *key person;* however there appeared to be limited research available. I therefore decided to broaden my focus for this literature review to explore what is already known about the emotional experience in nursery settings. I will discuss the potential implications of this at the end of this chapter to identify the gaps in knowledge that will guide my research questions and methodology choice.

**The role of the key person**

In the context of EY practice, the term *key person* was devised by Goldschmeid and Jackson in 1994. It has been defined by Elfer et al. (2003) as:

how one or two adults in the nursery, while never taking over from the parents, connect with what the parents would ordinarily do: being special for the children, helping them manage throughout the day, thinking about them, getting to know them too (p. 6)

In the *Birth to Three Matters* (DfES, 2002), the key person role was initially stated as a key principle (Elfer, Goldschmeid & Selleck, 2012); however, it was not until 2008 that it was implemented in nurseries as a mandatory duty (Elfer, 2010). The need for a key person is currently stated within the EYFS, which sets standards of care, development and learning for children. There have been several revisions, however the most up to date is 2021 (DfE, 2021), which states that the key person role is:

* to help ensure that every child’s care is tailored to meet their individual needs
* to help the child become familiar with the setting
* to offer a settled relationship for the child and build a relationship with their parents
* to help families engage with more specialist support if appropriate
* to support parents and/ or carers in guiding their child’s development at home

The guidance provided by the DfE (2021) provides a vague definition of the key person role, which may be understood and constructed differently across individuals and nursery settings. Although the focus on the key person role is based upon relationships with children and families, some of the language provided in this guidance such as ‘settled relationship’, ‘support parents’ and ‘engage’ could mean that there is ambiguity in the guidance for key people in their relational work.

Despite government guidance in place in the EYFS and the underpinnings of psychological theory for the key person approach “there is evidence of failure of its principles being applied consistently’ (Page & Elfer, 2013, p. 555). This will be explored further throughout this literature review.

**Attachment theory**

Attachment theory has highlighted the need for children to have a secure attachment to a parental figure, to enable them to navigate current and future relationships through their internal working model (Albin-Clark, Shirley, Webster & Woolhouse, 2018; Bowlby, 1982, 1988). It has been proposed that young children present with “innate attachment behaviours, such as slinging, crying, and smiling, which, when activated by the presence of the attachment figure, and can elicit adult behaviours that provide them with the security and emotional warmth they need to thrive” (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009, p. 145). The EY is an important period for relationship formations, as these relationships are understood to have a long-term impact on a child’s social and emotional development (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009).

A great deal of the current guidance, policies and practices in facilitating positive relationships in nurseries are built upon attachment theory (Elfer et al., 2012; McDowell Clarke & Bayliss, 2012; Page & Elfer, 2013; Slater, 2007). Page (2018) devised the term *professional love*; suggesting that if an early years practitioner is deemed to be an attachment figure to a child, it is expected that over time they will develop “a loving, relational bond with the child.” (p. 129). The key person approach is primarily focused on the importance of the individual relationship between a child and an early years practitioner. Elfer et al. (2012) argue that the role of a key person could include some features of the parent-child relationship (although not representing a substitute), such as “coming to know the child very well, showing the child spontaneity, immediacy and delight in interactions, the ability to be involved in an intense relationship without being overwhelmed by it” (p. 5).

There has been previous research that has highlighted the value of the key person approach for children. For example, Bain and Barnett (1986) found that the availability of a consistent attachment figure in the nursery appeared to reduce the children’s stress levels and enhance their overall development. Evidence from Elfer’s (2009) study also found that a 15-month-old child benefited from a key person approach in terms of the knowledge the adult had of their individual needs, which enabled the functions of their behaviour to be understood and supported (Elfer, 2009). The key person therefore serves an important function in EY by representing a secure base to enable children to learn and develop.

The role of the key person has however been met with caution due to the significant attention that is placed on the individual adult-child relationship (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009). It has been argued that the sole application of attachment theory may not reflect the complexities of maintaining and forming relationships, as there can be a focus primarily on the adult’s behaviour to meet the child’s needs (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999; Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Trevarthen, 2004). It is assumed that by utilising attachment theory in child care practices, the early years practitioner must take on a maternal role in order to respond to the child’s needs sensitively; and that a sensitive child caring approach cannot occur in nurseries without this bond (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Elfer et al., 2003). Relationships can also be understood as bidirectional, with the behaviour of both parties influencing the other’s response in their interaction (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009). According to Degotardi and Pearson (2014), all relationships in society should be viewed as occurring within a “network of other relationships” (p. 10), and children need to have access to these relationships; as different relationships will serve different purposes for them (Degotardi & Pearson, 2009; Dahlberg et al.,1999). This would also include peer relationships as an attachment for older children, particularly as they begin to gain more independence socially outside of the family. (Dahlberg et al., 1999; Elfer, 2008; Penn, 1997).

From a cultural perspective, attachment theory can present an ethnocentric view of relationships (Rothbaum, Weisz, Pott, Miyake & Morelli, 2000), as there are some countries (e.g., Scandinavia, Spain and Italy) where group relationships are encouraged over one close adult relationship (Gandini & Edwards, 2001). In Elfer’s (2009) case study research, it was suggested that for older children, “a small consistent team of adults rather than to mainly one person” might be just as effective (Elfer, 2009, p. 378). Ahnert (2005) however argues that in a group care environment, it may be more challenging to meet the needs of multiple children effectively. Despite these criticisms, Elfer et al. (2012) argue that there is substantial evidence of the positive impact of relationships in early childhood. Therefore, the criticisms of the approach should be seen as considerations to overcome, rather than reasons not to implement the approach (Elfer et al., 2012).

**Background of Psychoanalytic Theory**

Psychoanalytic theory originated from the work of Freud, who believed that the human mind consists of a conscious mind and an unconscious mind (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021). The unconscious mind is believed to be made up of our early experiences and emotions that are not within our immediate awareness but impact our present behaviour (Eloquin, 2016; Trowell, 1996). Trowell (1995) argues that when unconscious thoughts become “too conflicting, anxiety takes over and to protect ourselves, people use coping mechanisms or defences” (p. 13). Psychological defences were first conceptualised by Freud, but further developed by Klein (1935, 1946) through object relations theory, to understand how the external world is understood, interpreted and symbolised through internal objects and part objects. It is now widely acknowledged that not all psychological defences are intended to be understood as pathological, as they can be interpreted as necessary and healthy (Youell, 2006).

Klein’s work emphasised how anxiety is experienced in the early development of babies (who she refers to in her work as infants) who are dependent upon their caregiver to meet their basic needs (Hollway & Jefferson 2013). Klein further explains this theory through two positions: *the depressive position* and *the paranoid-schizoid position*.

The *paranoid-schizoid* position (Klein, 1975) describes a way of being in which experience is permeated by a fear of persecution, and to defend against these fears, objects are experienced either as unrealistically good or unrealistically bad (Waddell, 2002). In the context of the infant and parent relationship, the infant views the caregiver as all *good* when their needs are met and all *bad* when their needs are not met. The purpose of this position is that it “permits us to believe in a good object, on which we can rely, uncontaminated by bad threats which have been split off and located elsewhere” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, p. 20). The paranoid-schizoid position involves a multi-step of defence mechanisms, including the projection (putting out) and introjection (taking in) of external objects, denial and the splitting off the good and the bad parts of the object to protect the self at these times of threat (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001).

In the *depressive position*, the whole object is recognised by simultaneously being able to hold onto both the good and bad parts (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). The infant therefore feels ambivalent towards the mother and is able to hold an integrated view by seeing her as a whole person, which encompasses both the good and bad parts (Waddell, 2002). Unlike the paranoid-schizoid position, the infant does not take a binary view of either or, and they can tolerate their emotional experience and the uncertainty this brings (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021; Bibby, 2011). Recognising the work of Klein, Bartle and Eloquin (2021) discuss how defences against anxiety are more sophisticated within this position, and they provide examples of humour and sublimation. Although these positions originated from Klein’s work with children, they are also recognised as being relevant to adults, as we move through them in a non-linear way throughout our lives (Bibby, 2011). This suggests that, even as adults, we may continue to require emotion containment in times of heightened anxiety to manage our emotional experiences.

Klein (1946) also developed the idea of projective identification to emphasise the intersubjective aspects of defence mechanisms that can occur within interactions (Bibby, 2011; Holmes, 2019). This involves splitting and projecting parts of the self into external objects so that they can become "possessed by, controlled and identified with the projected parts" (Segal, 1973, p. 27). Bion’s (1962, 1963) theory of containment was built upon Klein’s projective identification theory (Clarke, 2002), in exploring how “affect is managed in human relations” (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009, p.12). This metaphor of the container/contained refers to the parent’s (or another person’s) ability to make sense of the infant’s unprocessed sensory experiences that have been projected out by taking them in (introjection) and presented back in a more manageable way. When this is demonstrated consistently over time, the infant can internalise this feeling through an emotional learning experience, which they can then draw upon in other situations throughout their life (Elfer, 2007; Hollway, 2008). Containment can also occur between adults through supervision when discussing their experiences about work and relationships (Elfer, 2007).

**Nursery observation as a psychoanalytic research method**

Psychoanalytic theory was first applied to the nursery context through Infant observation methods to understand the emotional world of the child in Susan Isaac’s (1926) work and later work by Dorothy Burlingham and Anna Freud (1945). The advantage of using observation methods in research is that the observer records their subjective experiences to understand the child’s inner world, rather than solely relying on their external observable behaviours (Rustin, 1997). There have been a number of recent psychoanalytic observation studies within the nursery environment (e.g., Adamo, 2001; Dechent, 2008), with some that have specifically focused on the experience of one child in a nursery and their key person (e.g., Brace, 2020; Elfer, 2009). However, the literature suggests that using observations in research has been subject to a number of methodological challenges. This covers the researcher’s knowledge and training in psychoanalytic theory, the time required to collect data (sometimes years), the propriety of sharing raw data with parents and whether interviews are performed following participant observation (Elfer, 2009; Elfer, 2017).

**The application of psychoanalytic concepts in the nursery setting**

Previous research has illuminated the range of emotions that early years practitioners can experience, which may need to be defended against for self-protection (Elfer, 2012; Elfer, Greenfield, Robson, Wilson & Zachariou, 2018a; Elfer, Dearnley & Wilson, 2018b). Psychoanalytic concepts could therefore be relevant for understanding emotional interactions within the nursery environment, particularly in the key person role (Elfer, 2007). The relationship between the parent, key person and child has been defined as a *caring triangle* (Hohmann, 2007) due to the emotional exchanges that can occur between all parties. This can mean that early years practitioners can be subject to the projected emotions of parents and children in their work (Elfer, 2007; Elfer et al., 2018b). It is also understood that early years practitioners bring their “subjective personal history” and “present feeling, embodied selves”, which may guide their relationships and how they approach their role (Manning-Morton, 2006, p. 42). This would imply that relationships in the *caring triangle* will be unique and based upon the needs of each individual (Elfer, 2007; Lemos, 2012; Page, 2018).

According to the literature, the practice of early years practitioners may be more influenced by personal values and subjective experiences (e.g., parenting) than formal qualifications (Colley, 2006; Martin, 2014; Seaman & Giles, 2021). Previous research has proposed that early years practitioners may enter the profession as a way to address their own previously unmet needs from their early relationships (Bain & Barnett, 1986). This could be understood through the concept of transference from psychoanalytic theory, which is the projection of specific feelings about our past relationships into an object in the present to manage anxiety (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Bartle & Eloquin, 2021). Bibby (2011) claims that:

where early contexts and experiences are evoked, we project out unconscious phantasies into current situations, including work situations and experience what happens around us as a both objective reality and phantasy. This process creates the non-rational templates for our beliefs and values as the phantasies are poked and prodded by what we perceive to be happening around us and early feeling are re-experienced. (p. 22)

It has also been suggested that the work early years practitioners may involve projections from their own emotional experiences of relationships in relation to parenting or being parented (Elfer & Page, 2015). The transference of previous relationships and subjective experiences could account for the variation in how the key person’s role is understood on an individual level.

It has been acknowledged that the key person could provide a source of containment for both the emotions of the parent and the child in the work they do (Brace, 2020; Elfer, 2007; Ross-Lonergan, 2019; Seaman & Giles, 2021). However, containment is described as “relationally complex” in the EY, as “receiving a child’s distress means allowing the pain to be expressed, thought about and digested before the child is able to takeback something more manageable” (Brace, 2020, p. 136). Containment may be difficult for early years practitioners to provide without feeling contained themselves within their role, through both internal resources (e.g., experience, emotional maturity) and external resources (e.g., supportive colleagues, supervision) (Elfer, 2009; Elfer, 2015a; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007).

There were challenges noted in containing the emotions of parents in Seaman and Giles’ (2021) research with nursery managers. Concerns were expressed that containing parents' emotions might lead to an overreliance in their relationship, which led the managers to avoid potential emotive interactions with parents. According to previous research, working with parents can be particularly anxiety provoking for early years professionals; especially when they need to discuss concerns about a child's development and there may be some conflicting views surrounding this (Elfer & Wilson, 2021; Seaman & Giles, 2021). These interactions may also provoke a heightened emotional response from the parents who could be grieving the loss of their idealised child (Youell, 2006). There have been a number of studies that have detailed the emotive interactions early years practitioners can have with parents, which can lead to blaming parents for their lack of acceptance (Boyer, Remer & Irvine, 2013; Robinson, 2003; Seaman & Giles; 2021), withholding information to “curtail parental guilt” (Boyer et al., 2013, p. 534), positioning parents as needy, vulnerable or lacking in parenting ability (Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Seaman & Giles, 2021; Martin, 2014).

Interestingly, in Martin’s (2014) research with eleven senior nursery staff, she reflected on how early years practitioners may “not always be aware of the potential for their communication with parents to be interpreted negatively and that the attributes that they are making in relation to the influences of parents on behaviour may be apparent in their behaviour”. (p. 133). This was identified as a training need in Seaman and Giles’ (2021) research, as they felt that developing awareness of the source of parents’ emotions could increase the empathy of early years practitioners.

Although it is not explicitly stated or explored in these studies, some of the responses from early years practitioners could be understood as a means to defend against their emotional experience and project their unwanted feelings into the parents. However, without the opportunity for reflection and containment in their work, it will be difficult for early years practitioners to recognise these processes within their interactions (Brace, 2020; Elfer, 2009).

**The nursery as a social defence**

***Overview of social defences***

The psychoanalytic concept of *social defences* was first described by Elliot Jaques (1953) in terms of how emotions are experienced within organisations. It refers to “a collective defence against anxiety, protecting the individual in a group. It simultaneously structures an unconscious culture of a social organisation, thereby becoming a cohesive force” (Figlio, 2018, p. 28). It is understood that individuals may invest in social defences to strengthen their individual defences and maintain a form of equilibrium in the organisation (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021; Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2020). Social defences may be evident within the structure and culture of the organisation, including its policies, procedures and systems (Bain, 1998). All organisations have a primary task(s) that they must perform in order to function and survive (Rice, 1969). However, there is the potential for conflict if sub-systems have different definitions of what the primary task is within the organisation (Eloquin, 2016).

***Literature on social defences in nurseries***

The concept of a primary task has the potential to clarify the many differing tasks nurseries must address (professional, political and commercial) if they are to work in a unified way with a common orientation and commitment to shared tasks. The absence of this concept risks considerable personal conflict about the primary tasks of the nursery, conflicts between different subgroups and teams, sabotage of management initiatives and high levels of sick leave.

(Elfer, 2007, p. 117)

According to the literature, the organisational culture and ethos of a nursery can impact the prioritisation of relational work, including the implementation of the key person approach (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Lemos, 2012; Page & Elfer, 2013). Nurseries are situated within a wider system within society that is influenced by changing socio-political and legislative pressures, which will ultimately determine their role (Goouch & Powell, 2013). The neoliberal principles that have been adopted by governments have meant that in some private nursery provisions, parents have become the client and the consumer of a service (Albon & Rosen, 2014; Goodfellow, 2005), due to the need to “ensure financial viability” (Elfer, 2012, p. 136). The introduction of Ofsted inspections to nurseries saw an increase in the focus on educational outcomes for children and performance targets, with administration tasks prioritised over relationships with children (Elfer, 2007; Osgood, 2010). This may explain why some research participants have understood the key person role as an administrative task, that involves documenting a child’s developmental learning journey (Lemos, 2012; Phair & Davis, 2015).

These ongoing changes in the EY may have also meant that funding, training and support have not been consistently available from external professionals to assist early years practitioners in implementing the relational principles of the key person approach (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Seaman & Giles, 2021). In research by Phair and Davies (2015), the lack of available training was identified as the main barrier in four PVI nurseries that had not yet implemented the key person approach. These external pressures may have unfortunately led to a culture of surveillance and audit over a relationship focused culture, which has meant that the key person role has not been prioritised (Albon & Rosen, 2014; Elfer, 2012; Elfer et al., 2018a; Elfer & Wilson, 2021; Hopkins, 1988).

Social defences have not been considered significantly in the context of nursery settings (Elfer, 2015b). They were first explored in Work Discussions Groups (e.g., Bain and Barnett, 1986; Hopkins, 1988) and again in more recent research (e.g., Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer et al., 2018a; Elfer et al., 2018b). Hopkins (1988) found that early years practitioners expressed their fear and uncertainty about having close relationships with children, in case the child might favour them over their parents. This led the early years practitioners to avoid emotional interactions with children in order to protect themselves. This coincided with earlier research from Bain and Barnett (1986) in a London nursery with staff who were reported to be caring for children with emotional needs. It was found that the staff experienced a high level of anxiety, which often resulted in “multiple indiscriminate care” (Bain & Barnett, 1986, p. 14) through their prioritisation of administrative tasks over emotional care.

Similar findings were also noted in Elfer’s research (2012), who claimed that the implementation of policies, procedures, and practices could act as a social defence system to protect the early years practitioners’ anxieties in building close relationships with children (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Piper & Smith, 2003). In Elfer’s (2009) research, one nursery discussed rejecting the *key person* approach in favour of the key group approach, to avoid children becoming too reliant on one particular staff member (Hopkins, 1988). The presence of social defences in nurseries could offer an explanation for the rejection of the key person approach, with some nurseries reported to focus on the key worker role over the key person role, which is more practical and less concerned with emotions (Brooker, 2010).

**Emotional Labour Theory**

The theory of Emotional Labour (Hochschild, 1983) has been predominately applied in the health sector, but there has been some evidence of its application to nurseries (Boyer et al., 2013; Colley, 2006; Morris, 2018; Page & Elfer, 2013). Emotional Labour “requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 7). Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labour originated from her study of flight attendants, who described their need to display positive emotions and minimise their real feelings in order to meet the emotional needs of their passengers. Hochschild referred to these as feeling rules, which are socially constructed outside of the individual and determine how they should manage their emotions (Hochschild 1983). These rules can then become embedded as a key feature within organisation culture and are seen as good practice (Colley, 2006; Vincent & Braun, 2013).

Two different emotional regulation strategies are involved in emotional labour, known as *surface acting* and *deep acting* (Grandey, 2000). *Surface acting* is the process of concealing one's genuine emotional reactions while feigning another emotion. Whereas, *deep acting* is the process of altering one’s internal condition, in order to match the emotion expressed to meet the needs of others and feel empathy (Fischer, 2019). In comparison to deep acting, surface acting can lead to burnout and exhaustion due to the effort required to modify their emotional responses (Song & Liu, 2010).

There have been several studies that have highlighted the application of emotional labour in managing the emotional demands of EY work, although this is still a relatively under researched area (Morris, 2018). Throughout the literature, it is evident that feelings rules are being embedded within the nursery culture as good practice, which will determine if and how emotions are expressed (Elfer, 2015b; Vincent & Braun, 2013). Boyer et al. (2013) interviewed twenty-two senior nursery staff from five private nurseries who found their role to be “taxing” and “emotionally draining” (p. 528). They managed these strong emotions by adhering to the unwritten rules of the nursery ethos by switching off their emotions, which provided them with “emotional protection” (Boyer et al., 2013, p. 533). Research has also noted how emotional labour could impact the private lives of early years practitioners, as they will take their worries home about children (Seaman & Giles, 2021). In Elfer’s case study (2009) of four different nursery settings, he reported how:

Nursery staff spoke of minimising possible feelings of exclusion, guilt or envy in parents by careful control of information given to them about their child’s day. Staff were required to smile and look cheerful when parents were being showed around. There was also the labour managing emotions evoked by parents, sometimes nursery staff being idealised as loving children and having endless patience when this is far from the subjective reality.

(Elfer, 2009, p. 365)

In a case study, Colley (2006) conducted semi structured interviews to understand the experiences of six trainee early years practitioners. The central theme in their narratives was found to be “the management of feelings” through suppressing their emotions to “evoke calmer feelings” (Colley, 2006, p. 21-22). Colley also discussed the impact of the working class culture of many of the trainees and how this may have contributed to their expression of emotions due to their need to be seen as professional (Page & Elfer, 2013). The need to remain professional in their work is an explanation that has been provided for the suppression of emotions of early years practitioners across a number of studies (Morris, 2018; Seaman & Giles, 2021); although doing this, is reported to “elicit feelings of hopelessness and frustration” (Seaman & Giles, 2021, p. 867). The term *vocational habitus* could therefore explain this further, as this relates to how an employee’s culture, experiences, history and characteristics impact the formation of their work identity and subsequently impact the identity of a workplace (Colley, James, Tedder & Diment, 2003).

The theory of Emotional Labour has received some criticism for its generalisation to the experiences of all early years practitioners; as the work can also provide a great deal of personal satisfaction (Boyer et al., 2013; Morris, 2018). For example, in Boyer et al.’s (2013) research, senior early years practitioners reported their work to be “deeply gratifying and rewarding… despite being hard and emotionally draining” (p. 518). Morris’ (2018) research also raised some interesting insights; in that early years practitioners “perceived their emotional labour to have far-reaching societal benefits” (p. 212), despite feeling that their occupation had a lower status in society (Osgood, 2012). Morris also discussed how early years practitioners used their passion and motivation for working with children to distract them from anxious thoughts in relation to their private life.

As identified in Hochschild’s (1983) study on flight attendants, these studies also suggest the presence of a cognitive dissonance in how early years practitioners experience their work (Morris, 2018; Vincent & Braun, 2013). Emotional labour therefore has the potential to transform “into its opposite – not a source of human bonding and satisfaction, but of alienation and eventual emotional burn-out” (Colley, 2006, p. 16). This reflects the complexity of the emotional experience of early years practitioners and the need to learn and develop practice through the exploration of feelings, rather than purely through the act of doing, which is often seen in child care training (Morris, 2018; Vincent & Braun, 2013). Taggart (2011) therefore proposed that early years practitioners need to have a “critical understanding of their practice as emotional work” (p. 85). However, access to supervision to reflect on the emotional interactions within EY remains an ongoing concern (Martin, 2014).

**The role of the educational psychologist in the EY**

EPs work with children and young people aged 0-25 years old. It has been recognised that EPs can have a distinctive role in the EY sector, due to their knowledge and training in early child development and the potential to engage in preventative and early intervention work with children and families at this critical stage of development (Douglas-Osborn, 2017; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2004). There has however, been limited recent research into the role of the EP in the EY and how they can best support settings, in comparison to the wealth of literature available for school EP practices (Douglas-Osborn, 2017; Robinson & Dunsmuir, 2010).

The ongoing changes and expansion of EY provisions have provided further opportunities for EPs’ community contribution, particularly with the increase in children attending PVI settings (Shannon & Posanda, 2007; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2004). Specialist EP roles in the EY have also been developed in many LA services in line with government policies and agendas (Dennis, 2003). Although EP work in the EY sector is influenced by national policy, it will also vary across LAs, due to different structures, other professionals in EY (e.g., portage workers) and funding systems. Despite these factors, EPs will continue to have a role in statutory work in the EY, and through this, they provide recommendations, provisions and outcomes to support children in these provisions who may have SEN (Douglas-Osborn, 2017).

Wolfendale and Robinson (2001) proposed that EPs have the potential to work in the EY at both a micro level through their individual casework and at a macro level, which could involve training, systemic practice and involvement at the organisational level to support outcomes for children. Research by Shannon and Posada (2007) explored the EP role in the EY through questionnaires and thirty-two interviews with EPs. They found that 53% of EPs were involved in at least two to three days of EY work, which predominately consisted of individual assessments with children. The EPs expressed their dissatisfaction with their individual EY casework and aspired to engage in more systemic and organisational work. From the perspectives of nursery managers in Seaman and Giles’ (2021) recent research, there was a demand for more involvement from EP services in the EY through consultation and training. These studies highlighted the need and desire for more preventative EP work in the EY at a systemic level rather than solely working on individual case work (Shannon & Posada, 2007; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2004).

**Critique of the literature available**

***1. Predominately group studies are available.*** The emotional experiences of early years practitioners across the EY sector appear to be a relatively under researched area. There have been some studies that have applied psychoanalytical principles to the nursery context due to the emotional complexity of these relationships (e.g., Elfer et al., 2018a; Elfer et al., 2018b). This has been primarily explored through Work Discussion Groups, to understand the social defences in nurseries and to provide evidence for the need for a reflective space for nursery staff (Elfer et al., 2018a; Elfer et al., 2018b). Research with groups of participants can have some advantages in terms of the synergy and interaction data that can be produced in this context (Morgan & Kruger, 1993; Morgan, 1996). However, consideration needs to be given to the dynamics of the group that could impact the engagement of each individual member (Carey, 1994). For example, in the context of a group of early years practitioners (in the same nursery), there may be a reluctance to share their emotional vulnerabilities (Martin, 2014), as this could be “interpreted as not managing, incompetence or inexperience” (Elfer & Wilson, 2021, p. 11). Elfer and Wilson (2021) claim how the organisational ethos of the nursery can be projected into how the group functions, which can in itself become a form of avoidance. This could mean that the individual’s subjectivity may be lost due to the need to remain professional in the group environment (Elfer & Wilson, 2021; Elfer et al., 2018a).

***2. Limited research across nursery provisions.*** As discussed in the introduction, there continues to be a historical divide between the PVI settings and MNS. Research using a systemic psychoanalytical methodology has indicated how the organisational ethos will impact the nursery practices of staff (Elfer, 2012). Given this, it would be fair to presume that the nursery provision itself, whether it is a PVI or an MNS, may provide a different experience for the early years practitioners and subsequently impact how the key person approach is implemented. The noticeable gap in research on the experiences of staff who work in the PVI sector was highlighted in Martin’s (2014) mixed methods research with senior staff. When reviewing the literature, the Children’s Centre nurseries appear to feature more strongly than other nursery provisions, suggesting a potentially skewed view of this topic in the literature (e.g., Brooker 2010; Goouch & Powell, 2013; Page & Elfer, 2013; Seaman & Giles, 2021). In some studies, the context of the nursery has not been disclosed (e.g., Lemos, 2012), which can make it difficult to situate the research, given that relationships are “contextually bound” (Degotardi, 2009, p. 150).

***3. Research in the EY is dominated by the voices of those in a senior position.*** One of the most significant criticisms of the literature is that nursery managers (or those in a senior position) have been predominately featured as participants through individual interviews or in a group environment (e.g., Page & Elfer, 2013, Boyer et al., 2013; Martin, 2014). Although research using nursery managers will have provided insight into the organisational ethos and systemic influences surrounding emotions in nurseries, this role is likely to be different from the role of the early years practitioner with a key person responsibility. The nursery manager is in charge of the daily running of the nursery, which would mean there is potentially less time for them to be involved in the caring triangle (Hohmann, 2007). This has meant that the voices of the key people who are experiencing considerably more of these daily interactions with children and families have potentially been lost. Martin (2014) also found this within practice, as it is often the nursery SENCos and managers in PVI settings that access interactions with external professionals (e.g., EPs) rather than the child’s key person. One of the issues that I have encountered when exploring the literature, is how it is not always disclosed if the participants are key people to consider the scope of their role (e.g., Boyer et al., 2013). As discussed throughout this literature review, not all nursery settings adhere to the key person approach and can reject these relational practices due to the presence of social defences in nurseries (Elfer, 2009). This has led me to presume that the key person role within PVI settings is a relatively under researched topic.

**Summary and justification for this research**

The EY is understood to be a critical time period in a child’s development, which highlights the significant value of EY EP work in relation to prevention and early intervention (Douglas-Osborn, 2017; Kingston, 2004; Wolfendale & Robinson, 2004). However, despite this view, the EY sector has received little attention within EP research compared to schools, despite experiencing a separate range of pressures and issues that require a different model (Douglas-Osborn, 2017; Robinson & Dunsmuir, 2010). Given the variation of service delivery across LAs (due to differences in the roles of other professionals in EY work), it can sometimes be unclear what the EP professions’ distinctive contribution is in the EY beyond statutory assessments (Martin, 2014). Previous literature has proposed how EPs can influence change at a greater level when they work with the systems around the child, rather than at the individual within child level (Fox, 2009). This would involve working at the microsystem level with the key person and the parent in a reflective space to think about relationships within the caring triangle (Hohmann, 2007; Dennis, 2004; Seaman & Giles, 2021).

This literature review has highlighted that despite efforts from the government, there remains variation across the EY sector in relation to funding and qualifications. The increase in children attending PVIs could also mean that more children with SEN will likely need to be supported in these settings with input from external agencies (Dennis, 2004). These contextual factors could mean that nurseries within the PVI sector may have a different primary task(s) than MNS. There appears to be limited research available on the experiences of early years practitioners who work in the PVI sector; and ultimately, it is important that EPs provide services to children, families and nursery staff that are reflective of the current socio-political context (Shannon & Posanda, 2007). Therefore, further knowledge about the key person role from the individuals who undertake this would be beneficial to the EP profession in planning for how PVI settings can be best supported.

The literature suggests that there may be influences in how the key person role is understood and implemented at both an individual and social level; this could highlight the value of utilising a psychosocial methodology. The triadic relationship between the key person, parent and child is unique to the individuals involved, and research indicates that personal biography may influence how these relationships are experienced (Brooker, 2010; Lemos, 2012). Brace (2020) stated that the key person role requires an “empathic, receptive and containing (to the parents and the children)” approach and “further understanding and more research into what might complicate this process is urgently needed” (p. 146). Elfer (2017) has also argued that further exploration of psychoanalytic concepts in the EY would be beneficial. Psychosocial research may therefore provide the means to explore these processes further both on a conscious and unconscious level, as Kenneally (2021) proposes that this could “enable EPs to get to the heart of communication… with intervention following naturally from this” (p. 38).

This literature review has illuminated the limited research available regarding the individual experiences of early years staff who have a key person role, as the focus has predominately been on those in senior positions in nurseries. There have also been complications in interviewing early years practitioners in group settings, due to their apprehension in speaking honestly and openly in this context (Elfer & Wilson, 2021). Previous research has discussed how there can be a need for early years practitioners to remain professional in the presence of their colleagues, which can make it difficult to gain their personal narratives in the group context (Colley, 2006).

The benefit of conducting further research through interviewing individual early years practitioners have been noted in previous literature (e.g., Cottle & Alexander, 2014). Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2003) acknowledge the value that individual experiences can bring to research, as they can illuminate the “powerful effects of societal discourses and the agentic struggles of particular subjects as they locate themselves in relation to these discourses – and that the unconscious is both generated by this struggle and generative of its consequences” (p. 264). McAlpine (2016) claims that research at the systemic and organisation level has too often been privileged over the subjective agency of individuals and their biographical experiences (Frosh, 2007; Jefferson, 2008). I believe that by understanding the meaning making of early years practitioners through the interview process, we can learn more about their subjective experiences and their relationships within the PVI context (Stapley, 2006).

**3. Methodology**

**Chapter introduction**

This chapter will describe the research aims, purpose and identified research questions. It will then provide an outline of psychosocial research and the study’s adopted ontological and epistemological position, followed by an overview of the process undertaken to collect the data. I will then discuss the participants and the recruitment process, followed by an outline of the ethical considerations and the analysis process. The chapter will conclude by addressing Yardley’s (2015) key principles for demonstrating the validity of qualitative research.

**Research Aims**

This research aimed to understand how early years practitioners in PVI settings (situated within one LA area) make sense of their subjective experiences in implementing a key person approach. This research intends to inform and extend the knowledge base for EP practice in the EY that reflects the current context of the PVI sector. It was hoped that the findings would lead to further consideration of how EP services could adopt a more systemic and community-based approach to working with PVI settings, in addition to their established statutory role.

**Research purpose**

The purpose of this research was exploratory (Robson & McCartan, 2016) and aimed to explore a phenomenon within the complex system within which it occurs (Willig, 2013; Yin, 2009). The PVI nursery sector is an under researched area in the EY and is also yet to be explored within EP research through a psychosocial lens. According to Creswell (2009), using qualitative research methods can complement an exploratory study, especially when little is known about the topic. Consequently, using qualitative research methods has allowed me to explore the subjective narratives of early years practitioners who work in PVI settings through the “researcher-interviewee dyad” (Holmes, 2013, p. 169). I have acknowledged that this would not have been achieved by using quantitative methods, as the data would be reductionist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

**Research questions**

The research questions are intentionally broad to allow for the exploration of the participants’ experiences through their own meaning frames (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). It could be argued that more specific questions may have resulted in me imposing my assumptions and ultimately shaping what the participants discussed about the research topic. The research questions below devised for this study are:

1. How can the emotional experiences of the key people be understood (through conscious and unconscious processes) within a PVI setting?
2. How do early years practitioners in PVI settings conceptualise their role as key person based on these emotional experiences?
3. How might the findings of this research inform EP practice in the EY in PVI settings?

**Psychosocial methodology**

We intend to argue for the need to posit research subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and whose experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner worlds allow them to experience the outer world.

(Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 4)

This research has utilised Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) psychoanalytic informed methodology to explore the subject’s experience through both the social (external) and their unique (internal) biographical experiences (Frosh, 2003). Within psychosocial research there are different perspectives regarding whether the approach to research should be recognised as psychosocial or psycho-social (Archard, 2021). Some researchers embrace the view that the ‘social’ and the ‘psychological’ are intertwined and reciprocally influence each other (e.g., Frosh & Baraitser, 2008). Whereas others propose that the psychological and the social should be understood as separate entities, as the social world has “its own rules of structure formation” that may not always be understood as related to the psychological processes (Hoggett, 2008, p. 383). Hoggett (2008) advocates for the use of a hyphen in psycho-social research, which represents a third transitional space that “connotes what is ‘‘other than’’ both, that is, what is different from either of the two milieus that generate it” (p. 384). The approach that I will adopt in this research will be further discussed below in the ontology section.

Psychosocial research is underpinned by the clinical practice of psychoanalysis, which is understood as both a therapeutic tool and an epistemology in itself (Bartle &

Eloquin, 2021). Fundamental to psychosocial research is the recognition of the unconscious mind “in the construction of social realities, with its suggestion that feelings and emotions shape our perception and motivation, constructing the way in which we perceive others” (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009, p. 6). This methodology is founded in Melanie Klein’s (1952) object relations theory, which adopts the assumption that anxiety is “inherent in the human condition” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 17). Walkerdine et al. (2001) discussed the distinction between anxieties at the conscious level that can be named and discussed, compared to anxieties at the unconscious level, which are thought to be “beyond the rationalising influence of language” (p. 90). Consequently, subjects can engage in a range of behaviours on an unconscious level to defend against their emotional experiences that may be too threatening to the self (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

To my knowledge, there has been no previous research that has utilised Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) Free Association Narrative Inquiry (FANI) methodology with early years practitioners. I felt that a psychosocial methodology could provide rich, in-depth data to address my research questions in understanding the emotional experience of key person role in the PVI context beyond their conscious narratives (Gadd & Jefferson, 2007).

**Defended Intersubjectivity**

In psychosocial research, the notion of the “defended subject” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 19) has been central in how both the participant and the researcher are theorised (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Ultimately, these adopted unconscious defences against anxiety occur intersubjectively between the researcher and the participant. Ivey (2022) recently proposed that we “talk of defended intersubjectivity when considering the interview interaction” (p. 26); which connects the psychic and social, rather than using separate terms such as *defended subject* and *defended researcher.*

Consequently, the notion of defended intersubjectivity would suggest that subjects may find it difficult to provide a coherent narrative of their emotional experiences in the interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) methodology acknowledges how this issue has often been overlooked within traditional qualitative methods, as subjects are assumed to be transparent and can “tell it like it is” (p. 3). Psychosocial researchers are therefore interested in going beyond the subject’s narratives of "conscious and rational logic" (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 86) to explore why they might invest in particular discourses to defend themselves.

**Ontology & Epistemology**

Ontology is “concerned with the nature of the world” (Willig, 2013, p. 13) and what can be known about it. The ontological position adopted by the researcher reveals how they view the status of truth and reality in the real world and how they intend to engage in all aspects of the research.

Epistemology “relates to the explanatory principles that underpin particular bodies of knowledge and is concerned with both knowledge and the nature of the relationship between the knower (for example, the researcher or practitioner) and what can be known” (Moore, 2005, p. 106). A researcher’s epistemology will ultimately influence the knowledge they wish to acquire about the world in their study.

This research is informed by a psychosocial ontology and epistemology (Hollway, 2008), which have previously been adopted in several studies (e.g., Burton, 2020; King, 2016). Hollway (2011) proposes that a psychoanalytically informed ontology and epistemology are “intimately linked” together (p.13). However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will discuss these separately.

***Psychosocial Ontology***

Psychosocial research has traditionally been located within a critical realist ontology; however, this has since been further developed by Hollway (2015) in favour of a uniquely psychosocial ontology (Froggett & Hollway, 2010). This assumes the presence of both social and psychological realities, which reciprocally influence each other, and in turn, individuals are seen to shape these psychic and social realities (Hollway, 2008; Salling Olesen, 2012). A psychosocial ontology is built upon the notion of *intersubjectivity*, which is understood as “the dialectical process of continually (re) constructing subjectivity in the presence of, and in relation to, an other” (Duncan & Elias, 2020, p. 2). In essence, the research subject can only be known through the researcher.

This research does not claim to provide the truth of another’s experiences, as the meanings that emerge from the research encounter will be unique (Hollway, 2011). I have therefore acknowledged that my psychic reality and social context will have influenced the relational encounter in the interview, the generation of data and my interpretations (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009).

***Psychosocial Epistemology***

In the context of psychosocial research, Hollway (2008) describes epistemology as “how the status of the knowledge generation process is understood” (p. 2). As previously discussed, this emerges intersubjectively within the “relational dynamics of the interview couple” (Ivey, 2022, p. 9). Therefore, researching how the subjects defend themselves from their emotional experiences can be valuable data for psychosocial researchers (Jervis, 2009).

One of the challenges in researching unconscious processes is that they cannot simply be observed, as they need to be interpreted by the researcher (Hinshelwood, 2009). A psychosocial epistemology is therefore “founded on a deliberate shift away from positivism towards reflexive research methodologies that are informed by researchers’ inevitable emotional responses” (p. 297). It is understood that acknowledging an affective way of knowing through the psychoanalytic concept of countertransference, could provide further insight into the subject’s emotional experience (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Walkerdine et al., 2001). This would involve the researcher attending to their own emotions through “unsymbolized communications” (Hollway, 2015, p. 129) and asking themselves reflexive questions such as: how did I feel in the interview process? Why did they make me feel like that? How did I deal with it? How did that affect the interview? (Brett, 2019). This research adopts the view of countertransference that is presented from Bartle and Eloquin (2021), in that:

we do not feel exactly what another feels, but if we are alive to our own emotional and somatic states, the arising of an unfamiliar emotion, allied with observable data and what we know about the client, can supply insight into the challenges they are facing – externally and internally – thereby deepening hypothesis creation. (p. 12)

**Study design**

***Brief outline of the EP service context***

The LA EP service (where the research took place) has a lead EY EP and senior EP who oversee the EY work undertaken by EPs and an AEP across the six consortia in the LA. This EP service values early intervention and provides an EY consultation service for children in PVI settings funded by the LA. Nine consultations occur each term in each of the six consortiums, with follow up work undertaken by the AEP through in person visits or virtual solution circles. Permission was obtained from the Principal EP to conduct the research across the LA.

***Participant criteria***

Participants were recruited using an inclusion and exclusion criteria. The desired participant was an early years practitioner who works in a PVI setting and has a key person responsibility. I chose to exclude SENCos or those in a senior position who take on the key person role, as I felt that their additional responsibilities might make it difficult for them to fully attend to their experience as a key person in the interview. The participants needed to have been in their current role for at least 18 months, as previous research identified that working in the nursery setting for less than a year was a barrier for the researcher in obtaining rich data on the participant’s experiences (Lemos, 2012).

I also recruited nursery settings that did not have a qualified teacher on site to reflect the majority of PVI settings.

***Participants***

A small sample size has been recommended for psychosocial research, due to the in-depth data analysis (Hollway, 2004). This has been evidenced in a number of psychosocial studies that have utilised FANI methods (e.g., Cole, 2017; Soares, 2017).

Three participants were recruited through an opportunistic sample across different areas within one LA where I was a TEP. Interestingly, all three participants shared some commonalities; in that, they were female and supporting preschool aged children (three to four years). For two participants, the interviews took place in a quiet space in their nursery setting. However, this was not available for one participant, and she decided to be interviewed at a local Children’s Centre.

***Participant recruitment process***

Firstly, I contacted the head of EY services in the LA to seek her support for the research. She was happy to share some basic information (through a flyer) about the study on my behalf to all PVI settings. However, due to GDPR, she was not able to directly provide me with any emails or contact details of the nursery settings. Unfortunately, I did not receive any responses to this initial email. I then sent a follow up email to PVI settings using the contact details that were available in the service from previous EP involvement. I received one reply at this stage expressing interest; however, they did not meet the criteria for the study.

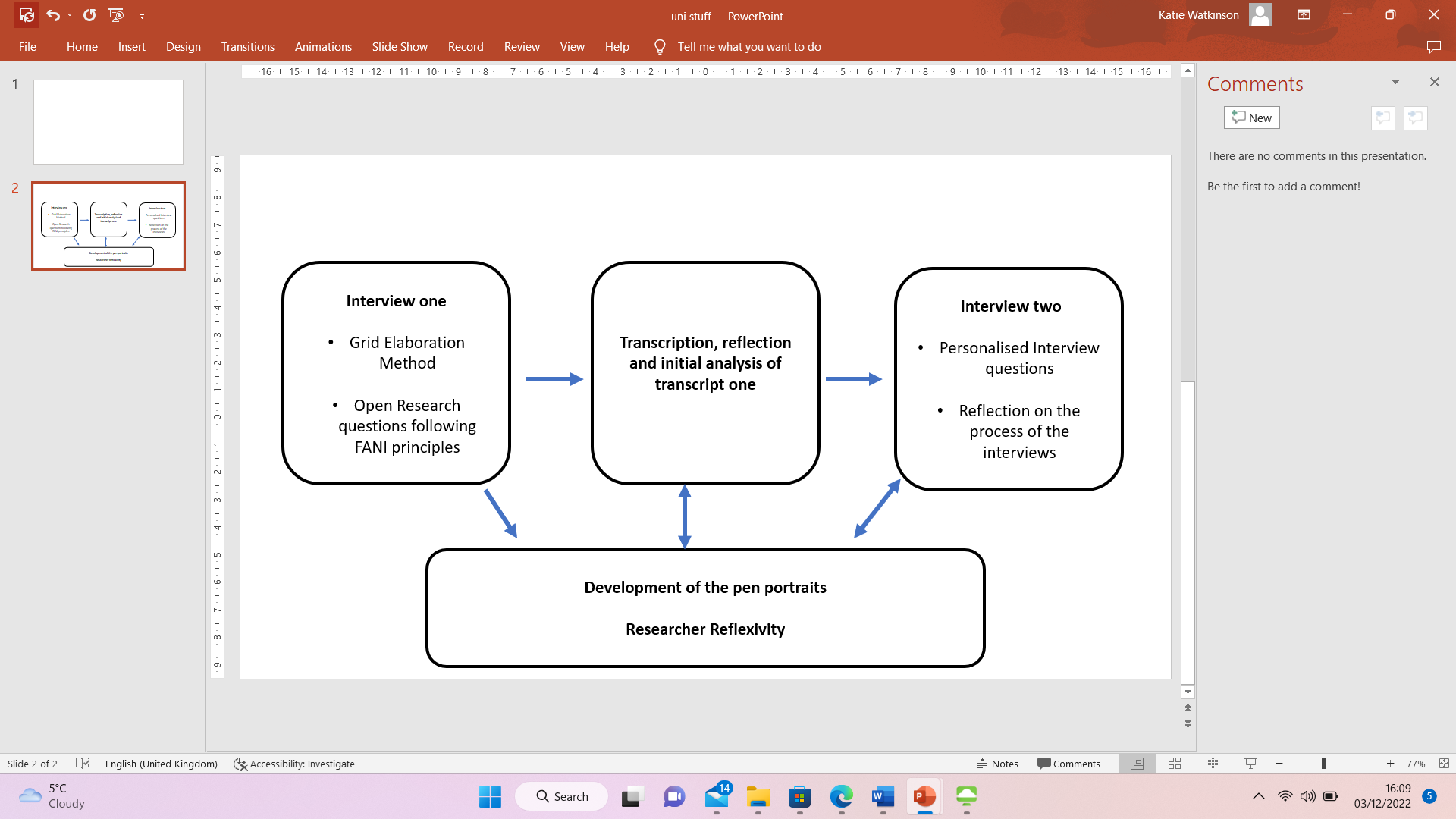
The most effective recruitment method appeared to be drawing upon the relationships the EPs and myself had with their nursery settings. One participant stated that she may not have taken part in the study if I had not been known to the nursery manager through previous casework. In addition to the three participants recruited, I received an email from another four people expressing an interest in my research flyer after it was shared directly by the EPs. The information sheet was then provided to them to read for further information via email. After my initial contact with these participants, I attempted to make further contact on a number of occasions. After no response, it felt appropriate not to pursue them as participants for the study any further.

**Data Collection Methods**

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) emphasised the need for multiple sources of data when undertaking psychosocial research. Therefore, this study drew upon the data from two individual interviews (including the transcripts and the audio recordings), the Grid Elaboration Method, the pen portraits (discussed below), and my reflexive field notes. The process I undertook and my decisions to use these methods are discussed below and documented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*The interview process that took place for each participant across interview one and two.*



***Interviews***

I used two free association methods in the interviews to collect my data: the Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) (Joffe & Elsey, 2014) and the Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI) (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2013), which have been used together in a number of psychosocial studies (e.g., King 2016; Stone, 2019). Further details will be provided below regarding how I used these.

***Reflexive field notes***

I kept reflexive field notes documenting my thoughts and affective responses following the relational encounter in each interview and after listening to each audio recording (Elliot, Ryan & Hollway, 2012). This enabled me to consider the intersubjective processes between myself and the participant and how this may impact the data. This was stored securely on the University drive and shared with my supervisor for further reflection. In addition to my reflexive field notes, I also kept a research diary, so that I could be mindful of my decisions and influences on the research process.

***Pen portraits***

Pen portraits are descriptive in nature and are intended to “come alive for the reader”, which “can serve as a substitute *whole* for a reader who will not have access to the raw data” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 65). Pen portraits were developed for each participant in the study (see analysis chapter). In interview one, biographic information was obtained from each participant in relation to their journey to becoming an early years practitioner, their qualifications and details about the key children they support. This provided contextual information about the key person’s role in their nursery setting, valuable insights into their motivations for the job, and relevant life events that may have led them into the profession.

**Free association methods**

According to Hollway (2008), most qualitative research methodologies only consider the participants’ experiences on a surface level and would not be appropriate to research the unconscious (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Free association was first employed as a therapeutic technique in the clinical practice of psychoanalysis. There have been some concerns raised in the literature regarding the use of therapeutic techniques in research (which will be further discussed in the ethics section) due to the overlap of ‘therapy’ and ‘research’ and the implications for this for the participants (Hart & Crawford-Wright, 1999; Thorpe, 2013). Despite these issues, it has been argued that using techniques from psychoanalysis in research have the potential to deepen and enrich qualitative interviews, due to the focus on the relational aspects of the interview in the construction of knowledge (Kvale, 2000, Midgley, 2006).

Free association techniques require the participant to say what comes to their mind, rather than trying to answer the questions as the researcher would prefer them to. This enables a “kind of narrative that is not structured according to conscious logic, but according to the unconscious logic; that is, the associations follow pathways defined by emotional motivations rather than rational intention” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 34), which may not be possible with a traditional structured interviewing method. Free Association methods can be used to explore how participants defend themselves to provide the researcher with a richer and deeper insight into their unique experiences (Frosh & Young, 2017). By using these tools, I felt that I would achieve the exploratory purpose of research, by having limited interference on the participant’s meaning frames (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013) and “steering interviewees away from well-worn responses dominated by readily available discourses” (Hollway, 2015, p. 43).

***The Grid Elaboration Method.***The Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) is a tool which can be used to highlight “more emotive and implicit dimensions” of a subject’s unique experience in relation to a concept (Joffe & Elsey, 2014, p. 177). The participants were presented with a “grid containing four empty boxes” and asked to “tell me, write or draw the first four things that come into your head” in relation to their emotional experience of the key person role in their PVI setting (Joffe & Elsey, 2014, p.178). The participants could answer as they preferred, as there was no right or wrong answer. All participants chose to write their associations in the four boxes rather than draw them (see analysis chapter). Through open questions (e.g., ‘can you tell me more about this?’), they were asked to further elaborate on their answers for each box in the order that they were completed. I used the skills highlighted by Hollway and Jefferson (2013) and Joffe and Elsey (2014) to empower the participants and facilitate further exploration of their narratives, which included: active listening, providing encouragement (e.g., ‘hmm’ sounds), parroting (repeating participants words that generally provoke further detail), or asking participants to ‘tell me more’ to encourage them to continue with their association detailing their personal experiences of the role.

***Free Association Narrative Interview (FANI).***Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) FANI methodology was followed in both interviews to elicit further stories of the participant’s unique experiences and meaning frames in their role as key person. The first interview followed a non-directive open format and was led by the participant, with the questions available as a guide for myself (see Appendix C). The FANI methodology requires the researcher to adopt four key principles throughout the interview process, which include: the use of open-ended questions; avoiding why questions (to avoid intellectualised responses); following up using respondents’ own ordering and phrasing; and eliciting narratives based upon real events (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). The aim of these principles is “to assist narrators to say more about their lives…without at the same time offering interpretations, judgements or otherwise imposing the interviewer’s own relevancies” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 34). I used some promoting questions adapted from Hollway and Jefferson (2013) to explore real life events or situations (see Appendix C). It was important that each narrative was uninterrupted and complete before the prompt questions were used (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

***Follow up interview***

After the first interview, I listened and transcribed the recording, followed by some initial analysis of the data (see phase one of the Reflective Thematic Analysis below). Using my reflections from interview one, I generated some personalised follow up questions to ask each participant in the second interview. This allowed me to check for any emerging hypotheses and address any interesting themes or topics that I felt may have been avoided to elicit further narratives (Brett, 2019; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The second interview took place approximately within two weeks of the first interview for each participant. The participants were given the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and reflections since the last interview, which also provided useful data. I concluded the second interview by asking the participants to comment on their experience of engaging in the process of the two interviews (see discussion chapter).

**Ethical considerations**

This research has been carried out in accordance with the British Psychological Society’s Code of Human Research Ethics (2021). Ethical approval has been obtained from the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Committee prior to interviewing participants (see Appendix A). Ethical considerations have been given throughout this psychosocial study, from the planning, recruitment, interviews, analysis and interpretation (Clarke & Hogget, 2009). I will discuss this further below.

***Consent***

Information sheets (see Appendix B) and consent forms were provided to participants, clearly detailing what would be involved in the research process and explaining my role as a researcher. Information about the study was also shared with nursery SENCos and managers to allow for the early years practitioner to be released for the two interviews. Written permission was sought from the early years practitioners who wished to carry out my research. They were aware that their involvement was voluntary. A meeting was offered to each participant before the interview, to check their understanding of what would be involved in the study and allow them to ask any questions before signing the consent form. It was important to highlight to participants that the research would be analysed using a psychoanalytic lens (with clear definitions of the terminology associated with this) and that two interviews would occur. This was also discussed verbally with the participants before the interviews to confirm their consent.

***Right to withdraw***

Participants were informed (verbally and in writing) that they have the right to withdraw from the study without needing to give a reason. They were explicitly given a time frame of four weeks after the second interview to withdraw, before the analysis will have occurred. The consent form had the contact details of myself, my supervisor and the head of the University department if there were any concerns regarding the research process.

***Data Confidentiality***

All information in the study was kept confidential, with any identifying details about participants, nursery settings and the LA anonymised. All participants were referred to in the study using a pseudonym. Before the interviews took place, the principle of confidentiality was verbally explained to the participants (alongside the information sheet); in that, information would only be shared if it was felt that there was a potential risk to the participant or others. Each participant was informed that a discussion would take place with them before this occurred and that they would be involved in the decision making process.

Participants were informed of how their data will be used and disseminated following the analysis. All information was stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act (2018) and the General Data Protection Regulations. Data will be kept until all of the requirements of the thesis have been met. Participants were informed that the interview data would be audio recorded and password protected on a secure server following the university protocol. They were made aware that once the recording had been transferred to the University drive, it would be deleted from both devices. Audio recordings were only shared with my supervisor.

***Protection from harm***

According to Hollway and Jefferson (2013), harm will likely be avoided if the researcher demonstrates respect, honesty and sympathy towards the participants. In addition to these principles, I also showed empathy and compassion to facilitate further connection (Bowker, 2011). I did not anticipate that the research topic would cause the participants significant emotional distress. However, I was aware that discussions about work experiences had the potential to be emotive. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) claim that distress is not necessarily harmful to participants, as it is inevitable that emotive topics will have some impact on them. An informal debrief therefore took place at the end of each interview to check in on the participants. This allowed them the opportunity to talk about their emotional response to the interviews, ask questions and discuss any further support that they may need signposting to. One participant did appear to become emotionally overwhelmed during the interview. However, during the debrief, she stated that she did not require any additional support and found the interview process a containing experience to reflect on the emotional aspects of her role. Given the intersubjective nature of the research, I was also conscious of my emotional wellbeing throughout. I therefore ensured that I accessed supervision with my research tutor as a reflective space and that I had private reflection time to self-debrief following the interviews.

**Ethical principles in psychosocial research**

Although the goal of research is to obtain knowledge from the participants, the epistemology of psychosocial research is closely linked with therapeutic practice and therefore requires careful consideration of ethics (Rustin, 2019). The interpretations that researchers make about the unconscious of the research participants is therefore recognised as a particularly contentious issue (Archard, 2021; Frosh, 1999). The way that interpretations are used in research differs from how they are used in clinical psychanalysis, as they come much later in the analysis process and are not meant to be part of a therapeutic process that aims to bring about change and deepen a person's self-understanding (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013; Midgley, 2006). Midgley (2006) argues against providing any interpretations to participants within the research interview, as this may shift the focus towards a therapeutic intervention and without a therapeutic contract, this could have significant ethical implications. There have also been concerns with regards to researchers employing psychoanalysis techniques to make such interpretations without appropriate training (Archard, 2021). Ivey (2022) however provides a response to this by suggesting that:

“as long as researchers are able to closely observe their own and their interviewees’ behaviour, to emphasise with interviewees and appreciate the effects of defended intersubjectivity, and can reflect on the communicative significance of their nuanced emotional responses to interviewee verbal and non-verbal expression” (p. 26).

According to Wetherell (2003), utilising a psychosocial methodology has the potential for researchers to position themselves as an expert regarding the participant’s experiences, by creating an identity for them (often after meeting them on a few occasions) that they may not agree with. I therefore felt that sharing my personal reflections on the individual interview interactions may impose an unintended expert position, especially given that the analysis would have already been completed and this would only be one form of data (Midgley, 2006). As this research is founded in *defended intersubjectivity* (Ivey, 2022), the interpretations that I have made do not make claims of truth, but are one possible interpretation of an interaction (Holmes, 2013) and “a story amongst other stories” (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 88). The second interview allowed me the opportunity to check out some of my hypotheses and hunches with the participant and seek further clarification of their experience.

This emphasises the ethical requirement to consider the power dynamics between the researcher and participant while examining unconscious processes in psychological research (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Holmes 2013). Given the perceived lower status of early years practitioners in society, this felt even more pertinent for this research. I therefore acknowledged the power imbalance at the beginning of the interview by building a rapport with the participants and highlighting the value an understanding of their experiences could bring to the EP profession. I felt that the open nature of the free association methods provided a non-threatening environment for the participants to answer as they would like. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked about their experiences of the research and to decide if there was anything discussed they would not like to be included in the analysis. I decided that an ethically sensitive way to disseminate the findings to participants would be through the themes and identified commonalities between their experiences after the analysis had been completed.

**Analysis**

***Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)***

The qualitative data was analysed using a Thematic Analysis, which has previously been applied in a number of psychosocial studies that have utilised FANI with a small sample (e.g., Burton, 2020; Plender, 2019). I felt that the epistemological flexibility of Thematic Analysis and its focus on how "individuals make meaning of their experiences, and, in turn, the way the broader social context impinges on those meanings" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) was particularly relevant for psychosocial research. In addition, it also offers the possibility of the researcher exploring the participant’s narratives at the semantic level and beneath the surface at the latent level, by attending to the unconscious and intersubjective processes (Brett, 2019).

In keeping with my psychosocial ontological and epistemological position, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was adopted specifically for this study, due to its focus on reflexivity and “the researcher’s subjectivity as an analytic resource” in the production of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 330). RTA is a method for analysing patterns in qualitative data through systematically coding to identify themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This is not a process that is traditionally undertaken in the analysis of psychosocial research, as case studies are usually created for individuals (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). However, Clarke and Hoggett (2009) acknowledge that themes will naturally begin to emerge across studies with multiple participants, which “may be revealing” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 27). They advise that researchers should begin with a holistic analysis of the individual’s gestalt, as “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 64), before exploring any commonalities across participants. Braun and Clarke (2022) also advocate a similar process in their RTA phases.

The data analysis was carried out through the proposed phases of RTA by Braun and Clarke (2022), which I have transparently detailed below. However, the authors stipulate that the phases do not need to be followed rigidly, as it is the researcher’s thoughtful engagement with the data that is the most important factor in the analysis.

***Phase one - Data set familiarisation.*** In order to immerse myself in the data, I transcribed it as close to the time of the interview as possible (as recommended by Braun & Clarke, 2022). As well as speech, I also transcribed for potential avoidances, inconsistencies and contradictions in how the narratives were told (e.g., utterances, pauses, hesitations and manner of speaking). Malan and Della Selva (2006) refer to these as “tactical defences” (p. 25), which in psychosocial interviewing are pertinent in providing affective information about the participant’s experience (Clarke & Hoggett, 2009; Ivey, 2022). As this research is founded on an ontology of defended intersubjectivity, my data was also transcribed and read for the same reasons (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). I made notes regarding patterns, emotional connections and interesting points in the data that I could explore with the participant further in interview two (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

In accordance with Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) methodology, this first phase of analysis required me to keep the individual’s gestalt in mind, so that I did not lose any meaningful data. I transcribed and reflected on both interviews for one participant, before interviewing the next participant. I also drew upon multiple sources of data (e.g., pen portraits, interview transcripts, GEM and reflexive field notes) for each participant across both interviews, as recommended by Hollway and Jefferson (2013).

***Phase two – Coding.*** Codes are defined in RTA as “the building blocks of analysis”, which “capture specific and particular meanings within the dataset of relevance to your research question” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 52). The whole data set was coded inductively at a semantic level and then deductively at the latent level for each participant after all of the interviews had been completed and transcribed. This enabled me to address the research questions by illuminating the participant’s conscious and unconscious processes. Semantic coding captures the “explicitly-expressed meaning; they often stay close to the language of the participants or the overt meaning of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 57). This provided a structure for coding to occur at a deeper latent level, which focused on a “more implicit or conceptual level of meaning, sometimes quite abstracted from the obvious content of the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, pp. 57-58).

This stage of the analysis applied an interpretative psychoanalytic lens to the whole data set. The data was coded by searching for emotive data beyond the spoken narratives and by applying psychanalytic concepts. I have provided the definitions and functions of the defence mechanism (e.g., humour, suppression, intellectualisation, repression, idealisation, omnipotent, denial, rationalisation, projection, splitting, projective identification, regression) from the glossary from Di Giuseppe and Perry (2021) (see Appendix E), which were used in the coding process to make sense of the unconscious data. Once all of the interviews had been through the first coding process, the transcripts were reviewed twice in a different order to ensure consistency (as recommended by Braun & Clarke, 2022). A list of codes for both semantic and latent was then generated.

***Phase three – initial theme generation.*** Braun & Clarke (2022) state that the third phase aims to "generate a number of working provisional themes, and consider the story they allow you to tell about your data set" (p. 84). This phase involved arranging and clustering the identified codes based on their relationships and "similarity in meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 79). I first used colour coded post-it notes to arrange the codes into broad areas visually. Through this process, some of the codes were identified as being similar or were found to overlap. This meant that some of the codes were redefined or abandoned.

***Phase four – Theme development and review.*** Braun and Clarke (2022) propose that there are two stages involved in reviewing themes in this fourth phase. The first stage is to review the clusters of codes that make up a particular theme. This involved reading all the data sets related to each code to check for consistency. In doing this, I found that some codes only represented one participant’s narrative and were subsequently abandoned as they could not be used in the theme generation. Again, some codes were collapsed and redefined due to further identified similarities in meaning. The second stage involved reading the entire data set to check that the themes could tell a coherent story in relation to the research question. I did this by reading the transcripts, my reflexive notes, the pen portraits and GEM tasks (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). During this process, I found more extracts related to the themes.

***Phase five - Theme refining, defining and naming.*** Braun and Clarke (2022) define a theme as “a pattern of shared meaning organised around a central concept” (p. 77). This stage involves naming themes and identifying the essence of each theme to determine what unique aspect of the data it captures in a few sentences to represent the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I discussed the themes in supervision for reflection and to gain another perspective on the names. Following these steps, further refinement of the theme names took place (see Appendix H).

***Phase six – Write up.*** The process of writing up the findings enabled me to see further connections between the data, and eight themes (with subthemes) were condensed down into four themes (with subthemes). I found that some of the themes were similar in what they represented (see the results section and discussion for the write up of the data in relation to the research question). I have used extracts from the interviews to illustrate the story surrounding each theme that relates to the research questions.

**Demonstrating Validity in Qualitative Research**

The use of traditional methods of assessing the reliability, objectivity and generalisability in this study would not be applicable, due to the ontological assumptions inherent in psychosocial research (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). I have therefore applied Yardley’s (2015) four key principles for demonstrating validity in qualitative research to outline the steps I have taken to enhance the validity of this study.

***Sensitivity to context.*** Before commencing this research, I completed a literature review regarding the research topic concerning different EY provisions and considered the application of psychoanalytic theory in this area. This enabled me to identify a gap in the literature of the PVI sector and subsequently develop my research questions in an area that had not already been explored. Within my introduction and literature review, I have particularly outlined the historical and current contextual factors relevant to PVI nursery settings and the lack of research in this area.

Thought was also given to how participants were recruited for the research. This was done sensitively through an EP with whom the nursery staff already had a working relationship with. I gathered background information on participants in the form of pen portraits, so that I could consider the socio-cultural context of their narratives during the analysis. I also considered the context in which I would interview the participants to ensure they felt safe and comfortable engaging (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). The participants were given a choice of venue (e.g., in their nursery setting or a nearby Children’s Centre) and a convenient time, given the demands that can be placed on these settings. The free association methods used in the study followed an open format, which allowed participants to express their narratives as they would like while limiting the researcher’s influence on responses.

***Commitment and Rigour.*** Yardley (2008) highlighted the importance of a systematic approach to data collection and analysis. Therefore, the guidance from Hollway and Jefferson (2013) and Joffe and Elsey (2014) was followed during the planning and delivery of the interviews. I also undertook a pilot study with a colleague to practice the FANI principles and receive feedback. Multiple sources of data have been drawn upon to address the research question, which Denzin and Lincoln (1998) argue adds breadth and depth to the study. The analysis phases were also followed by Braun and Clarke (2022), and themes were discussed in supervision, which added further rigour to my research.

***Coherence and transparency.*** The coherence of a study is “the extent to which it makes sense as a consistent whole” (Yardley, 2015, p. 267). The psychosocial methodology chosen for this study fits with my research question, aims and the prior exploration of psychosocial literature in the EY I had undertaken.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) reject the notion of bias, as it is the researcher’s subjectivity and unique contribution that needs to be acknowledged throughout the research process. In qualitative research, transparency is demonstrated through researcher reflexivity (Yardley, 2015). I have recognised the unique encounter between myself and each participant, and I am aware that a different researcher may have obtained different results. As discussed above, I have kept a research diary and reflexive field notes to support the credibility of the findings (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). I also accessed regular supervision, which is a necessary process when undertaking psychosocial research (Elliot et al., 2012; Jervis, 2012).

***Impact and importance.*** The impact and importance of this research will be further addressed in the discussion and conclusion chapter. The rich data produced in the research represents the unique narratives of three early years practitioners in different PVI settings that reflect their psychological and social processes consistent with the psychosocial epistemology and ontology of this research. This research has provided insight into the under researched context of PVI settings in the EY and how relationships with children and parents are understood.

**4. Analysis**

This chapter will outline the findings co-created in the research encounter through a psychosocial lens. I will first present the pen portraits and the Grid Elaboration Method (GEM) task for the three participants, to keep the individual’s gestalt in mind and provide contextual information for the reader (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). I will then present an overview of the themes and subthemes identified from the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) across the six interviews in relation to the semantic and latent codes. The findings will be interpreted further with regard to the research questions in the discussion chapter.

**Overview of participants**

***Lisa***

***Lisa’s Pen Portrait.*** Lisa did not intend to work in the EY and began her working life in customer service. It was through volunteering in a nursery that she decided that she wanted to pursue this as a career and gained her level 2 qualification in child care. Lisa volunteered for two years before obtaining paid employment in her nursery eight to nine years ago. Lisa describes her nursery as a private non-profit organisation located in a church hall in an affluent area. Lisa is currently the key person for ten preschool aged children. Last academic year, one of Lisa’s key children was undergoing further assessment of their social communication profile through the neurodevelopmental pathway.

***Table 1***

*Lisa’s GEM task response*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Excited to meet new families and children* | *Nervous* |
| *Hopeful I can support them with learning and development* | *Happy to be here and play!* |

***Helen***

***Helen’s pen portrait.*** Helen had worked in EY for twenty-two years at the time of the interview. She began volunteering in her daughter’s nursery when she completed her level 2 qualification in child care. Helen later completed her level 3 qualification in paid employment (around fifteen years ago). Helen was given the opportunity to complete a funded foundation degree in EY when someone dropped out at the last minute. Helen then self-funded an additional year in ‘learning, development and support’, meaning she is degree qualified. Helen works in a private non-profit nursery (located in a church hall) in an area that consists of deprived and affluent areas. The nursery is located near a children’s hospital, so it is common for families to move into the area when children have frequent hospital visits for medical needs. Helen works in the preschool room with children aged four years old and has recently taken on the room leader role. Helen has four key children this academic year, although this could increase to a maximum of seven. Helen explained that currently, she does not have any key children with additional needs, which is unusual for her.

***Table 2***

*Helen’s GEM task response*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Important to build my relationship straightaway 😊* | *Do they have any additional needs ☹* |
| *What will their likes/dislikes be – will they cause me any worries?* | *I hope I do enough for them – to keep them happy – bring them on and keep flourishing in time for starting school* |

***Vicky***

***Vicky’s Pen Portrait.*** Vicky has worked in the EY for thirteen years, but has been in her current setting for two years. She currently works in a private non-profit nursery, which is located next to a community centre. Vicky currently works in the preschool room with children aged three to four years old; however, she began her career as a key person in the baby room. Vicky obtained her Level 2 and level 3 Child Care qualifications while working in her previous nursery. She has also completed a ten week course in SEN; as for a short period of time, she needed to stand in as the SENCo. Vicky currently supports seven key children, which is typical for her setting; although she could sometimes support up to fourteen children in her previous nursery. Vicky currently works part time (2.5 days a week), and there have been occasions when she has shared the key person responsibility for some of the children with another staff member. Vicky’s nursery is located in a deprived area of the city, with children from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds that attend. Vicky explained that a number of her key children have SEN.

**Table 3**

*Vicky’s GEM response task*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Care* | *Safe* |
| *Happy* | *Settled* |

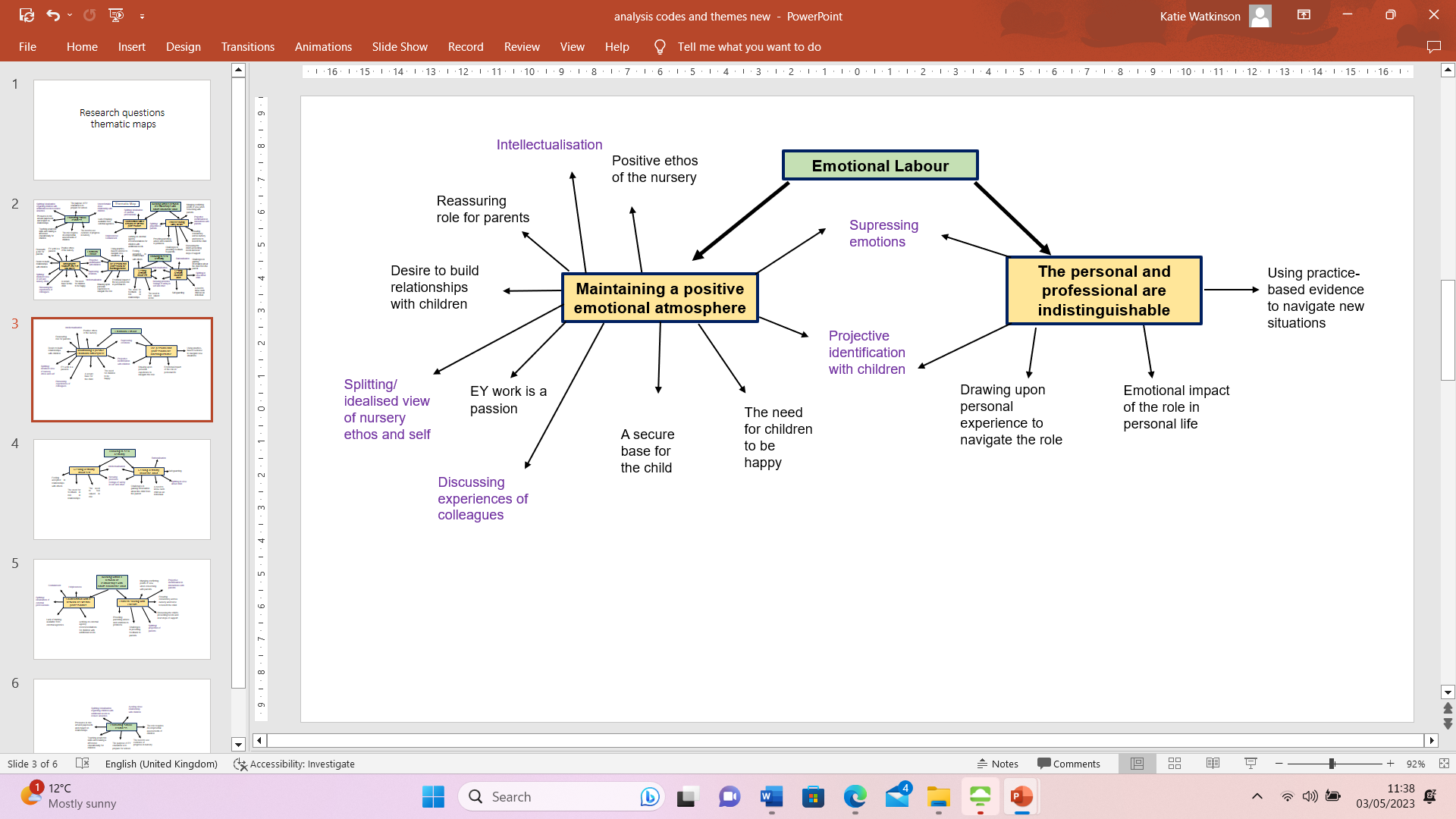
**Overview of themes**

A RTA was utilised to identify themes across the six interviews of the three participants. For each theme, a thematic map has been provided, detailing the relationship between subthemes and codes. An overall thematic map can be found in Appendix I. Four overarching themes were identified through the analysis, which includes: *emotional labour*; *knowing to seek certainty*; *working with a network of relationships around the child* and *promoting school readiness*. I will explore each theme in detail by discussing the conscious factors (through semantic coding) and then offering a psychoanalytic interpretation to consider how the participants may have defended themselves from their emotional experience. This will be based on my understanding of any potential unconscious emotive experiences through the application of defence mechanisms (in latent codes in purple), alongside my countertransference reactions from my reflexive field notes. I am aware that these interpretations will be unique to the research encounter, and that another researcher may have provided a different perspective.

**Theme 1 – Emotional Labour**

**Figure 2**

The thematic map for codes and sub-themes for the theme of *emotional labour.*



# *Key: Black =semantic codes Purple= latent codes*

The theme of *emotional labour* highlights the discrepancies in how key people might feel about their role and the outward emotions they display in their relationships at work. Their role is recognised as a part of their identity that encompasses both work and their personal lives, given that they are all also parents to young children; which can make maintaining an emotional boundary between home and work difficult. There also appears to be an organisational influence on how the individual experiences emotions, due to a desire to conform to the nursery ethos.

There are two subthemes within the emotional labour theme: *maintaining a positive emotional atmosphere* and *the personal and the professional are indistinguishable*. From a psychoanalytic perspective, there may be a number of defence mechanisms that the key person employs to avoid their authentic emotional experiences, which have been identified in purple on the thematic map for this theme (e.g., splitting/ idealised view of the nursery setting, intellectualisation, projective identification, discussing the emotions of colleagues and suppressing emotions). In this section, I will explore these discrepancies of emotion further, by discussing what I feel are the most relevant defence mechanisms employed in relation to this theme to enable the key person to successfully carry out their role. The defence mechanisms that will be discussed below are: suppressing emotions and idealisation (of self and nursery).

***Subtheme 1 – Maintaining a positive emotional environment***

|  |
| --- |
| **Extract from reflexive notes:**  I wondered if Vicky was trying to portray a picture as everything being great in her role. I noticed some frustration in myself at this time about not being able to connect with her to seek out the information I wanted to hear. What has resonated with me from this interview is the surprise from Vicky in how her role is emotional; as quite often, she feels like she is automatically doing her role. |

This subtheme highlights the key peoples’ passion and fulfilment from their work in building and maintaining relationships with children. This was noted through Helen’s response in that she feels “it is important to build a relationship with that child straight away. An me first thought is just happy because I love building a bond with them” (1:184-185). Lisa also explained that she is” always like really super excited an like want to get to know them and what their interests are (1:112-113).

I understood this through the psychoanalytic defence of idealisation of the self, by the key person locating all of the good within themselves. This could be illustrated by Lisa’s use of the word always in the quote above, to potentially over emphasise her positive emotions in building relationships with children. For Helen, identifying her positive traits below may be understood as a potential way to promote her self-esteem:

Am dead empathetic. I want that I want that challenge (I: yeah yeah). I love helping people. I love seein them bein this when the come in ta then now look where they are (I: hmm). So an I’ve always had that.

(Helen 1:277-280)

The key people acknowledge that they are a secure base for children, to provide emotional support to learn and develop. However, the function of this secure base appears to be understood as keeping the distress children experience to a minimum, to ensure that everyone continuously has a happy experience at nursery. This is emphasised in Vicky’s quote below:

you wanna make sure that the children are happy in the nursery (I: yeah) as a key person again ya forming that bond […] an ya want to make them happy and make sure they are happy every day.

(Vicky 1:186-189)

The need to maintain this positive emotional atmosphere could mean that some children experiencing distress can be difficult for the setting to tolerate which means that they are put onto a reduced timetable, or their parents are asked to collect them.

There’s a little boy now an he’s erm. He’s he’s got additional needs (I: hmm hmm) an he does afternoons but he just does quarter past one till quarter past four [..] because of to support him. Because any longer I don’t think he would cope for too long.

(Vicky 1:327-321)

I wondered if the key people could be suppressing their own emotions in order to meet the needs of others, to ensure that they maintain a positive emotional atmosphere because the children “vibe off you” (Lisa 1:424). I also noticed this within my interactions, particularly with Lisa, as both before and after the interview, she went out of her way to ensure that all of my needs were met (e.g., a drink, toilet facilities, laptop on charge).

Throughout the interviews, the participants may have suppressed their emotional experiences in different ways. In Lisa’s narrative, it could be that regressing to a childlike state and using laughter has made it safer for her to access her emotional experience.

It’s like yano we always laugh when yano you’re having a bad day at home [I: yeah] the kids put a smile on your face don’t the it’s like you see them and you’re like aw (I: yeah yeah) and you can sort of like come out of it […] but because I am here, I think I can switch off […]. Cos you can come in and then you see the kids it’s like it just melts away and your just like ‘oh hello’ ((in child friendly voice)). You just sort of forget then an ya you do what your doing an.

(Lisa 1:424-432)

When Helen was asked to ‘tell me about the first child you were a key person to?’, she found it difficult to recall any information about this. I wondered whether this was a form of repression to avoid these uncomfortable feelings that occurred at a time when she possibly felt less competent before her formal training.

I think I don’t even. I don’t can’t even urh urn. Was even the key worker role even then? I can’t remember when it came about (I: oh okay). I don’t even remember [..]. It’s mad cos I can’t remember me time before (I: yeah) I went to uni. It kind of all me memories are from then (I: okay). But I was a key worker before (I: yeah) but I can’t remember.

(Helen 1:581-588)

This need to maintain a positive emotional state in others was also seen in relationships with parents. The key people discussed often reassuring parents to minimise their anxieties, particularly concerning separating from their children. The whisper in the quote, “even if it’s not fine, I just say that kind of thing *(whispers)”* (Helen 2: 589- 600) suggests how Helen may feel some shame in doing this.

The participants also discussed the positive ethos of their nurseries. They all compare their nurseries to a family environment, which may feel they need to adopt to meet the emotional needs of parents and children.

*c*os we are so welcoming it’s like a big family we all get on so our parents are like friends in the end [..]. But mostly everyone does leave going ‘huh ya just like one big family’. An yeah, I think it makes people feel. You’ve got to do that it’s their precious cargo you don’t want them to be feeling anxious when there in work that they are just getting left.

(Helen 2:723-726)

So it’s it’s a bit more like homely [...] Which is what our approach here is it’s different to the other nurseries. Ya home from home here.

(Vicky 1:660-662)

I wondered if investing in these idealised narratives of the nursery (and the self) enabled participants to avoid the more negative and painful experiences in their role and subsequently experience the nursery as holding all of the good.

Very very hardly people leave. Or if they leave, they come back (I: hmm hmm). It’s that type of a place where cos it’s so lovely (I: yeah). It’s hard then cos kind of stuck in ya own bubble of what goes on an how things work.

(Helen 1:54-56)

The supportive nursery atmosphere was also discussed in relation to colleague relationships, as a key factor in managing the stresses of the key person role.

I’ve got a really great. Team. Round me (I: yeah) to help me and support me with it. That. Like ta see that rather than when it’s like look look what you’ve got ta help it’s actually okay don’t worry kind of thing.

(Lisa 2:356-258)

For all participants, there were times when they would discuss the experiences that their colleagues had with their own key children through detailed examples as if they were their own. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this could be a way to defend against their own emotional experience that might be too difficult to discuss in the interview. However, I also wondered whether the participants were identifying with the emotions of their colleagues to promote feelings of safety and belonging through a shared experience “We were all feelin the same kind of” (Helen 1:716). Lisa provided a detailed example of this:

I feel I think cos were all in the same sort of vibe off each other and that (I: oh okay) and keep each other. Like for ( ) the girl I work with (I: yeah). Like if one of us comes in all like that ((gestures unhappy face)) the other one will make them laugh (I: Brilliant) and they sort of like cheer each other up and stuff and if one of us is struggling or having a bad day (I: Hmm). Erm. We’ll we’ll do whatever we can to support each other really.

(Lisa 1:448-454)

***Subtheme 2 – The personal and professional are indistinguishable***

This subtheme highlights the interlink of both the personal and professional in conceptualising the key person role. It was evident that the key person learns more on the job or by drawing upon their personal experiences than through their formal training. This is particularly apparent when navigating an unfamiliar situation that could occur in their role.

Well it’s the experience that ya ya how ya’ve dealt with it how you’ve dealt with situations over the past and things (I: yeah) it puts you in where you are now an yano how to deal with things how to speak to people in a way of like.

(Vicky 2:614-616)

All of the participants are parents of young children, which they acknowledge gives them particular advantages in their role. Lisa discussed how disclosing that she is a parent enables her to build stronger relationships with parents.

It can be really helpful when I can say it to parents (I: hmm hmm) I’ve experienced or I’ve tried. I feel that you get more trust from them [..]. They seem a bit positive an open to your ideas then (I: yeah) because they think well actually, she has done it or she’s yano (I: yeah) or she’s not just chatting from a book kind of thing.

(Lisa 2:191-195)

Helen describes her personal knowledge of child development from being a parent as her “sixth sense” (Helen 2: 871), which she uses as a guide to determine whether a child is progressing as expected. Helen often draws upon her personal qualities as a parent that can be applied to the role “I am kind of like motherly (I: yeah) but I’m like that with all the kids” (Helen 1: 918). She also refers to caring for children “like they were me own” (Helen 1: 618) at several points throughout her narrative. This could be understood as a projection of her personal relationships in her work with her key children, and may be further illustrated through the quote below:

An they were a lovely family don’t get me wrong (I: yeah) an they loved their kids an they done their best for them but they just parented different (I: right) then what I would and what I knew this child needed.

(Helen 2:175-177)

Lisa believes that her training and professional experiences have influenced how she has parented her own child and also how becoming a parent has aided her in her work:

An a lot of workin here an have him have sort of give me ideas for both. Like havin some of the children here come through an seein the way they are an what supports them I’ve tried on him an it’s er worked with him. But in the same way stuff I’ve done with him to help him out I’ve gone oh I’ll give that a go in work [I: oh okay] and I’ve sort of […] helping both ways.

(Lisa 2:204-208)

Vicky often discusses her desire to promote feelings of safety with children throughout the interviews. She suggests below that this is what she would expect for her own son in nursery:

An think it’s just cos I’ve got a little boy me self (I: yeah) an I just think I would want him to feel (I: yeah) safe as well (I: yeah). An I’d want I’d want him to know he feels safe an I’d want wanna feel it too. So, I can relate to parents.

(Vicky 1:155-158)

It was evident that working in the EY is a vocation for the participants, especially given that they volunteered for a number of years before being given a permanent job. This understandably makes it difficult to maintain a boundary between their emotional lives at home and work. The participants discussed often thinking about work and their key children when they are at home.

I am an empathist (I: yeah). So everythin bothers me. Yano I’ll go home an be like ‘Oh god love her’ *(quiet voice).* I hope he’s sleepin tonight aw them girls.

(Helen 1:324-326)

I don’t think you can switch off like I (I: oh okay) like I sit at home goin (hh) I need to make sure such and such erm we need ta consolidate that counting or they were a bit quiet yesterday I wonder if there’s summin goin on or they could not be very well. Like if they’ve banged their head I would be like god I hope they’re alright I can’t wait to see them in the morning (laughter in voice).

(Lisa 1:321-326)

These difficulties in stopping thinking about work were felt to be impacting on the key people’s personal relationships, as they were not able to be fully present.

even when I’m out me family get upset with me because I go (hh) […] An they will go “what do you need that for?” an then the look at me and go “preschool” and I go *yeah* (laughter). It’s like your always it’s always there in the back of your mind

(Lisa 1:329-332)

Me husband used ta go mad cos I’d be like oh I’m just goin upstairs an in the end I couldn’t tell him (I: yeah) that I was doin stuff on me phone ta do with work he would be like it’s 9’o’clock come an speak to me (I: oh okay). An am like aw I’m tired. I’d be doin work on me phone. An I didn’t wanna tell him becos he’s be like ‘why you getting paid for that?’ but I’d be like no.

(Helen 1:422-426)

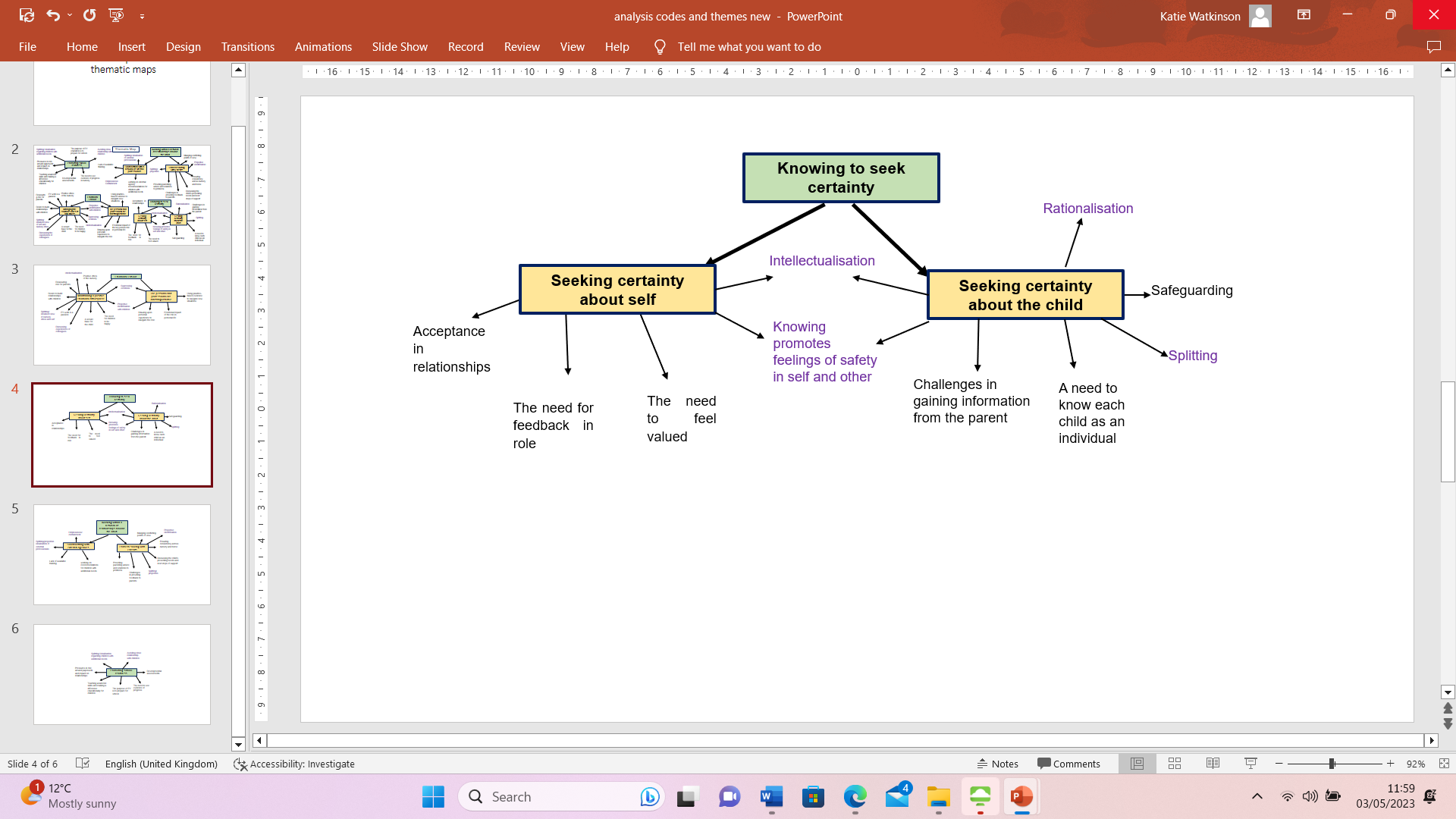
It’s not really good for my family. Life. Because I literally have no patience left then.

(Helen 1:32-33)

This subtheme has illuminated the interlink of the personal and professional identity of key people and the influence of parenting experiences on how the key person role is conceptualised. Key people are therefore finding it difficult to separate work life from home life, which is subsequently having an impact on their relationships.

**Theme 2 – Knowing to seek certainty**

**Figure 3**

The thematic map for codes and subthemes for the theme of knowing to seek certainty

# *Key: Black =semantic codes Purple= latent codes*

This theme highlights the key person’s need to seek certainty, to enable them to feel reassured in managing aspects of their role. This theme includes two subthemes, as there is a need to seek certainty of self in the key person’s need for reassurance in their ability to do the role. There is also a need for certainty of the child, in terms of knowing information about them and their needs, to make problem solving more straightforward.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, there may be a number of defence mechanisms employed (in purple on the thematic map) by the key person, to avoid the anxiety of not knowing and provide a means to seek certainty in their work (e.g., rationalisation, intellectualisation, splitting). In this section, I will explore the defence mechanisms that I feel are of most relevance to this theme to enable the key person to seek certainty in their role (intellectualisation and splitting).

***Subtheme 1 – Seeking certainty of self***

|  |
| --- |
| **Extract from reflexive notes:**  I noticed that throughout the interview I did occasionally evaluate Lisa’s experience (e.g., “brilliant”, “okay great”). There were also times when I had to actively stop myself from attempting to rescue her and sit with the silence; particularly during the GEM task when she said “this is really hard”. I wondered whether this could reflect of my own need for reassurance, with it being my first interview, and if this could be my own defence in attempting to avoid Lisa’s emotional experience. |

This subtheme highlights the need for the key people to know they are valued and accepted within their nursery organisation relationships. Lisa states that she is “always a bit like (I: yeah) are the parents going to accept me kind of thing?” (Lisa 1: 171). Helen discusses how “I love all the kid’s attention d’ya know what I mean I love being liked” (Helen 2: 513-514). The key person therefore requires clear feedback from their working relationships about their competence in their role.

I like it when the parents give ya that feedback (L: the feedback) and sort of go you’ve made a difference […] I think that’s the best thing for them to go they’ve loved it.

(Lisa 1:283-286)

It’s nice to see so when am talkin to mum an doin feedback an communicating to her about it she’s yano she’s so happy that he’s developed more as I think she was getting a bit worried as well.

(Vicky 1:587-589)

This desire to know can make it particularly difficult for the key person when they work with younger children or children with social communication or language needs, who may not provide them with feedback (either verbally or non-verbally). For this reason, there was a desire to work with the older children (in preschool) “I just want the one’s that can talk (laughter in voice) back to me” (Lisa 1:505-506), who may be more likely to provide this.

I also sensed that when the key people do not have access to the feedback or recognition they need, this can at times lead to feelings of anxiety, frustration and rejection.

I don’t feel like we get the (I: yeah) support or the recognition that we deserve really (I: ah yeah) that’s coming from the top (I: yeah). Yano an parents yano from the top to the bottom.

(Helen 2:61-63)

I’ve had like the odd parent where maybe like for example they’ve for whatever reason they’ve not come ta me yano an they know what I am their key child [..] they’ve gone to another. Member of staff. An like I use I used to take it sort of personal an be like “oh well yano what’s wrong with me?” (whispers).

(Lisa 1:77 – 80)

For all participants across the interviews, I noticed that there was a need to check in with me to see if an answer was correct, useful or exactly what I was looking for. The quotes from Vicky and Helen below may reflect the shame experienced in not knowing within the context of the interview:

I don’t know if that’s right *(whispers).*

(Vicky 1:88)

Like I was nervous coming here thinkin what to expect. What’s she gonna ask me? Will I know? How will I know the answer? Yeah, even if you’ve done the role, you still kinda always doubt yaself don’t ya (I: hmm hmm) an think am I gonna be able to answer that or am I gonna look stupid.

(Helen 1:663-666)

The participants often provided me with accurate facts and details in the interview. I wondered whether the defence mechanism of intellectualisation could have been utilised as a way for the key people to promote a level of certainty in an emotionally unpredictable context and demonstrate their usefulness and professionalism to protect their own insecurities.

there is six of there’s six members of staff. Oh my god I can’t remember *(whispers the names of the staff members to count)*.

(Helen 1:125-126)

I have been here for (3 second pause) I think it is coming up for 8 years (.) 9 years (I: ah okay). I am terrible for like (.) I didn’t think of (I: laughs) I should have checked all this.

(Lisa 1:20 – 22)

The defended intersubjectivity (Ivey, 2022) between myself and the participants will also need to be considered in relation to the quotes above. As the data obtained from the interview will contribute towards academic knowledge in the profession. The anxieties that I experienced as a trainee EP completing a thesis could have been experienced by the participants and influenced their desire to respond with accuracy.

There were also times when the participants discussed some of the processes involved in their nursery, rather than their own emotional experience. The quote below from Vicky is part of a very long narrative around the need to promote safety through applying nursery safeguarding policies and procedures. I wondered who was not safe, whether this was personal or professional or if this was a reflection of the social context of the nursery to promote one’s own feelings of safety. I felt that Vicky’s laughter and gasp in her narrative below may indicate a deeper emotional experience relevant to this topic:

Like ya ya policies an procedures are always like yano (I: yeah) always refresh always goin through them all the time especially with safeguarding […]. Ya do it anyway un subconsciously naturally (I: yeah) yano it’s just part of ya job part of ya role it’s it’s yano it’s paramount to safeguard them [..] unfortunately like an yano ya hear it in the news an it’s just it’s just *(gasp).* Yano it’s not nice but it’s just when you’re working with children it makes ya think aw yano (I: yeah) just it makes ya think just listen out for any alarm bells type of thing (I: hmm hmm) an look out for anything that they need. I mean they haven’t like they’ve always been like touch wood like we’ve been like okay […] yeah gotta stay vigilant and stuff so *(laughter).*

(Vicky 2:326-350)

***Subtheme 2 - Knowing the child***

This subtheme represents the key person’s desire to know each child as an individual, which can be achieved by seeking out information about their interests, needs and any potential triggers for their behaviour. This implies a factual way of knowing a child through information that can be obtained, rather than intersubjectively through a relational way of knowing.

Ya role of the key worker is ta get to know ya child an then ta. Go from their likes an take them from there.

(Helen 1:433-434)

Just tryin to find triggers an stuff [..] ta wonder why yano why things are happenin at certain times or er around certain people or anything erm so there was a lot of a lot of like getting to know a child like that yano it’s ya’ve literally got to know their ins and outs.

(Vicky 2:414 -417)

There is also a need for the key person to continually have the correct information from parents, so that they can make sense of the child when they are in their care. When the information about the family context was unavailable, this may have led to the key person experiencing feelings of helplessness and anxiety. For Vicky, it was difficult to describe how this not knowing made her feel.

It’s hard at first when ya don’t get the input off the parents (I: hmm hmm) but ya can’t always yano if they’re not willing to it’s it’s hard […]. It makes ya feel ahh… They. Were. Just. Quite. Quiet an d ya yano they were they were not giving much away kind of thing […]. So yeah, it’s it’s it is daunting because it’s not knowing.

(Vicky 2:438-489)

For Helen, this inhale of breath could indicate the anxiety and helplessness she feels when she finds out that a child has additional needs or a confirmed diagnosis, without already having this information from the parents (also highlighted in Helen’s GEM task).

An yano find out what they’re like an then the kind of reality will sit in then. An then you’ll be like (*inhale of breath*). Do they have any additional needs? […] and their like avin additional needs even though mum and dad said their fine then we’ll have to rejig it all. So that’s kindas in the back of ya mind (I: oh okay) about what if there is any additional needs.

(Helen 1:198-208)

Everybody who would come in would be like. He clearly is. The paediatrician in the hospital said yeah yeah. I will say he is but obviously we need it all on paper.

(Helen 1:163-165)

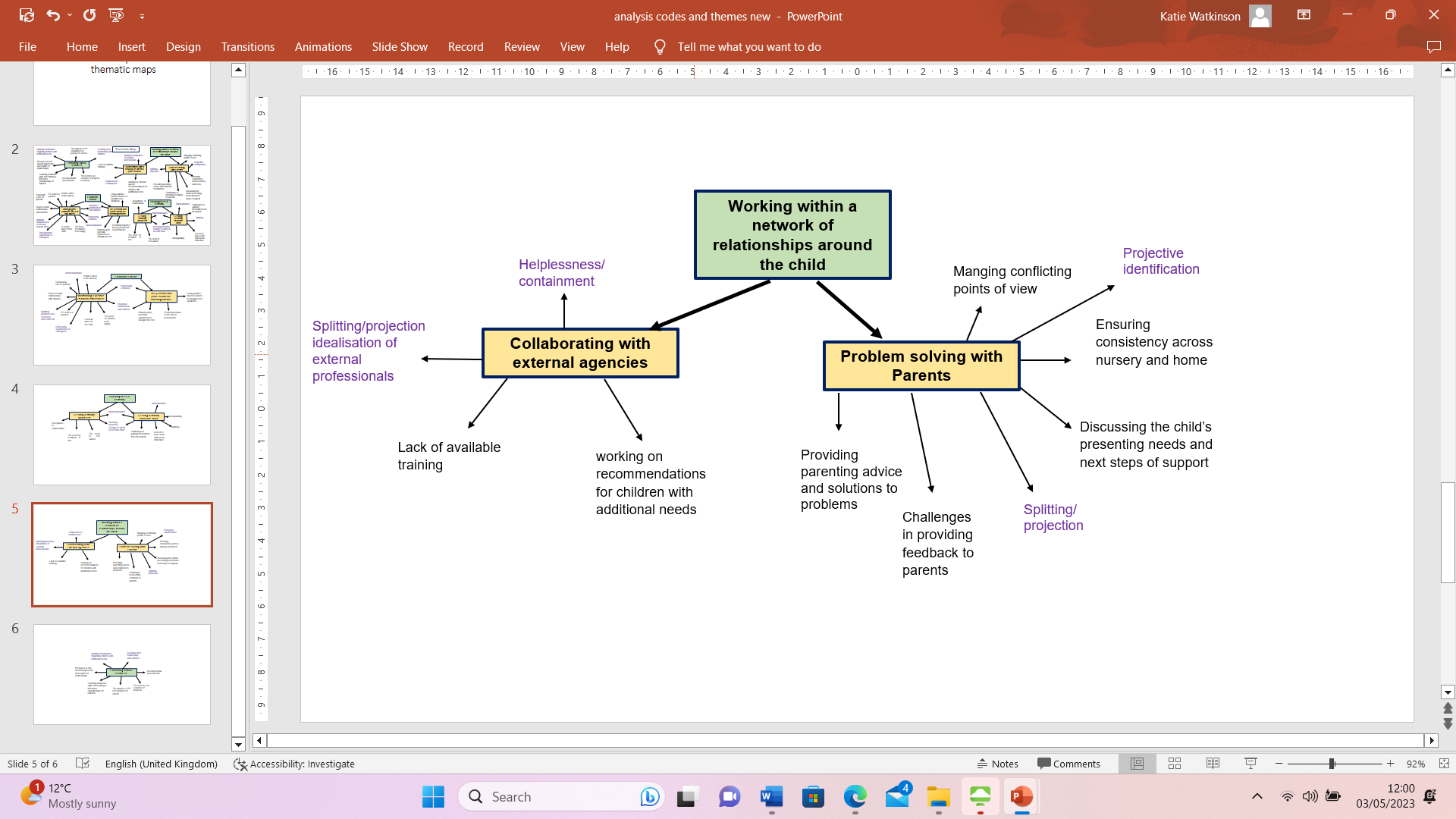
This need for certainty could mean that there may have been a challenge for the key people in holding an integrated view of the child as presenting differently across home and nursery. I interpreted this through the defence mechanism of splitting, whereby the child needs to be understood through either a diagnostic label or a parenting issue. This serves to protect the key person from their feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and incompetence by locating the problem within the child or the parent who is in need of support.

So we didn’t know. At first, he was showin like traits (I: yeah) but then it was just like more behavioural then you could see it was like parenting.

(Helen 2:127-129)

**Theme 3 – Working within a network of relationships around the child**

**Figure 4**

The thematic map for codes and subthemes of *working within a network of relationships around the child.*

# *Key: Black =semantic codes Purple= latent codes*

This theme emphasises the emotional experiences of working with a network of relationships around the child, particularly when there are developmental concerns. This theme includes two subthemes: *collaborating with external agencies* and *problem solving with parents*. These subthemes highlight how the interactions with external professionals and parents can provoke a range of emotional experiences on both a conscious and unconscious level for key people. From a psychoanalytic perspective, there appear to be psychoanalytic defence mechanisms (e.g., splitting, idealisation, projective identification) that are employed by the key people in relational encounters to defend against their emotional experiences. These defence mechanisms (along with other unconscious codes) can be found in purple on the thematic map in relation to the semantic codes in black.

***Subtheme 1 – Collaborating with external agencies***

|  |
| --- |
| **Extract from reflexive notes related to theme:**  While interacting with Helen (at the beginning of the interview), I felt overwhelmed. I struggled to attend to some of the information that Helen had provided. I also noticed other emotions such as boredom and frustration come up for me. When I left the interview and got into my car, I did feel noticeably tired. I was curious as to why this was, as I had not felt tired prior to the interview. I wondered if it was the effort required to keep up with Helen in the early stage of the interview. Or exhaustion in experiencing a glimpse into Helen’s emotional experience, or both? After the recording had finished, Helen further discussed her anxieties about meeting external professionals and in coming to meet with me today. I felt guilty in listening to Helen as she gave examples of when EPs had previously used jargon language in their interactions with her and she felt powerless in asking for clarification. |

The key people understand that the role requires them to work with external agencies to implement their recommendations with their key child in nursery.

as a key person then we would follow all what the outside agencies tell us to do (I: yeah). We have them all coming in an they give us things an we will do it with them.

(Vicky 1:471-475)

When you know like you’ve got children with speech problems or autism and that (I: yeah) and you have to have external agencies coming in.

(Lisa 1:227-228)

I got a sense that the key people may have felt helpless in their role in supporting some children, which could result in a request for external agency involvement.

It does make ya. An I was his key person. It does make ya feel like oh if ya if ya can’t help them in a way ya think ohh it makes ya think what what do I do?

(Vicky 2:393 – 395)

This may have led to feelings of shame, anxiety and incompetence due to their perception of failing to support the child. It was difficult for Lisa to put into words exactly how she feels about working with external agencies, as this is expressed initially through her body language. After this emotional experience came into her awareness (through talking about it), Lisa used laughter to defend against these uncomfortable feelings:

I always get a bit like ((L: tensed her body to explain this point)) [I: yeah] about that. You know you work with them and things like that. But I do get a bit nervous an you just (hh). You hope ya doing (.) the best for that kid. And that is all [I: yeah] I think I am just going to do all I can… But I do I still get (hh) nervous and think what if I have missed something. Or what if I have (hh) [I: ahh okay] but that is probably just me (laughs for 3 seconds).

(Lisa 1:227-235)

I wondered whether the referral to an external agency was a means for the key person to project their unwanted emotions and to attempt to seek out a form of containment. At times, this may have led to participants idealising the external profession as holding all of the good and therefore seeing themselves as unskilled and lacking in knowledge.

it’s by the end of it (I: hmm hmm) yano it was it was different yano cos he he was getting the support he needed (I: hmm hmm) erm. From outside agencies were coming.

(Vicky 2:464 – 466)

I would always feel a bit like stupid. Like not like anybody ever made me feel like that. It’s probably just me…I think ya just see these educational psychologists (I: yeah) an they’re really high up (I: yeah yeah) an really qualified an really know what they are talkin about their psychologists. An I think that just how you feel. Not that that person has made you feel like that (I: yeah). It’s more me like I am gonna be able to do this?

(Helen 1:652-701)

There were however examples discussed when the external professional did not maintain their idealised image in containing the problem for the key people. This subsequently led to an increase in anxiety, which appeared to be projected into the external professional. One of Lisa’s key children required input from Speech and Language Therapy; unfortunately, there was a period of time when there was nobody available from this service to complete this work. Lisa was therefore required to implement this intervention until someone was available, which understandably may have led her to experience anxiety:

A lot. Of the work was getting left to me which is yano it’s fine (I: hmm hmm) but I felt like (hh) I felt like. I was taking. It it was a lot for me to take on (I: oh okay) erm yeah considering I have never been trained in it ((laughter from both)) as a speech therapist… so there was a bit of time where it was more being reliant on me. An am there yano thinking ahh if this (.) goes (gulp) horribly wrong. I was given stuff to do (I: yeah yeah) like do that ( ) an I am thinking am I doing it properly kind of thing.

(Lisa 1:247-255)

Helen also explained that the suggested recommendations from the external professional for her key child could not be implemented effectively, which meant that a further visit might be required to potentially help her feel contained again:

An yano we’ll go ta our SENCo an go that what the speech and language have come in an told me ta do that. We’ve tried it for two weeks am not getting anywhere can you speak ta someone an see if anyone (I: hmm) can come in or ask them what should I do? Should I continue or whatever whatever?

(Helen 1:719-722)

***Subtheme 2 – Working with parents to problem solve***

The key people believe that building relationships with parents is a vital investment to make, as then a consistent approach across home and nursery can be achieved to benefit the child. This is evidenced in Lisa’s quote “I had built a really good relationship with her mum […] I think in turn, because she [the child] saw the way me an her mum were then helped her” (Lisa 1: 126-128).

The interviews highlighted how working with parents can be an emotional experience for the key person. This was particularly evident when having initial conversations with parents (and the build-up to having them) when there are concerns about their child’s development:

I’d have a sleepless night thinkin I’ve got a parent 1-1 tomorrow how am I going to describe this child to the parents? When he’s just really naughty.

(Helen 2:590-592)

nerv. I was quite a bit nervous actually. Erm (.) cos (.) at the time I didn’t know mum so well cos it was so early on. So I didn’t know how she was gonna react.

(Lisa 2:143-144)

I wondered whether to manage their anxieties (regarding how the parent might respond) they may employ the defence of splitting; through splitting parents into types of parents, namely those who react in a 'good' and 'bad' way:

They are all different parents are different (I: hmm hmm) so ya don’t know them so ya think oh they are gonna react bad.

(Vicky 2:507-508)

So I think it’s like what kind of parent you get. I find that my parents who are teachers are a lot more (.) like the come in the know what you like, the know how you think (I: yeah) and they understand the job and stuff and they have a totally different approach and attitude.

(Lisa 1:201-204)

Each participant discussed an example of when a parent disagreed with the concerns raised about their child, which may have led them to feel frustrated and “upset”. Examples are provided from Lisa and Helen:

An I was quite (hh) like oh oh er yano a bit upset really like yano she didn’t feel that way about the work I had produced. And how I think that their child is (hh).

(Lisa 2:35-38)

Cos you do feel like. God I can’t lie I’m not lying (I: yeah yeah). On his last report she was like ‘I get what you mean but that’s just not him’ (I: right yeah). An I’m like I don’t just send reports home and I don’t make them look good (I: yeah) so I look like I’ve done the right thing.

(Helen 2:185-188)

I wondered whether these emotive interactions with parents could be understood through the defence mechanism of projective identification. In Helen’s examples below (of the same parent), it could be that she is projecting her emotional experience into the parent, who is reported to be identifying with these emotions by accepting blame:

You could kinda see it was yano (I: yeah yeah) that they had no boundaries really, he just kind of ruled the roost. An she’d say that herself ‘it’s just us isn’t it’.

(Helen 2: 145-147)

She kinda knew but then she was very much like she’d pander to his needs a little bit (I: oh okay) an it was quite *(inhale of breath)* yano ya like urh can ya not see that your doin this as well (I: yeah)? So obviously ya can’t say ‘this is all your fault’ I’ve got ta be professional.

(Helen 2: 568-571)

Vicky may understandably have felt helpless in being unable to gain the parent’s consent for external agency involvement. I reflected on whether this may have led her to project her feelings into the parent, who responds in a way that influences Vicky’s perceptions of them as being in denial:

I think for the yano for the mum this kind of if we’d kind of helped more well obviously we couldn’t do anymore for him because she was just in denial an a bit like (I: hmm yeah) there’s no an everything’s fine yano so. If we could have put that support in he would have maybe maybe received that before he goes to school (I: hmm) yano so that it wasn’t (: yeah yeah) in school till he got it.

(Vicky 1:429-434)

This defence mechanism serves to protect the key person from feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and incompetence by locating the problem within the child or the parent who is in need of support. This could provide an explanation for the key person’s understanding of their role to “fix everyone’s problems” (Helen 1: 508) by providing strategies for parenting:

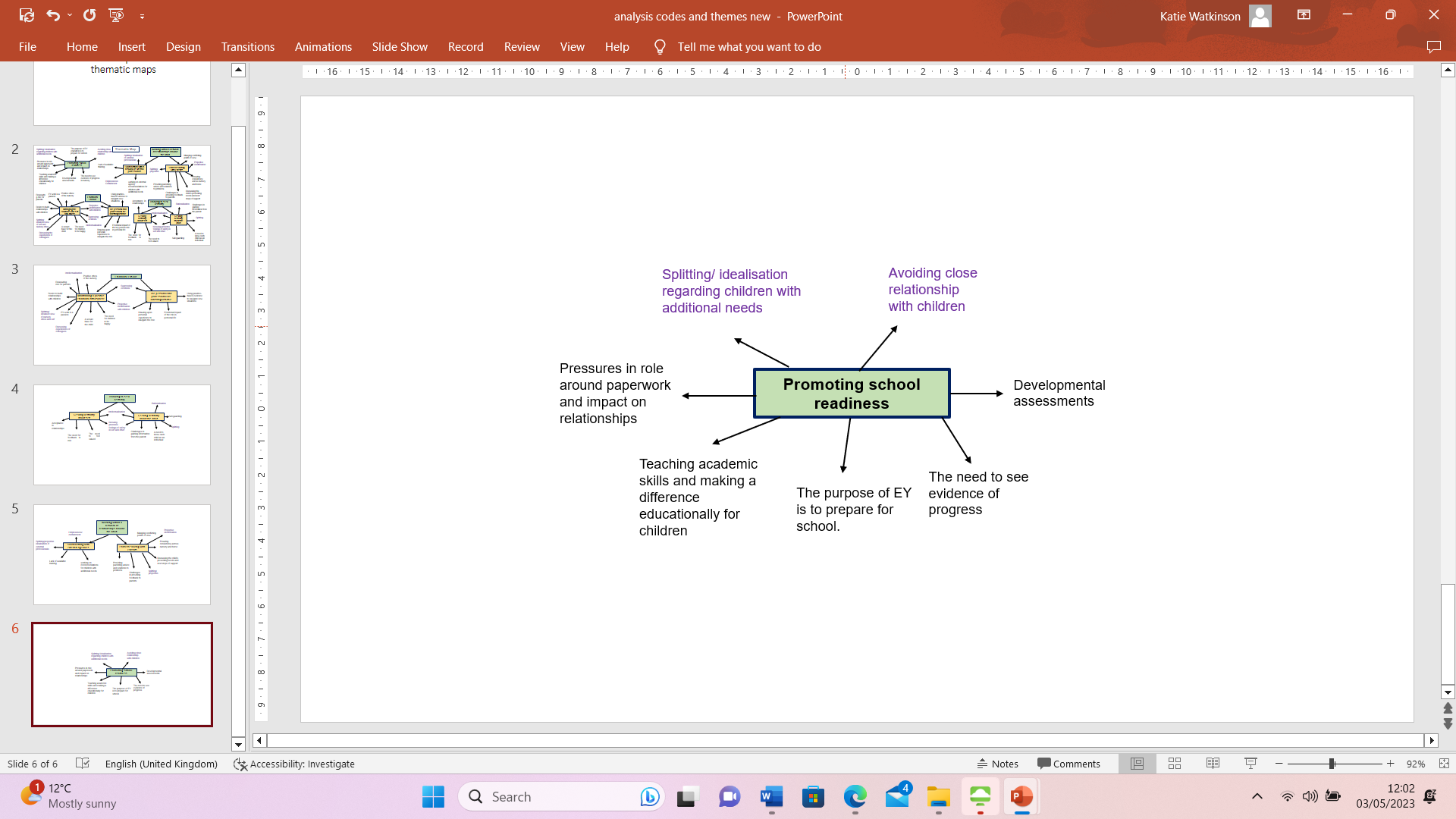
There was some sort of parent’s course or class or something (I: hmm hmm) which we helped them to like kind of attend to help them understand yano their son an his needs an things which. Which helps everyone in the in the end (I: hmm yeah) especially them.

(Vicky 2:438 - 445)

***Theme 4 – Promoting school readiness***

This theme highlights the key person’s understanding that a pivotal aspect of their role is to prepare their key children to be ready to transition to primary school. As discussed in the pen portraits, all participants work with preschool aged children, which could have influenced the prevalence of this theme in their narratives. This theme also refers to the need for children to experience noticeable success in relation to developmental expectations. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the key person may employ a range of defence mechanisms (which have been identified in purple on the thematic map) to protect themselves from feelings of loss or failure in relation to the child’s transition. These include splitting, idealisation and avoiding close relationships with children, which I will discuss further below.

**Figure 5**

The thematic map for codes for the theme ‘promoting school readiness’

# *Key: Black =semantic codes Purple= latent codes*

The key people all discussed the purpose of their role to support the child to transition to primary school to “be able ta feel comfortable goin into a bigger setting an moving on” (*Helen 1: 535*). Throughout all of the transcripts, it was evident that when close relationships are developed with children, it can be difficult to imagine the inevitable ending of these when they need to transition to school. Helen described how she feels about this in this quote: “Aw it breaks my heart. It does (I: yeah). It’s so hard at the end of the year to let them go cos it is like your own kid” (Helen 1:547-548).

For Lisa and Vicky, these narratives of transition were occasionally discussed with laughter. I interpreted this as a means for them to defend against (and keep at a distance) their uncomfortable feelings in grieving the end of these relationships:

So, he didn’t get to stay with us full time. An he was really upset he wanted to take me with him (laughter)…. I wan I wanaa go with him (laughs) *to make sure that he is ok* ((laughter)). But ya can’t can you?

(Lisa 1:264-272)

So it’s just constantly getting to know them more yano like before they go to school *(laughter).*

(Vicky 2:544 -545)

I wondered whether Helen could have also been defending against her feelings by promoting her key children’s emotional independence to keep them at a distance and protect herself from getting too close:

You do feel like sometimes because you are really close [..]. Cos obviously ya want the independence thing (I: hmm) that’s what our job is ta do we’ve got to make them independent (I: hmm hmm). But I know a few have struggled with over the years with that (I: hmm hmm) close bond. Then to go to a teacher who like won’t hug ya or (I: yeah) yano or be that kind with ya even at Reception age [..]. So you do feel a bit like that as well. God should I be doin this cos you’ve got to get them ready for the big like. If you’ve got one or two teachers and 30 kids it’s not going to be all about you anymore.

(Helen 1:263-265)

The key people understand the assessment of key children’s development as a vital component of their role, which informs their planning of structured activities to enable progress. Despite a slight reduction in the Ofsted requirements in the number of assessments each year, this continues to be experienced as pressure in the role. It was also understood that these processes might create some distance within the key person and child relationship. This was discussed by Lisa, who feels when interacting with her key children, her mind is often consumed with thinking about what they can do for their chronological age, rather than her enjoying the interaction:

You’ve just haven’t missed anything (I: hmm) like av av can the do that? Can the do that? Can the do that? An all the while you’re playing and you’re having a great time you just think (.) can the do that? (laughs) yeah they can do that.

(Lisa 1:312-316)

Vicky also refers to the impact of not getting to know her key children as well she would like to when there is lots of paperwork to complete:

It was just like a lot cos ya feel like right well what’s next an ya like. Instead of spending the time with the children to get to know them an then ya doing the paperwork ya thinkin oh do I know them as well as I should be.

(Vicky 2:578-582)

In order to prepare for Reception, key children were expected to make progress and show achievement in relation to developmental progress that could be monitored through structured activities. Helen states that: “You’ve still got ta do some kind of they can’t just be a free for all. (I: yeah) it’s got ta be some kind of structure otherwise they’d go ta school an be like wow what is this? (Helen 1:440-442).

When participants were asked about a memorable key child from their career, they all chose children where noticeable progress had been made. Vicky discussed a key child who she engaged in a speech and language intervention to develop their expressive language:

ya could see him like (I: yeah) learning pickin up things an it was like good (I: hmm) it was a nice feeling to know like that’s helpin him an that’s (I: yeah) an yano he’s developing well an it’s it’s improving an it’s helpin him with his communication an speech with with other people an children in the room.

(Vicky 2:171-175)

Helen referred to some of her previous key children who were interested in learning and she felt satisfaction in her job:

Loved them to death [..] couldn’t wait to get in (I: yeah). Cos I could see the progress each week [..] I love seein their excitement (I: yeah) of wantin ta learn an yano they come out an one of the little boys. He left reading. Being able to read cos he was that interested in things he was (I: hmm) reading sentences an everythin by the time he left […] Erm just seein their excitement really (I: yeah) that’s what means a lot to me.

(Helen 2:345- 355)

Lisa offered a slightly different memorable experience of working with a child and she had come away from her structured planned activities and noticed increased engagement in play from one of her key children:

An it was something where we hadn’t gone right well we will try that sort of let’s do this and see what happens an it was the best idea ever for him an it was lovely to just see his reaction an him to be able to come away from his quite structured play an av a little bit of fun really.

(Lisa 1:171-175)

I sensed that a range of emotions may be experienced (guilt, anxiety and helplessness) from the key person when their children do not follow the 'normal' progression of development expected ahead of their school transition. Examples from Vicky and Helen are discussed below:

Ya don’t want them ta ya don’t want them to feel (I: hmm hmm) like you’re failing them in a way but yeah no we do what we can here.

(Vicky 2:448-449)

That that guilt of could I have done a bit more could they have could they have known more phonics.

(Helen 1:520 – 521)

To defend against these emotions, I wondered whether the key person may employ the defence mechanism of splitting by projecting these feelings into the children. This may have been seen by the key person positioning children who have not made progress as having needs and subsequently idealising their own skills and children who are making progress. By doing this, the key person is relieved of any feelings of anxiety, guilt, failure or incompetence in relation to their skills and their professional identity remains.

Well obviously ya have circumstances where it is because ya have got speech and language problems and I think (I: yeah) an you can take that into account (I: yeah) that they are not where they should be.

(Lisa 1:360-363)

There is a couple of children erm even in this nursery (I: hmm hmm) that have took longer to settle than others (I: oh okay) an it’s because of their needs sometimes.

(Vicky 1:311-315)

**5. Discussion**

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings from the analysis in relation to my research questions and relevant existing literature. Further consideration will be given to EP practice and suggestions for future research. I will then present my personal reflections and the reflections of each participant based upon their engagement in the whole interview process. I will conclude this chapter by discussing the potential strengths and limitations of the research and how I plan to disseminate it.

**Summary of research questions, purpose and aims**

The purpose of this study was to explore the under researched context of the EY PVI sector, to understand how three early years practitioners make sense of their subjective experiences in implementing a key person approach. It aimed to inform and extend the knowledge base for EP practice in EY, that is reflective of the current context of the PVI sector. This research is underpinned by psychoanalytic theory and has utilised FANI (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013) and the GEM (Joffe & Elsey, 2014) to explore both the conscious and unconscious processes through the “research-interviewee dyad” (Holmes, 2013, p. 169). This study sought to answer the following research questions from the data:

1. How can the emotional experience of the key person be understood (through conscious and unconscious processes) within a PVI context?
2. How do early years practitioners in PVI settings conceptualise their role as a key person?
3. How might the findings of this research inform EP practice in the EY in PVI settings?

**Summary of the findings of the study**

Through utilising a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022), four overarching themes were identified: *emotional labour; knowing to seek certainty; working within a network of relationships around the child*; and *promoting school readiness*. I identified the themes using a number of sources of data, which included the interview transcripts, reflexive entries and the GEM task, alongside a consideration of the individual’s gestalt in keeping with the psychosocial methodology (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

The findings have illuminated a number of conscious and unconscious factors that may have shaped (and continue to shape) the key people’s understanding of their role. Across the participant’s narratives, there appeared to be a range of emotions experienced in doing the key person role that were defended against alongside anxiety; such as, shame, guilt, inadequacy, frustration and helplessness. This research therefore supports Tucker’s (2015) view that “we defend ourselves not just against anxiety but against any experience that threatens to overwhelm us” (p. 58). There was evidence to suggest that the participants may have mobilised a range of defence mechanisms in their work, both on an individual level and through social defences, which will be explored in this discussion.

This research has also highlighted how those within the caring triangle (Hohmann, 2007), may be subject to projections from the other parties through projective identification (Klein, 1946). This has been explored in a limited way in EY literature so far. There were a number of commonalities in the experiences of the participants that have been evidenced through the themes of the study. Although it was not explored to a significant degree (due to the process of the RTA), there did appear to be some individual differences in how they conceptualised the key person role due to their personal experiences. This meant that at times, there was some variation in the defence mechanisms that were employed. I will address the findings in relation to the three research questions below.

**RQ1 - How can the emotional experience of the key person be understood (through conscious and unconscious processes) within a PVI context?**

***The application of Emotional Labour in the key person role***

Emotional Labour “requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 7). The findings of this research suggest an “emotive dissonance” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 90) in how the key people feel about their role and the outward emotions they display within their relationships at work. The key people could talk with a level of awareness about concealing their genuine emotions and feigning another emotion in order to fulfil their role. These findings correspond with previous research from Boyer et al. (2013), who also found that early years practitioners held the view that children were “sensitive to the moods of others” (p. 527); particularly that of adults, which they felt had the potential to lead children to become overwhelmed. In the interviews and the GEM exercise, it was discussed how children need to be calm and settled at all times. According to Brace (2020), the word *settled* in early years practice can be problematic, as it can:

Generalise about the behaviour, its meaning, and its management, seem to act like a stop sign to open dialogue and thinking with parents and it obstructs taking a more reflective stance where the unique meaning behind the distress of an individual child can be considered together. (p. 134)

This study has also demonstrated how emotional labour was experienced in relationships with parents by early years practitioners actively encouraging parents not to worry; so that they too, did not become overwhelmed. I felt that there was evidence in the study of the key people using the emotional regulation strategy of *surface acting*, which involved the change in body language and facial expressions to portray an outwardly desirable emotion to others in their role. This may have also been demonstrated in the interview by the key people occasionally communicating their feelings nonverbally, which they may have become accustomed to doing at work. I wondered whether the key people in this study use this strategy to preserve their relationships with children and families and maintain a stable emotional environment.

The key people appeared to have some level of awareness of the dissonance in how they experience their emotions. However, the findings from this study suggest that they may also modify their feelings unconsciously, by employing defence mechanisms to suppress their genuine emotions to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed in their role. This was identified across their narratives in several ways; however, some defence mechanisms were used specifically within the interview encounter to suppress how they felt about an emotive topic. In Lisa’s narratives, she often used laughter and there were times when I noticed that she may have adopted a childlike state, which I interpreted as regression. Curtis (2015) states that regression may be “an unconscious attempt to become someone who does not have to behave in an adult way, and is excused from doing so” (p. 51). In Helen’s narrative, she may have employed the defence mechanism of repression, to avoid her early memories of the key person role at a time when she may not have felt as competent.

One of the limitations of utilising defence mechanisms is how they can enable key people to maintain emotional distance from children. This was particularly evident when they discussed children transitioning to school. Youell (2006) claims that experiences of transition and loss in work can evoke painful experiences of loss that have occurred in earlier life. Throughout both Lisa’s and Vicky’s narratives, laughter was used to potentially keep their uncomfortable feelings of grief at a distance. Helen also discussed promoting the independence of children in a way that required her to avoid close relationships. This evidence suggests that there might be unconscious processes involved in the emotional labour of key people, in order to suppress their own emotions and maintain a positive emotional climate.

***The emotional impact of parenting experiences on the key person role***

This research has highlighted the interlink between the professional and personal identities of key people, which is also a key finding in previous research (Morris, 2018; Seaman & Giles, 2021). All of the key people in the study were parents, and it was clear that their subjective experiences impact on their work. Hochschild (1989) refers to this as continuously being on duty, by doing the first shift of motherhood, and then the second shift as an early years practitioner. Therefore, this interlink of identities can mean that maintaining an emotional boundary between work and home can be challenging and requires “emotional work of the highest calibre” (Elfer et al., 2003, p. 27). According to Hochschild (1983), having a strong identification with work can also contribute to increased anxiety, burnout and fatigue (Colley, 2006).

Although this was not explored to a significant degree, the psychoanalytic concept of transference could be applied to this research; as the key people drew upon personal relationships to make sense of and navigate their role. This is unsurprising given the historical view of EY work as an extension of motherhood (Smith, 1992). Sikes (1998) proposes that the reason for this could be due to the “profound emotions that many people experience when they become parents” and that “once they had their own children their professional knowledge, consciousness and practice was, to some extent, altered” (p. 92). This research therefore suggests that the emotional experiences that key people have in their personal relationships cannot be separated from their experiences in relationships at work.

***The key person’s need to know the child***

The subtheme of *knowing the child* was highlighted in relation to the key people’s need to seek out knowledge about the child to reduce feelings of uncertainty. This was seen through factual information about the child (e.g., emotional triggers, likes/dislikes, home context) rather than through knowledge that emerges from their intersubjective relationship. This could also explain why the key people preferred to work with children in the preschool room, who were more likely to verbally express their needs to adults. The key people found it difficult to hold an integrated view of the child’s behaviour (across home and nursery) and to manage feelings of uncertainty about the child, they may have employed defence mechanisms. I wondered whether the key people utilised rationalisation to provide more logical theoretical explanations about their interactions with the child to reduce feelings of anxiety. There was a need for a clear explanation for a child’s behaviour in relation to either a diagnosis category or a parenting issue to manage their uncertainty, which has also been noted in previous research in schools (Burton, 2020; Keaney, 2017). Billington (2006) suggests that the need for a diagnostic label could be a way for adults to seek out a form of containment and “to provide a reasoned account for feelings of distress being experienced” (p. 74).

These findings could be further explained through the work of Bion (1962, 1967), who proposed that for someone to *know,* they need to experience *not knowing*; which involves drawing upon one’s emotional experiences as a way of knowing. Sapiuntzis (2018) discusses Bion’s work in the context of education; as for adults to make sense of a child’s needs and experiences, they first need to “be able to tolerate the frustration and uncertainty a symptomatic child can create in oneself and be willing to reflect on one’s own experiences and the experiences of the child” (p. 90). Bibby (2009) however reminds us that “uncertainty inevitably carries risk” (p. 44); therefore, for some, feelings of frustration and uncertainty can be too painful to acknowledge, which can lead one to seek out other ways of finding certainty in their experience.

***Defending against feelings of inadequacy in the key person role***

The findings of this study correspond with previous research that suggests that early years practitioners need to be seen as professional in their role (Morris, 2018; Seaman & Giles, 2021). The key people in the study needed clear feedback from those they work with (managers, children, parents) that they are doing a good job, which was evidenced through the subtheme of *seeking certainty of self*. I identified different defence mechanisms that may have been employed to defend against feelings of inadequacy, failure and incompetence in the key person role, which will be discussed below.

The key people often discussed the joy and satisfaction they experience in their role, as noted in other studies (Morris, 2018; Page, 2011). I got a sense that the key people may have employed idealisation, through their over emphasis of love for their role and their own abilities to protect the ego from the persecutory bad aspects of the role (Klein, 1952). This finding is important because it highlights that for some key people, these unconscious factors and motivations against anxiety could be mobilised in ways that mean they have unrealistic expectations about their role.

This study corresponds with psychosocial research by Dashtipour, Frost and Traynor (2021), who also identified idealisation in nurses by overemphasising their parenting qualities in their role. According to Vincent and Braun (2011), believing that the role requires intrinsic maternal qualities can be problematic, as it implies that little training is required for the role and that it can only be completed by women. Key people will therefore need to accept both the good and the bad within their role, which could move them towards the *good enough* key person (Winnicott, 1953).

I wondered whether the key people were projecting their feelings into children and parents to preserve their idealised view of their role, in order to avoid feelings of inadequacy, failure and incompetence. This could be understood through Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position (1975), as children were split into those who wanted to learn and made observable progress, in comparison to those who did not. Finch and Schaub (2018) claim that in the educational context, there can be a tendency for educators to “internalise the student’s failure as their own", which will subsequently impact on how they respond. This could also be relevant for the EY sector, as children who were not making observable progress or had what felt like big emotions (that needed to be contained) were positioned as having SEN. By the key person locating these feelings in the children, this may serve to relieve them of their feelings of incompetency. It was evident from the key person's accounts of memorable children throughout their career, that those who made progress and were calm and regulated were idealised. The application of these defences would make sense, given the lower qualifications of the early years practitioners in the PVI sector. This could mean that these feelings may be even more intense and require the key person to work harder to experience success.

***The key person’s emotional experience working with parents***

This study supports previous research that emphasises that key people experience heightened anxiety when discussing concerns with parents about their children (Elfer & Wilson, 2021; Seaman & Giles, 2021). This was particularly evident before a meeting with a parent, as it consumed their thoughts even in their free time. The key people found it extremely challenging to manage the uncertainty regarding how the parents might respond to what they say. I understood this through Klein’s (1975) paranoid-schizoid position, as the key people identified parents who might react in a good way or a bad way to provide them with certainty about potential emotive situations. The meeting itself also provoked a great deal of frustration and anxiety for the key person, particularly when the parents did not agree with their concerns. Although the theme of emotional labour suggests that key people can attempt to minimize the feelings of parents. There may be times when the key person might need to experience some coherence in their internal feelings and outward expression of emotion. This could mean that frustrations are more easily expressed in heightened emotive situations.

I considered the key person and parent’s interactions through Klein’s (1946) projective identification, which involved the splitting and projecting of parts of the self into the external object [the parent] so that they can become "possessed by, controlled and identified with the projected parts" (Segal, 1973, p. 27). This defence mechanism could serve to protect the key person from feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and incompetence by locating the problem within the child or the parent who is in need of support. In the examples provided by the key people, it is the parent who appears to be identifying with the key person’s view of their parenting or perceived denial of their child’s needs. These strong emotive reactions from early years practitioners towards parents have also been noted in previous research (e.g., Boyer et al., 2013; Cottle & Alexander, 2014; Seaman & Giles, 2021). Psychosocial research by Ross-Lonergan (2019) explored parents’ emotional experiences of transition in the EY, and found how they also employed the defence mechanisms of splitting and projection to remain “psychologically defended against feelings of inadequacy” (p. 121). This study and the findings from Ross-Lonergan (2019) highlight the potential unconscious intersubjective processes that can occur between parents and the key person in their interactions.

***The key person’s emotional experience in working with external professionals***

This research highlights the projective identification (Klein, 1946) that the key person may experience from their interactions with their key child; particularly in relation to children who need additional support with emotional regulation. The need for external agency involvement in this study appeared to be closely linked with feelings of shame, anxiety and incompetence experienced by the key person for not being able to support the child within their skill set. This suggests that the emotional experiences of those within the caring triangle (Hohmann, 2007) could extend beyond this into networks of other relationships (e.g., external professionals), who could also be subject to these projective processes. This research has identified how the referral process to external agencies may be a way for the key person to project out their feelings to potentially seek a form of containment. This might explain why, in their discussions with parents, key people are often keen to make onward referrals to external agencies. This could be understood through Bion’s metaphor of the *container-contained* (1962); in that, there is a need for another to act as a container to enable information to be thought about. The external professional could therefore represent the container for the key person’s emotional experience, so that “the fears become manageable” (Bion, 1962, p. 115).

Dunning, James and Jones (2005) suggest that defence mechanisms such as *splitting* and *projection,* are more likely to occur when individuals do not feel contained themselves. I understood the discourses that the key people had regarding external professionals through Klein’s paranoid-schizoid position, in order to protect their ego from the overwhelming feelings they have in relation to supporting a child (Klein, 1975). The key people therefore presented an idealised view of external professionals as possessing all of the good and themselves as unskilled or lacking in knowledge. Ellis (2021) states that it is very common in EP work to be idealised as the expert, particularly when others feel inadequate or useless. These idealised notions of external professionals can however be problematic; as Trevithick (2011) claims that: “it is often when idealisation breaks down that it becomes possible to realise the intense feelings that have been invested, and the unbearable disappointment and despair that this can lead to” (p. 398). This was applicable to this study, as when the external professional did not contain the problem for the key person in the way they needed, this led to an increase in anxiety. Bion (1962) describes this as “the nameless dread” and proposes that if the mother (or external professional) cannot tolerate the child’s (or key person’s) emotions and provide a containing presence, “then projective identification is carried out with increasing force and frequency” (p. 115-116). This appeared to lead the key person to project their feelings into the external professional, who was seen as to blame for the situation. As discussed in my reflective field notes, I experienced some of these projections from the participants regarding previous external professional experiences and therefore needed to provide a containing function (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

***The application of social defences in PVI settings in the study***

This research has highlighted the potential presence of social defences in PVI nurseries and could further explain some of the defence mechanisms that I interpreted from the participants’ narratives. Emotional Labour theory proposes that feelings rules can become embedded within an organisational culture and are subsequently understood as good practice (Colley, 2006; Vincent & Braun, 2013). The dissonance that key people experience through surface acting can often be due to the contradiction of the individual’s internal state with what the organisation requires. Previous research in the EY has emphasised the influence of the nursery culture and systems on attachments with children and ultimately, the implementation of the key person approach (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Lemos, 2012; Page & Elfer, 2013).

I sensed that when children did not conform to the emotional expectations of the nursery, the key people may have experienced feelings of helplessness and anxiety in not being able to support them to emotionally regulate. This may have led the key people to adopt organisational procedures to maintain the emotional stability of the nursery; such as, putting children on a reduced timetable or asking parents to collect them from nursery. Although this relates to the school environment, Burton (2020) found that excluding pupils can represent a social defence through the projection of the organisation’s anxieties by identifying the child as the problem. This also corresponds with previous research from Elfer (2007, 2012), who suggested that when early years practitioners experience an increase in anxiety, they can become more reliant on nursery procedures for containment. I noticed how policies, procedures and processes were at times discussed in the interview to potentially avoid their emotional experiences and remain professional. Brace (2020) has argued how social defences in nurseries may be problematic, as they “protect the adult, they do not benefit the child”, and they can “obstruct a more contingent and containing response, as they enable an escape from straightforwardly being in touch with the child’s feelings” (p. 134).

In organisations, social defences have the potential to induce conformity and help maintain an individual’s identity to protect “themselves against intolerable internal conflict” (Miller, 1976, p. 20). Petriglieri and Petriglieri (2020) propose that social defences can enable people to “avoid the question ‘how do I feel?’ while helping them address the question ‘who am I?’” (p. 30). Given the uncertainties of the PVI sector, it would make sense that those working within these settings might look for ways to develop a collective identity to foster emotions of security. This was identified in how the participants discussed the emotive experiences of other key people and used words such as *we* and *us* in their narratives. I sense that the key people may be holding onto an idealised notion of their nursery as a family environment to project out their negative experiences to other nurseries, parents or children. This study has therefore emphasised the organisational influences on how key people experience emotions due to a desire to belong through a shared emotional experience with others.

**RQ 2 - How do Early Years Practitioners in PVI settings conceptualise their role as key person?**

Through the analysis, this appear to be a number of different ways that the key person role is conceptualised based on personal experiences, the individual relationships within the caring triangle and the influence of wider factors on the EY sector. An important finding from this research was how the key person role was understood in slightly different ways across the three participants with some placing more of a focus on the educational aspects or the safeguarding responsibilities. This research has illuminated how there continues to be uncertainty regarding the role of the key person in terms of how the care and education aspects of the role can be incorporated.

***Demonstrating professionalism in the key person role- what is the primary task?***

There continues to be confusion regarding the identity of the EY sector and what professionalism means for early years practitioners. In the context of this study, being a professional key person appeared to mean ensuring that children make academic progress and become independent without a significant focus on the emotional aspects of the role. It has however been proposed that attending to one’s subjective experiences and emotions in their role should be understood as demonstrating professionalism (Osgood, 2010; Page & Elfer, 2015).

The findings of this study suggest that the educational responsibilities of the key person role, may be more preferable than care. This could be explained by the wider systemic pressures on the EY to focus on children’s academic progress through the EYFS, which include typical ranges of development that are monitored by Ofsted (Manning-Morton, 2006). Therefore, promoting educational outcomes could be a measurable way for early years practitioners to demonstrate their contribution to society and maintain financial viability in the competitive nursery sector (Elfer, 2012; Elfer & Page, 2015). Research by Ross-Lonergan (2019) also highlighted the pressures that early years practitioners might experience from parents to prioritise education; as they viewed play as all bad and idealised more academic skills in nursery, such as reading and writing. This may have implications for the key person’s role; particularly in PVI settings, where staff may not feel they are sufficiently trained to promote academic progress before children transition to school. One of the challenges for PVI settings is that only 8% of the sector has qualified teachers who are appropriately trained to assist children in meeting their learning outcomes. This could mean that early years professionals in the PVI sector may need to work even harder with the resources that they have available to avoid feelings of failure.

This study is consistent with previous research, which claims that duties such as observations and assessments in nurseries can take precedence over relationships and could serve as a social defence for keeping relationships at a distance (Albon & Rosen, 2014; Elfer, 2012; Elfer et al., 2018a; Elfer, et al., 2018b; Elfer & Wilson, 2021; Hopkins, 1988). Rice (1969) stated that all organisations have a primary task(s) that they must perform in order to function and survive. For the PVI nurseries in this study, their primary task could be conceptualised as preparing children to be developmentally ready to attend school. This means that their role may become focused upon the child moving on to another setting, and therefore relationships with children may be kept at a distance to defend against feelings of loss (Elfer, 2007; Elfer, et al., 2018b). Although *school readiness* is not clearly defined by Ofsted (DfE, 2014), academic literature suggests that this term could imply a fix set of characteristics and abilities the child does or does not possess, without considering the environmental factors (Carlton & Winsler, 1999). This definition of school readiness could further illustrate how this primary task might serve a function to reduce the key person’s feelings of inadequacy and keep relationships with children at a distance for emotional protection. This understanding of school readiness has been reconceptualised by Bates (2018) as an *event,* and emphasises the need for early years practitioners to embrace uncertainty by addressing the needs of children in the "here and now" during their interactions, rather than focusing on what children should be doing in the future.

***Keeping relationships at a distance***

All of the key people discussed the importance of relationships in their work and getting to know the children and families. This reinforces the caring triangle and the role of the key person in meeting the needs of the parent and the child in PVI settings (Hohmann, 2007). This research corresponds with Elfer’s (2015b) findings in how participants spoke “with sophistication and theoretical detail… about the general importance of relationships in fostering attachments or early learning in nursery”, however when the focus became on specific examples of “their own interactions with children within their own work setting, they seem to disconnect themselves from this knowledge” (p. 295). In this study, the function of providing a secure base for children was understood to be to minimise emotional distress in children, to enable the key person role can be carried out successfully. This is a different way of understanding the notion of the secure base in comparison to the established literature, which emphasises it as a way for children’s emotions to be felt, explored and learned from by the present attuned adult (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist & Target, 2004). The process of evoking “powerful emotions in the adults who care for them is understood as an essential part of an infant’s emotional development” and this includes feelings such as “joy and satisfaction as well as anger, division and alienation” (Elfer et al., 2018b, p. 189). Children therefore need to know the range of affects generated in the adults who care for them to be able to know about their own affects (Bibby, 2009).

According to the findings, there may be the potential for the key person to locate problems in children and families (e.g., a parenting issue or the child having a diagnostic condition) when they experience heightened emotions in their role. This may also be influenced by the fact that parents often want to know if their child is presenting with traits of a diagnosis and will inquire about the key person’s opinion on this. The key person’s need to seek out conformation of a child’s presentation could serve several functions for them; as focusing on the behaviours of a child can sometimes be utilised in a way to avoid thinking about both the child’s and their own internal state (Sapiuntzis, 2018). Youell (2006) notes that “the formal process of assessment and diagnosis sometimes serves the function of allowing parents and teachers, unconsciously to distance themselves from the child’s difficulty” (p. 102). However, Youell (2006) also reminds us that having a diagnosis does not necessarily mean that a solution has been found to the problem situation. The key people often discussed their role as a problem solver and used language such as *fix,* which could be another way to avoid one’s and another’s emotional experience. They perceived their role to extend beyond the nursery environment by providing parenting support, home guidance and referrals to external agencies. This is an important finding, as if the parent does not believe that the problem is due to their own parenting skills, this could have implications for their relationship with the key person.

***Adopting the role of the mother***

I got a sense that each key person presented an idealised family ethos in their nursery and personally connected to this. The key people appeared to conceptualise their role based upon their personal experiences of parenting, as being a mother gave them access to a specific type of knowledge (e.g., “a sixth sense”). According to previous literature, the practices of early years practitioners may be more influenced by personal values and subjective experiences (e.g., parenting) rather than their formal qualifications (Colley, 2006; Seaman & Giles, 2021). However, Elfer and Page (2013) argue that it could be problematic to base attachment models on personal experiences of family love relationships, as “nursery children are not family members and nursery attachments, with their professional boundaries and accountabilities, are clearly different to family ones” (p. 562). This highlights the need for key people to embrace Page’s (2018, 2011) notion of *professional love*, to reflect on their feelings experienced in professional relationships from personal relationships (Manning-Morton, 2006).

**RQ 3 - How might the findings of this research inform EP practice in the EY in PVI settings?**

In this section, I will first explore the implications of the findings of this research for the application of psychoanalytic theory in EP practice. I will then address one of the aims of this study, which was to explore how the EP role might be extended in the EY, beyond purely individual casework or a statutory function. To address this, I will discuss how this research could contribute to the other four functions of the EP role: consultation, intervention, training and research (Scottish Executive, 2002).

***The implications of psychoanalytic theory from this research***

Engagement in a psychoanalytic approach might be seminal to our work – the EP works within relationships they form, and it is by valuing the relational and acknowledging the great power therein, which includes the potential to be liberated from the unitary and the rational, and open and curious about the unconscious intersubjectivity that is present in our day to day work.

(Bartle & Eloquin, 2021, p. 26-27)

This research has illuminated the emotional complexity and unconscious processes that affect how key people who work in PVI nurseries conceptualise their role and engage in their relationships. These findings could have implications for how EPs interact with key people; as the responses from key people that are observed, could be interpreted as defences against a range of emotions. An important finding is that making a referral to external agencies could be a means for key people to project out their feelings and seek containment of their heightened emotions regarding the children they work with. This highlights the function of external agencies to provide “emotional containment, and the capacity to tolerate uncertainty” (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021, p. 18). However, if the key people are defended against these heightened emotions, they may not recognise their own needs, which could make it difficult for EPs to engage them.

This research has highlighted the potential for EPs in working with key people in PVI settings to be subject to projective processes. This is another important finding, as projective identification can have implications for how effectively EPs can do their role (Trevithick, 2011). This promotes the need for reflexivity in EP work in the EY, by being curious about one’s own emotional experiences as affective data about the experiences of those we work with (Kennedy, Keaney, Shaldon, & Canagaratnam,2018; Pellegrini, 2010). Therefore, EPs will need access to the supervision and training they need to utilise psychoanalytic theory in their work with affect (Shaldon et al., 2021).

***Consultation/ Assessment.***This research has demonstrated how EPs can have a unique contribution in EY work in the PVI sector through consultation. EPs could provide emotional containment for the adults in the caring triangle (Hohmann, 2007) to enable them to think about their experience in a more integrated way, which could “lead to definite attitudinal changes which in turn inform both behavioural and relationships with others” (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021 p. 18). The benefits of EPs using psychoanalytic theory as a framework for consultation within emotive contexts has been emphasised in schools in recent literature (Eloquin, 2016; Pellegrini, 2010). However, this research highlights the value this could bring to EP assessment and consultation work in the EY to deepen hypotheses (Bartle & Eloquin, 2021). It is therefore vital that EPs are able to consult with the key person in their work, as Martin (2014) claims that this can often be a barrier and will have implications for how effective the consultation is.

***Intervention.***In previous literature, it has been suggested that early years practitioners need to have a “critical understanding of their practice as emotional work” (Taggart, 2011, p. 85), as this has not been a focus within their formal training (Morris, 2018; Vincent & Braun, 2013). Another key finding from this research is how key people will rely more on their previous work experiences and personal experiences to navigate their role, than their formal training. It has long been emphasised how early years professionals need supervision to attend to their personal lived experiences and emotions in their work (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Osgood, 2010).

Since 2012, it has been a statutory requirement in the EYFS for early years practitioners to access supervision; however, there is considerable variation in this across nurseries (Soni, 2019). Soni (2019) found that EY supervision can be predominantly focused on safeguarding issues and does not tend to provide staff with the space to reflect on their subjective experiences. This research therefore supports the use of psychoanalytically informed Work Discussion Groups, as a reflective and containing space “to facilitate thinking about the experience of individual staff in order that they can develop their own thinking about individual children and respond better on the basis for this” (Elfer, 2015b, p. 298). EPs could therefore have a role in providing group supervision to key people in PVI settings to reflect on their experiences and relationships.

***Training.***Elfer (2015b) claims that the tendency for early years practitioners to emotionally distance themselves in their relationships could be due to a lack of training. Alongside other EY research, this study has identified that there may be some specific training needs in PVI settings that EPs could support with, such as working with parents within the key person role and the emotional regulation of children (Hover-Reisner, Furstaller & Wininger, 2018; Seaman & Giles, 2021). Martin’s (2014) research highlighted how training in EY settings must reflect the individual needs of the nursery. EPs will also need to consider how ongoing mentoring and reflection can occur following any training, as standalone events could be less effective in EY practice (Martin, 2014). Further consideration will also need to be given to the high turnover of staff in PVI settings and how training can accommodate new staff.

***Further research.***This research has provided a great deal of thought regarding the EY sector and has illuminated areas for further research. It was evident that interactions with parents could be a significant source of anxiety for the key person. The voice of parents in the EY is an area that has received little attention, with only a small number of studies that have utilised interviews to explore their experiences of the key person role (Brooker, 2010; Page, 2011). It would be useful to conduct a similar study using psychoanalytic tools with parents to understand how they conceptualise the role of the key person; as there seems to be some tension in gaining a shared understanding. I also believe that further consideration needs to be given to how EPs could support staff wellbeing in the PVI sector, alongside the specific features of supervision in the EY. Further ideas for suggested research are discussed in the limitations section below.

**Strengths and limitations of the research**

***Strengths***

This is a unique study that has utilised a psychosocial methodology (Hollway & Jefferson) to explore both the psychological and social factors in how the key person role is conceptualised. These findings have extended the knowledge base of EP practice in the EY in the under researched PVI context. A strength of this study could be that a combination of psychoanalytic tools (e.g., FANI and GEM) have been utilised to elicit and explore the participant’s narratives and to generate unconscious data in different ways to address the research questions. All of the participants provided positive feedback about the process of engaging in the two interviews, to have a space to talk openly about their thoughts and feelings (see participant responses below). I felt that two interviews allowed us to establish a greater rapport, as the participants seemed more at ease in speaking about their experiences during the second interview. This enabled me to obtain rich data and check out any emerging hunches or hypotheses from the first interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Although there can be some ethical concerns in using a psychosocial methodology, I believe that understanding the discourses that key people in PVI settings invest in has given the study more depth and may also have the potential to elicit empathy from external professionals (e.g., EPs).

Despite the limitations that I have addressed in using RTA below, I believe that this allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the social context of the nursery, while also taking into account the individual’s experience. A strength of this research has also been its focus on researcher reflexivity; as Finlay (2003) states, “without examining ourselves, we run the risk of letting our elucidated prejudices dominate our research” (p. 108). A psychosocial methodology therefore goes beyond this, by the researcher attending to the countertransference within the interview interaction to make sense of each participant’s responses as a form of data (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). I took account of this in my reflexive notes, which I later used to triangulate the data and give my findings more depth.

***Limitations***

This research aimed to hear the voices of early years practitioners from the PVI sector. However, the sector itself is large and encompasses different provisions with unique pressures, which would have been difficult to represent in a small scale study (Crellin, 2017). The three nurseries that wanted to participate were from similar private non-profit provisions and worked with children in the preschool age range. Therefore, this study is only able to comment upon these specific experiences.

Another limitation of this research could be that all of the participants recruited were female. Despite the fact that females make up a larger portion of the early years workforce, it would have been valuable to learn more about the perspectives of male key people. As, according to Hochschild (2012), men and women may approach emotion work in quite different ways. I therefore concur with other studies that further research into hearing the voices of male early years practitioners would benefit the EY sector (Morris, 2018). Another critique of the study is that all of the key people were parents, which was significant in how they conceptualised their role. It would be interesting to conduct further research with key people who have not had experience of parenting to see how this could differ for them in their role.

This research has not been carried out by a researcher who is a trained psychoanalyst and I am aware that some readers may argue that this could weaken my interpretations of psychoanalytic concepts. This research does not therefore seek to make any claims of truth, but is one interpretation based upon different data including my interactions with each participant. It is likely that another person reading the transcripts may make other interpretations, and therefore I have presented the findings tentatively.

The use of RTA could also be seen as a limitation in this research, which may have resulted in the loss of some of the individual data of the participants. It has been proposed that psychosocial researchers might utilise thematic categorisation of data as their own means of seeking certainty in a messy research context, which could be relevant to myself in this study (Holmes, 2019). I occasionally found it challenging to code the unconscious data using a RTA, as defence mechanisms are not intended to be seen as distinct entities, but as processes that will overlap (Trevithick, 2011). Despite these challenges, I do believe that this method of analysis was appropriate for the research; as given the small number of participants, it is likely that their anonymity may be compromised.

**Participant reflections of the interviews**

At the end of the second interview, I asked each participant to reflect on their experiences of engaging in the whole research process. When Lisa was asked to share her experiences, she complimented my interview technique and expressed her worries about answering the questions correctly. She did discuss how the open questions in the FANI provided her with the opportunity to answer as she would like. As Lisa was the first participant I interviewed and it was my first time using the FANI, I wondered whether my need for reassurance was reflected in Lisa’s presentation in the interview; as she did not refer to the containing process of the interview in a great deal. I considered whether my over focus on the key principles of the FANI may have meant that it was not as containing for her as it may have been for the other two participants.

Both Helen and Vicky reflected on the value of participating in the research in developing awareness of their relationships and emotional responses through specific examples. They both told me how they had spent time in between interview one and two reflecting further on their practice. Vicky often discussed how she feels that she is doing things automatically (which she refers to as “subconsciously”) in her work and that the interview has made her become more self-aware. This quote highlights Vicky’s (2:637 – 642) reflections on being in the interview process:

It’s made ya more like sitting down ta talkin about it (I: yeah) has made ya think I’ve never done this before so (I: yeah) so I don’t know talkin to someone about like askin ya questions about how ya feel and the key person an different scenarios (I: yeah) situations and everything you think actually yeah yano it’s yano that has happened (I: yeah) an that did make me feel like that an that that yano it’s just makes you more aware and more like to think about it and talk about it is good.

**Personal reflections**

It has been a privilege to explore this research topic through a psychosocial approach that has built upon my previous work experiences and is aligned with my developing identity as an EP. Engaging in this research has subsequently had an impact on my practice, particularly my consultation skills. I have begun to apply some of the questioning styles of the FANI to elicit the meaning frames of consultees. I have also gained a greater understanding of psychoanalytic concepts, and I have found myself considering affective unconscious processes more often in how I respond to others in my work and the defences I may use. This has enabled me to stay within emotive situations, when previously I may have felt the need to offer a solution.

Within the research interviews, I did occasionally find it difficult to shift from my EP hat to my researcher hat; as at times, I needed to offer empathy, but ensure this did not become a therapeutic conversation. On one occasion, I found myself talking with a participant as if we were in a supervisory session, and it was sometimes difficult to maintain this boundary. This could be a reflection of my own anxieties about the research experience being at least somewhat beneficial for the participant and that I was not merely wasting their time given the demands the EY sector is currently under.

**Feedback to stakeholders**

I have arranged to email each participant a summary of the findings from the study, which will include a brief overview of the themes. This will take place following the completion of this thesis in summer 2023. The findings of this study will also be shared with the EP service in a team meeting where the application of psychoanalytic theory in practice will also be considered. I will also plan to disseminate the findings to the EY team in the LA, alongside nursery managers and SENCo. If I am not able to orally present the findings due to difficulties in releasing staff, I intend to create a one page report to share the findings in an accessible way. Further consideration will be given to how I will disseminate the findings to the wider EP profession.

**6. Conclusion**

This research area was chosen due to the criticality of the EY in relation to children’s development and the limited availability of recent EP research. The EY sector (specifically the PVI sector) has been labelled as *forgotten by the government* (EY Alliance Report from June 2020), which suggests that it experiences a separate range of pressures and issues in comparison to the education sector. The research questions for the study were devised due to the considerable variation in EY provisions and the historical divide between the MNS and PVI sectors (Moss, 2009). A review of the literature found there to be limited research in the PVI sector with early years practitioners who take on the key person role.

This research has explored the subjective experiences of three key people in PVI settings across three private, non-profit nurseries in one LA. The psychosocial epistemology and ontology were integral to the research; as they informed the methodology and took account of the defended intersubjectivity in the co-creation of data. The findings of the research have illuminated how the key person role is conceptualised through both individual and social factors to avoid their emotional experiences and maintain a positive emotional atmosphere. There was a desire for key people in PVI settings to be seen as professional and avoid feelings of failure and inadequacy in their work. This can lead to a split in which promoting educational outcomes and focusing on relationships are not recognised as entwined. In this split, promoting educational outcomes can become prioritised in a way that obscures or wishes away the importance of maintaining a focus on relationships.

The role of parenting and personal experience appeared to have a more significant influence on navigating their role than formal training. This highlights the need for early years practitioners to have the space to feel contained to attend to their subjective experiences and the emotive aspects of their role (Osgood, 2010). This research corresponds with previous studies that emphasise the significance of the caring triangle (Hohmann, 2007). However, this has been extended to consider unconscious intersubjective processes between all parties and the influence of the network of external professionals. EPs could therefore provide a containing function for key people to make sense of their emotional experiences and develop a more integrated view of those within the caring triangle. The findings also highlight how EPs could support to PVI settings to recognise the importance of relationships in fostering and promoting the educational progress of children.

This research aimed to extend the knowledge base in EP practice in the EY, and further consideration has been given to this across the five functions (Scottish Executive, 2022). The findings have also highlighted the value of drawing upon psychoanalytic theories and frameworks in EP practice in the EY to attend to the affective data from others in consultation.

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**Appendix A: Ethical Approval**



Downloaded: 26/04/2023

Approved: 29/05/2022

Katie Heymans

Registration number: 200112655

School of Education

Programme: Educational Psychology DEdPsyc

Dear Katie

**PROJECT TITLE:** A psychosocial exploration of the emotional experience of the key person role in Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) nursery settings.

**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 045296

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 29/05/2022 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 045296 (form submission date: 27/05/2022); (expected project end date: 31/07/2023).

Participant information sheet 1104896 version 2 (27/05/2022).

Participant consent form 1104897 version 1 (21/04/2022). Participant consent form 1106764 version 1 (27/05/2022).

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

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

Anna Weighall

**Appendix B: Information Sheet**



**Title: A psychosocial exploration of the emotional experience of the key person role in Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) nursery settings.**

My name is Katie Watkinson and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist with the University of Sheffield. As part of my course, I am looking to complete a piece of research which aims to hear the voices of four key people in either Private, Voluntary and/or independent nursery settings. I am hoping to interview key people who are not in a senior position in their nursery and come from a non-teacher led PVI. Participants will be interviewed on a first come first serve basis.

Before you decide to give consent to take part, it is important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or you would like more information. If you do decide that you would like to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign a consent form. Thank you for reading this.

**What are the aims of the research?**

This research aims to understand how the key person role is understood and implemented in PVI settings and the emotional experience involved in this role. Research in PVI nursery settings appears to be an under researched area in comparison to Maintained Nursery Settings. Previous research has also predominately consisted of the views of nursery managers within a group setting. As the Early Years is such a critical period of child development and the majority of our youngest children are attending PVI settings, it is important that the educational psychology profession gains a greater understanding of this context. Not all Educational Psychology (EP) services work with nurseries outside of statutory assessments. It is therefore hoped that this research will extend the evidence base in this sector in the context of covid-19, and further develop the role of the EP in the Early Years.

**What will I be asked to do if I choose to take part?**

If you decide to take part in the research, you will be asked to take part in two individual interviews ideally a week apart. They should take no longer than one hour each. The interviews will follow an open question format, which means that their content will be largely determined by you and your experiences as a key person in a PVI setting. The purpose of this is to help me gain an in depth understanding of your experience. The second interview will provide an opportunity to reflect on the first interview and continue to explore how you experience your role.

**What is Psychosocial Research?**

It may be helpful for you to know that this study will use a psychosocial approach. This means that as part of my analysis, I will be interested in what could be happening at an unconscious level, exploring some of the feelings that we might not be fully aware of at the time but do influence how we think/feel/talk about something or someone. I will do this is by keeping a reflexive diary of my own experiences as an interviewer and therefore I may understand something in a different way and generate thoughts and ideas about what this. In addition to the interviews, you will be asked to provide some biographical details to complete a pen portrait (e.g., your work experiences), and to complete a brief free association grid at the beginning of the interview (as another method to provide your views on the key person role). These additional tasks should take no more than ten minutes.

Both interviews will take place at times that are convenient to you and your nursery setting. Interviews can take place in a private space either in your nursery or in a Liverpool Council building, if you would prefer.

**What are the potential risks involved in taking part in the research?**

Although no physical or emotional risks to participants are anticipated as part of the research process, the researcher recognises that exploring personal experiences of work could potentially be upsetting for participants. The researcher will be available to discuss any concerns after the interview and will be able to direct you to independent supportive agencies should you wish to do so.

**What are the potential benefits in taking part in the research?**

This research project could offer the benefit of time to reflect and share your experiences of your role in a safe and non-judgemental space. As discussed above, there could be some potential benefits for the PVI and Early Years sector, alongside the development of EP practice in this area.

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

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. Data will be kept confidential and names will not be recorded. Instead, your identifying information will be removed and assigned a pseudonym rather than your name, as soon as possible, which will only be known by the researcher. The data will not be shared with any other organisations. The nursery you are employed at will not be named in the write up, and therefore any identifiable information concerning it will be omitted to maintain confidentiality.

Confidentiality will however be overruled if there is a safeguarding concern or disclosure is made that suggests that imminent harm to self and/ or others may occur. This will however be discussed with you first.

**Who is the data controller and what is the legal basis for processing my personal data?**

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you of the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that ‘processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest’ (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University’s privacy notice https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general

In accordance with data protection law, The University of Sheffield is the Data Controller for this project. This means that we are responsible for making sure your personal information is kept secure, confidential and used only in the way you have been told it will be used. All recorded data will be stored and used in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act (1998) and the University’s Data Protection Policy.

**Will I be record, and how will the recorded media be used?**

The interviews will be recorded using audio only equipment, and will be transcribed and analysed by myself as researcher. This recording will only be used for analysis and anonymised direct quotes may be drawn upon for the write up of results. No other use will be made of the recording without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. The anonymised recordings and transcriptions will be stored temporarily on password protected computer devices under a secure U drive (which satisfies the University’s requirements for secure data retention).

**What happens to the data collected and the results of the research project?**

All data will remain confidential throughout the whole research process. The findings will be analysed and written up as part of a doctoral thesis and shared with the researcher’s course (the University of Sheffield), as well as the Liverpool EP Service through written and/ or verbal presentation.

This research may also be considered for publication in an academic journal and shared with the Educational Psychology profession via conferences. Although this research will use draw upon themes of commonalities across participants, anonymous quotations may be used to illustrate these. A summary of the research finding themes and commonalities will be made available if requested when the research is complete.

All data will be stored securely and destroyed when no longer required. Data will be kept for three months prior to the successful completing this research. All signed consent forms will be kept in a secure location separate from the interview data.

**Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This research project has been reviewed via the University of Sheffield’s ethics review procedure. The University’s Research Ethics Committee monitors the application and delivery of the University’s ethics review procedures across the University.

**Do I have to take part? What happens if I do not want to take part or I change my mind?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form). You will still be free to withdraw at any time without needing to give a reason up until your data is processed and analysed. This will be up until four weeks after the interview. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact myself Katie Watkinson (Kwatkinson1@sheffield.ac.uk)

You have the right to ask that any data you have provided be withdrawn and destroyed, and to decline to respond to any questions asked during the interview. You also have the right to ask any questions you may have about the procedures and are invited to ask any questions about the information presented here before you take part.

**What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?**

It you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact my research supervisor Dr Anthony Williams (anthony.williams@sheffield.ac.uk) in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Education Department Rebecca Lawthom (r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk). If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University’s Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the project’s Designated Safeguarding Contact Dr Anthony Williams ([anthony.williams@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:anthony.williams@sheffield.ac.uk)). If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the Head of Department Rebecca Lawthom ([r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk)) and/or the University’s Research Ethics and Integrity Manager Lindsay Unwin (l.v.unwin@sheffield.ac.uk).

**Contact information**

I will be happy to answer questions you may have about taking part in this research via email on [kwatkinson1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:kwatkinson1@sheffield.ac.uk). Dr Anthony Williams will be supervising this research and can also be contacted (anthony.williams@sheffield.ac.uk).

Thank you for taking the time to read this invitation.

**Appendix C: Interview Schedule for Interview one**

**Check in regarding understanding of information sheet**

*Do you have any questions following the information sheet?*

Signing of consent form

**Background information**

See pen portrait Question’s to give to participant

**Grid Elaboration task**

Instructions:

*I am interested in what you associate and what comes first into your head when you think of the emotional experience in doing your role as key person role in your current nursery setting. So, I want you to in these boxes, draw, write or tell me what first comes to your mind when you think about the emotional experience as a key person You can put one image or word or phrase in each box.*

- Ask questions afterwards for participants to elaborate (e.g. *can you tell me more..* )

Suggested questions

* Can you tell me what is it like for you to be a key person in your nursery setting?
* Can you tell me about what it was like for you when you first became a key person in your current nursery setting?
* Can you tell me about a time when you have felt pressures or stresses in your role as key person in your current setting?
* Can you tell me about any factors that have helped to manage these pressures in your role as key person?

|  |
| --- |
| **Exploratory prompts**  Did your feelings about X change over time?  What did you do when X happened?  How did you feel when X happened?  What did you do/ think/ feel when X happened?  Tell me more about …/ say more about …..  When you say X what do you mean?  You mentioned X can you give examples?  You started talking about X are there any other times X has happened? |

**Appendix D: Interview Schedule for interview two**

**Introduction**

*The last time we met you talked about your experience of being a Key Person in your nursery setting:*

* *Are there any thoughts or comments that you would like to make about the previous interview? Or anything you went away thinking about?*
* *I wonder if you have any thoughts or feelings about returning to take part in this second interview?*

**Individualised questions in relation to interview 1**

*I have some more questions which we didn’t fully explore in the last interview which could be helpful to talk about:*

* Personalised questions developed from the analysis of the first interview 1.
* Personalised questions developed in relation to journey into the role as Early Years Practitioner and Key Person role.

|  |
| --- |
| **Exploratory prompts**  Did your feelings about X change over time?  What did you do when X happened?  How did you feel when X happened?  What did you do/ think/ feel when X happened?  Tell me more about …/ say more about …..  When you say X what do you mean?  You mentioned X can you give examples?  You started talking about X are there any other times X has happened?  Can you tell me more about …? |

**End reflections**

* *What has been your experience of the interviews?*
* *Is there anything else that I did not ask which you expected me to raise?*
* *Is there anything that has arisen from the interview process that has upset or confused you?*
* *Would you like to discuss this further with someone?*
* *Is there anything in this interview which you have tole me that you do not want me to use in the analysis?*
* *Are there any other comments you would like to make?*
* *Would you like information about the outcomes of the research? How would you like this presented?*

**Conclusion**

Thank you for sharing your experiences with me and taking part in both interviews. If you feel you would like further support following the interviews I can direct you to support from XXXXXXXXXXXXX

**Appendix E: Glossary of Psychoanalytic Defence Mechanisms (Giuseppe and Perry, 2021)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Defence Mechanism** | **Description** | **Function** |
| Humour | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by emphasising the amusing or ironic aspects of the conflict or stressor. | Humour allows some expression of affects and wishes that are involved with conflict or stressor. Whenever conflict or external stressors block full expression of the affects or satisfaction of wishes, humour allows some symbolic expression of them and of the source of the conflict. |
| Suppression | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by voluntarily avoiding thinking about disturbing problems, wishes, feelings, or experiences temporarily. The individual can call the suppressed material back to conscious attention readily, since it is not forgotten. | Suppression keeps both the idea and affect associated with a stressor out of awareness in the service of attending to something else; however, suppressed material may be voluntarily brought back into full awareness. Distressing feelings are acknowledged but dealing with them is postponed until the subject feels more able or the timing is more appropriate. |
| Intellectualisation | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by the excessive use of abstract thinking to avoid disturbing feelings. | This is a defence against affects or impulses in which the idea representing the affect or impulse is kept conscious and expressed as a generalisation, thereby detaching or distancing the subject from the affect or impulse itself. The felt quality of emotions is lost, as is the urge in any impulse. The cognitive elements remain conscious, although in generalised or impersonal terms. The subject commonly refers to his or her experience in general terms or in the second or third person. |
| Repression | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by being unable to remember or be cognitively aware of disturbing wishes, feelings, thoughts or experiences. | This protects the subject from being aware of what he is experiencing or has experienced in the past. |
| Idealisation | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by attributing exaggerated positive qualities to self or others. | The subject describes real or alleged relationships to others (including institutions, belief systems, etc.) who are powerful, revered, important, etc. This usually serves as a source of gratification as well as protection from feelings of powerlessness, unimportance, worthlessness, and the like. |
| Omnipotent | The subject responds to emotional conflict or internal and external stressors by acting superior to others, as if one possessed special powers or abilities. | This defence commonly protects the subject from a loss of self-esteem that is a consequence whenever stressors trigger feelings of disappointment, powerlessness, worthlessness, and the like. Self-esteem is artificially propped up at the expense of positively distorting one’s self evaluation in response to real experiences which bring up contrary feelings. |
| Denial | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by refusing to acknowledge some aspect of external reality or of his or her experience that would be apparent to others. | This prevents the subject who uses it and anyone querying him from recognizing specific feelings, wishes, intentions, or actions for which the subject might be responsible. The denial avoids admitting or becoming aware of a psychic fact (idea and feeling) which the subject believes would bring him aversive consequences (such as shame, grief, or other painful affect). |
| Rationalisation | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by devising reassuring or self serving but incorrect explanations for his or her own or others’ behaviour. | Rationalization involves the substitution of a plausible reason for a given action or impulse on the subject’s part, when a motive that is more self-serving or difficult to acknowledge is evident to the outsider. |
| Projection | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by falsely attributing his or her own unacknowledged feelings, impulses, or thought to others. The subject disavows his or her own feelings, intentions, or experience by means of attributing them to others, usually by whom the subject feels threatened and to whom the subject feels some affinity. | Projection allows the subject to deal with emotions and motives which make them feel too vulnerable (especially to shame or humiliation) to admit having himself. Instead, he concerns himself with these same emotions and motives in others. The use of projection therefore commits the subject to a continual concern with those on whom he has projected his inner feelings as a way to minimise awareness of them himself. |
| Splitting | The individual deals with emotional conflicts, or internal or external stressors, by viewing himself or herself or others as all good or all bad, failing to integrate the positive and negative qualities of the self and others into cohesive images; often the same individual will be alternately idealised and devalued. | Splitting of object images and self-images is the subject’s defence against the anxiety of ruining the good images of people by allowing bad aspects of them to intrude upon the good. |
| Projective identification | The subject has an affect or impulse which he finds unacceptable and projects onto someone else, as if it was really that other person who originated the affect or impulse. | The individual experiences the other person as doing something to him or herself that is threatening, which make him or her feel powerless. The subject reacts to this imagined (or partially real) threat by attacking and believing that his or her own actions are justified, despite provoking the other. Guilt over having aggressive wishes toward the other person emerges and is handled by identification with the other, reinforced by the belief that the alleged threat attack on oneself is deserved. Paradoxically the subject often induces the very feeling of powerlessness and guilt in others that he or she feels, which may result in others backing away. |
| Regression (Trevithick, 2011) | The individual retreats when feeling stressed or under attack, to an earlier stage in their development in order to avoid or reduce anxiety. | This enables them to experience a time in their life when they felt emotionally safe. |

**Appendix F: An example of a transcript from Vicky (Interview two)**

**Vicky transcript 1**

Interviewer: So. As I mentioned before the first thing that I’m gonna do is I just want to find out a little bit more about. As I said before your journey into obviously as working as an early years practitioner an obviously. Your what the key person role looks like in your setting. So if you could just tell me a little bit about your journey into this role maybe your qualifications and experience and things?

Vicky: Yeah. That’s fine. I started me child care journey in a nursery in X (I: okay). An erm I done on site training so I did my level two qualification an then me level three. Both on site. Er I was in that nursery for a long time. For nine years (I: oh okay). Erm. Obviously supported the key person role from the minute (I: hmm hmm) I started (I: yeah). Erm. I. After so many months I was startin to give get a couple of key key children. Obviously, I wasn’t qualified so it was slowly an yano while I was doin me qualifications I’d I’d get more an obviously that would help me with ma studying. Erm an learning all about the key person role at the same time so it helped me through my studying (I: okay) for my level two an level three. Erm. After that I then moved to a smaller nursery cos I moved house (I: hmm hmm) so it was the commute wasn’t as far. Er a smaller independent nursery. Er I was there for two years. Er again following the key person role had different sa key children in there that was in a room for two to four year old children (I: oh okay yeah). Erm. An then I had a little boy of my own *(Laughs)* so then I was on maternity leave. An then I have been here for two years (I: oh okay). Two years now. I’ve got 13 years overall child care erm

Some laughter – I wonder why?

Is there shame in expressing qualifications?

Interviewer: So 13 years yeah?

Vicky: Experience. Yeah. An I am qualified level three. I do have so many credits towards a Level four (I: yeah). I did do an SEN an inclusion 10 week course (I: oh okay) at *(states university)* a good few years ago about 10 years ago (I: oh okay). So I’ve got 30 credits towards a level four as well. Erm (I: oh brilliant). But that’s as far as my qualifications go.

Interviewer: No that’s really helpful. So you’ve kind of told me about your years and experience there (V: yeah). Which is really helpful too. Erm. So this setting that your in is a would you describe it as like a private. Like what kind of nursery would it be?

Vicky: Yeah it is a private nursery yeah yeah. There is two nurseries in this company. So yeah it is private based (I: yeah) nursery.

Interviewer: An then. So the children that you’re a key person to now. How many do you usually support?

Vicky: Erm it varies on what days they do because I’m only part time (I: oh okay) so they’ve got to be in and they’ve got to do the days that I do (I: oh okay). Erm we do try and base it where their their only days are my days (I: okay) sometimes if they do do earlier on in the week (I: yeah) there is another girl who does the opposite to me she does Monday Tuesday all day an the Wednesday morning (I: oh okay). So we kind of do a little share as well [I: right okay you share some with someone else] and share communication with each other. Only a couple only one or two. The majority are either all mine or all the other member of staff’s. It depends on the children of what days they do.

I wonder how working part time impacts on the key children

Interviewer: Oh okay. So how many at the minute?

Vicky: [at the minute] I’ve got seven. Seven key children.

Interviewer: Seven at the minute. And is that quite usual each year would you say or?

Vicky: Erm yeah yeah. Again it differs because of the children an what days (I: yeah yeah). Cos yano some wanna do all week full time (I: yeah). Some want to do earlier on in the week some wanna do later on. Erm but it is usually around seven or eight (I: oh okay). Erm then we have some moving up from the toddlers (I: yeah yeah) to pre-school. Erm in which case we look at the days again an then because throughout the year we have different in takes coming into pre-school. An obviously we have brand new children as well. So it can increase a little bit. Erm I know in the past when I’ve been full time in my in me experience years ago I’ve had up to about 13 or 14 key children (I: oh okay gosh yeah) cos it’s been a bigger nursery so we’ve had a lot of children (I: hmm hmm) in and a lot of them had been full time. So I’ve ad up to quite quite a lot but again I’ve been in five days a week (I: yeah). So I see them a lot more an I know them a lot more.

Interviewer: Oh okay. An the children your supporting are they all in the pre-school age are they so like..?

Vicky: [yes] they are in all in the pre-school room so from three years.

Interviewer: So from three years onwards.

Vicky: yeah to Reception aged yeah.

Interviewer: And erm is there. Have any of these children got any like additional needs or anything like that?

Vicky: [yeah] there is a couple with SEN needs yeah there is erm some speech needs, some with erm some just have a developmental and learning global delay as well (I: oh okay). Erm some need behavioural needs.

Interviewer: So you’ve got quite a range there yeah?

Vicky: [yeah] (I: yeah). Yeah there is a range. Not as many now as we have had (I: okay). Erm so have just obviously quite a few have left for school (I: yeah). An we did have more then were we yano we had at the at the minute there is not as many as we’ve had.

Interviewer: So typically for you this would be a bit less

Vicky: [yeah] yeah typically less yeah yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Just so that I can put it into context. So that was really helpful. So I’ve got an idea of obviously your experiences (V: yeah) and things there which is really helpful. So the next thing that I am gonna ask you to do is this grid task (V: okay). So I’ve put on there as well the instructions but I will just read it out and I will give you a pen. You can use my pen if you want to. So so I am really interested in what you associate and what first comes into mind when you think of the emotional experience in doing the key person role (V: okay). So in these boxes I want you to erm either draw, write or tell me what first comes into your mind. So drawing erm like an image, writing a word or a phrase that comes into your mind.

Vicky: Okay. In each box?

Interviewer: Yeah. So I will give you a bit of time to do that.

Checking out the instructions

Vicky: Okay. So just one word in each box or?

Interviewer: You can one word a phrase or you can draw something (V: okay). Whatever you would feel more comfortable in doing? (V: okay). Yeah.

Vicky: Right okay *(whispers)*

The need to check for approval – although I ask if she is happy with it

*(Pause for 33 seconds while Vicky completes task)*

Vicky: I don’t know if that’s right *(whispers)*

Interviewer: Yeah. Are you happy with that? (V: Yeah). Yeah Brilliant. Okay. So we’ve got this one that says ‘care’. Could you tell me a little bit more about this one?

Difficulty getting narrative out? Is she thinking a lot about what I might want to know?

Vicky: So when we are the key per the the child’s key person we want them we want were to take care of them. Were they are in our care (I: yeah). So we need to be able ta respond to them get to know their interests get to know their needs (I: oh okay) and be able to care for them *(talk quickly*) (I: yeah yeah). As yano as parents so parents feel like their yano we are meeting all their needs an interests.

Interviewer: Hmm hmm. Is there an example that comes to mind when ya’ve wrote down care when you think of a particular child you’ve worked with?

Is the purpose of care to keep parents happy?

Vicky: Erm. I would probably just saw it was an overall really (I: yeah) for all of them really. Erm cos they all have their own different interests (I: yeah). An different needs so it’s getting to know them *(talks quickly)* (I: yeah)*.* Erm an an knowing that we’ve an yano the parents knowing that we have that care for them (I: yeah). To know that Ya know that we are were helping them an supporting them in their learning an development (I: yeah). Erm. An we are making that time to spend to spend with them. Which they do before they settle in really. We have like a time when the parent comes in when they first come in an we have like a settling in (I: yeah yeah) type of out of the room to get to know (I: oh okay) us an a key person an the parent

This narrative highlights the importance of relationships with parents and how this links with relationship with child?

Interviewer: Yeah. Oh okay. Is there an example where you’ve you felt like you were able to do that quite at all? (V: erm). Like a particular child that stands out?

Vicky: Yeah I suppose there is. There is one that there’s one in my first nursery there is a little boy erm he had quite extensive urh urh additional needs. Erm an I an I was his key person an I spent a lot of time with the mum an the dad they needed a lot of support (I: hmm hmm). Erm. An different people from outside agencies were coming in (I: yeah). Erm. An it’s knowing that what he needed yano the care that he needed was yano I understood it so that I could yano talk to the outside agencies an they come in and yano an they they erm *(makes noise with tongue) they* looked at him as kind of watched him in nursery as well so that he was getting what he needed as well. Erm but yeah he needed a lot of a lot of support. An I was there yano as his key person to be there as a as a to speak to mum an dad as well. They’ve obviously seen the outside agency people as well (I: hmm hmm). Erm but I was like in the nursery getting what he needed an I’d erm *(make noise with tongue)* whether it was for speech or his play support plans an things that were in place (I: hmm hmm). I was doing them for while he was at nursery (I: yeah) then the parents would do them at home as well (I: yeah oh okay). So it was consistent and that as swell yeah yeah.

I haven’t got a sense yet of what care is for Vicky outside of the processes of the role.

Is this question too vague? Should I have said an example of working with an outside agency that comes to mind? Vicky does sound quite skilled in terms of SEN

Interviewer: Oh okay. What was it like working with the outside agencies working with that particular boy?

Vicky: It was fine yeah (I: yeah). To be fair we had a few different ones coming in for different children (I: yeah). So I tended to see the same ones for different ones like Inclusion Consultants or an educational psychologist would come in (I: yeah yeah). Or speech speech therapist.

Interviewer: yeah. So quite a few comin in.

Vicky: An at the time I was SENCo of the nursery as well (I: okay). An they would speak to me as well. An I was obviously this little boy’s key person. Erm so I had to know like how he was from when he first started (I: yeah). His baseline. An then like what he needed we ended up having like a box like a sensory box for him (I: oh okay) cos he had a lot of sensory needs as well (I: yeah yeah). Erm so we had that box an yano it was a erm like a padded (I: hmm hmm) a padded lap like a padded blanket a erm like a pad (I: oh yeah?) yano ta calm when he’s get a bit worked up (I: yeah yeah). So we had all this for him. Erm an then through his observations an that that I would ya. Ya know what we needed an that an you could see like how he progressed (I: hmm hmm). Erm. So yeah er er it was fine (I: yeah yeah) se seein all the different outside agencies coming in I’d it was. They’d go ta the assessment as well outside of (I: hmm hmm) nursery erm ta different ta different appointments an obviously (I: hmm hmm) they’d they’d come in an see how he was in nursery. So yeah.

Is safety about the relationship to feel safe?

Interviewer: Oh okay. Erm. So so you mentioned safe as well. Could you tell me a bit more about this one?

Does this reflect Vicky not wanting to open up to me? Or is safety what she thinks I may want to hear?

Vicky: [yeah again]. Yano the children need to feel safe as well in ya care as a key person. That’s why the whole ya need to make a bond with them get to know them (I: yeah). So they know they feel safe cos it will stop their learning and development to their extend they need to be able to learn to their full ability really (I: yeah yeah). An the par an obviously so important for the parent ta yano to make sure they know that their child is safe as well and they feel safe in the nursery.

Interviewer: Yeah yeah. Is there any situations or anything specific that you’ve you’ve thought about when you wrote safe that came to mind?

Is Vicky linking this safety to her personal relationships. I still don’t get a sense of what safety is like for Vicky in her relationships and how she conceptualises it. This needs further exploration – how could the child feel safe and how could Vicky feel it?

Vicky: [erm not really] just ya general safeguarding thing (I: yeah yeah) that we always follow as a nursery (I: yeah) like we all follow the safeguarding policy and it was all. An think it’s just cos I’ve got a little boy meself (I: yeah) an I just think I would want him to feel (I: yeah) safe as well (I: yeah). An I’d want I’d want him to know he feels safe an I’d want wanna feel it too. So I can relate to parents yano (I: oh okay of course yeah). Yano that friendly but professional kind of manner (I: yeah). Erm so that ya know that their child does feel safe an happy to come to nursery with no with no. An sometimes ya hear things don’t ya on like the news an stuff that yano safeguarding issues it’s just aw it’s just (I: yeah yeah) yano it’s not nice an yano aw ya need all the children need to feel safe (I: yeah). Yano its r it’s number one *(laughs).*

Interviewer: Yeah. Is there any safeguarding issues that that you’ve had ta to manage recently in your role as a key person?

I want to gain a sense of what events in the media have impacted on Vicky’s practice?

Vicky: [Noooo] I can’t say there is no. But every now and again we do have like a refresher over like safeguarding policies (I: yeah) an like anything else that happens like outside (I: yeah) in the news an things (I: oh okay) we had to like make sure we’ve all aware of it.

A general statement about nurseries – is this further evidence of Vicky saying what she would like me to hear?

Interviewer: An on top of it?

Vicky: Yeah yeah. If we need a refresher of our policies (I: yeah). But but it’s. It’s just like it’s it’s again it’s safeguarding is paramount in nurseries for the children so (I: yeah). But I can’t say I’ve ever had any personal experience as a key as a key.

Interviewer: Yeah yeah. What about since from when you first started in this setting to now? Do you feel like there has been any changes in this safety aspect?

Vicky: Erm *(2 second pause).* There probably has over time but it’s ee to me it’s just (.) Kind of. Common sense in a way because it’s it’s the chi (I: yeah) you’ve got to look after the child ta ta the full extent yano an. Erm obviously policies an get get changed (I: yeah) an there’s different acts like an children’s acts an blah blah. An every time something happens another act kind of forms together (I: yeah yeah). Which we always have ta like follow an things (I: yeah). Erm I think it’s probably more paramont paramount now. I think that’s just the way (I: hmm hmm) it goes with life yano (I: yeah) everything is more like health and safety more and (I: yeah yeah) safeguarding is more yano. So it’s just something that ya know. It’s just normal (I: hmm) it's just ya just go with it (I: hmm hmm) yano.

Is this embedded within nursery culture?

Taking about the policies and procedures rather than own experiences – why?

Interviewer: Yeah. Erm *(3 second pause).* Okay so the next one you’ve said was happy. Could you me a bit..

Vicky: [yeah] (I: this one?). Yeah erm you wanna make sure that the children are happy in the nursery (I: yeah) as a key person again ya forming that bond you have a little key group an ya want to make them happy and make sure they are happy every day (I : yeah) *(talks quickly)*. Obviously if they are not ya not yano pre-school have got an age where (I: yeah yeah) ya know they do they can communicate ta ya (I: hmm hmm). Erm so if ya’ve got any if they look worried or anything like that ya would speak to them (I: hmm hmm yeah) er obviously yeah ya know it’s all confidential ya know you make sure ya just listen to them (I: hmm hmm yeah). An obviously if there is anything any issues or concerns there ya would speak to the management (I: hmm hmm yeah) an it’s there’s anything that maybe we could speak to the parents about to make sure (I: yeah). Any changes at home sometimes yano (I: hmm hmm) can erm *(making noise with tongue)* can reflect on reflect on how their children are in nursery (I: hmm hmm). So if you get to know the children as a key person and you know them and there is a change in behaviour or character an ya think ooh there not as happy as they normally are (I: oh okay) or then it might be a little red flag type of thing or. It might be something so easy at home so simple (I: yeah) maybe they’ve just had a change a new a new bedroom or something (I: yeah) yano sometimes yano there yano parents might say oh yano they are moving house or an it can affect. So it’s good to know that parent’s yano they let us know things like that (I: yeah) that we can watch out for in the children (I: yeah) in case yano (I: yeeh) anything changes ya know. So it’s important to know.

An image of surveillance

I wonder about the acceptance of emotions that are not happiness and is this actually achievable for children to be happy all of the time? Can this result in staff wanting to fix situations quickly?

Interviewer: Is there any particular situations where this red flag has come up for you at all?

Automatically says no then needs time to think.

Vicky: Erm. Not really no no. There’s well there has been a couple of times. Let me try an think. Erm.

Interviewer: Any of your children were you’ve thought oh there’s a red flag?

I rephrase the question – could this be to rescue Vicky?

Vicky: *(talks quickly)* Yeah there has been. Nothing serious (I: yeah yeah) though there has been a couple times again an I’ve said (I: yeah) oh they’ve not been their usual self an they’ve said oh they are missin their Grandad or there or there has been (I: yeah yeah). Erm *(makes noise with tongue)* or yano even a a death in the family (I: hmm hmm) and things an we hadn’t known in the past like the Grandad or Grandma an we think okay that’s why maybe there not as (.) talk active as normal (I: yeah) which has happened. But nothing I wouldn’t say as in extreme as a safeguarding issue or anything like that (I: oh okay yeah yeah). But it’s yano just things in the family where that have maybe happened.

Interviewer: Oh okay. Is there one that comes to mind? (V: Erm not) A family situation yano maybe the last one? (V: yeah yeah) where you remember thinking (V: yeah yeah) oh this is a red flag?

Vicky: yeah well they just. Yeah I remember one an again I think it was the it was the Grandad *(whispers last five words of this sentence)*. I think it was the GG little boy’s Dad’s dad (I: yeah) an He’d he’d past away (I: aw). Erm. An it was it was kind of sudden (I: yeah) so it kind of effected the little boy an were just an we didn’t know this until a few days an we said he’s not been an yano he’s not been his cheery se. But they kinda never mentioned it straight away (I: oh okay). Maybe they didn’t think that it linked. Erm an we said oh not yano he’s not as happy or maybe he’s just having a tired day yano just kinda put it yano after a couple of days they’d said to erm the manager an they’d said oh yano cos the manager knew like he had like not been his normal self so. An they said oh well we’ve just recently lost (I: hmm) it was his Dad’s Dad. So he said that could be that could be it an then with in a week or so the little boy was yano perked up an that so obviously just not seein his Grandad or not knowing or understanding it at that age (I: yeah) yano they don’t they don’t know what’s goin on in their little head sometimes do they. How they erm interprate things yano (I: yeah) an understand it.

Sentence cut short – this happens on a few occasions – what might Vicky be holding back on saying?

Interviewer: An what was kind of going through your mind workin with [V: at the time when he was kind of] this boy at the time yeah?

Vicky: I just thought oh. Ya don’t know (I: yeah) ya can’t assume. It could even be a tired day like I said (I: yeah). Or just not wanting to play with (I: yeah) his friends as normal yano just a bit so yano I’d be there for him an like yano encourage him to play alongside others an erm yano ya did think like oh there’s something not (I: yeah) yano there not their normal self but ya don’t know until ya speak to try an find out more but erm when they did say they said oh it’s most likely that an it did an it dddid yeah yano ss (I: yeah) kind of a few days passed the following week he seemed to be yano to have perked up a little bit so (I: yeah). Erm but again ya don’t know how long these things yano play in their minds for (I: yeah). Yano when there when there when things like that happen to understand it (I: hmm hmm). So yeah *(increased volume)* nothing else kind of came from it arisen from it (I: yeah yeah). So we just put it down to that.

Making sense of what is going on for children and links to working with parents

Interviewer: So you were able to get that information [V: yeah yeah yeah] and make sense of what was going on a bit more?

Vicky: [yeah yeah yeah]. It’s all that parent partnership workin with them yano making sure you’ve got good communication.

Interviewer: Yeah yeah hmm. Is there any particular relationship with parents that comes to mind when you think of children and their emotions yano?

Vicky: Erm. They’ve all been. Some par everyone’s different the parents (I: yeah). Yano some some are more willing ta stand an chat to ya yano (I: yeah yeah) when we do feedback an things some some aren’t some are as quick to go (I: yeah yeah). An just think aw yano their fine but (I: yeah). The majority of the years I can’t I can say that the majority will yano (I: yeah) yano for the good of the children like they will like speak to ya an say (I: yeah yeah) yano how yano during feedback how yano how are they getting on an how they feel an everythin an yano they they do share things but sometimes it’s hard getting stuff out of parents (I: oh okay). Sometimes they don’t like ta (I: yeah) say. Everyone’s different yano yano so.

Interviewer: Of course yeah. Is there any that come to mind yano that an example where it’s been a bit more challenging to kind of [V: erm] share that information to get that information back from the [V: yeah yeah yeah] parents an share it?

Vicky: *Erm (2 second pause).* I wouldn’t say more challenging. I’d just it just it just takes a bit longer.

Interviewer: A bit longer yeah?

Vicky: [sometimes] an an they would yano they don’t sometimes they just don’t connect the two things together [I: yeah] an they’ll think oh is that the reason why yano like (I: oh okay) an think well yeah anything can affect them. Erm but it I wouldn’t say not my personal experience (I: yeah yeah yeah) that I have had with parents I wouldn’t say it’s not been too challenging

Interviewer: [ not too challenging but it’s just took longer?]

Vicky: But it’s just. Just took longer yeah (I: yeah) sometimes yano (I: okay) they don’t relate things or anything as anything can affect them (I: yeah) yano at such such a young age so.

Interviewer: What was. Is there one that you can think of where it did take longer cos I’m just wondering what that was like for you yano chipping away at it?

Vicky: [Yeah]. Well again yeah. It was like this little boy that took (I: yeah) a few days an I thought well (I: yeah) yano see how he goes on the next time was in (I: yeah) an he was in I think he was in full time. Was he four days? Four days a week? I think four days he did Tuesday to Friday (I: hmm hmm). Erm (.) an (.) yano each day an I think Oh he is still not sleeping very well (I: hmm) an you’d speak to the parents and they’d say no he settled fine last night (I: oh okay) yano an he’s not been as happy himself oh yano hes jus. An then it’s again it's like I say it’s the following week (I: yeah) when they say oh well we’ve had a yano (I: yeah) his Grandads passed (I: oh okay) passed away so it’s like oh yano (I: yeah). They don’t realise do they (I: yeah) that it could have been earlier on (I: yeah yeah) be there for the children their child a lot sooner an (I: hmm yeah) to kind of like just be there for them for for them (I: yeah) rather than him like thinking well you don’t know what they are thinking in their heads (I: exactly exactly). But obviously mentioning it you can do things like activities or read story books (I: yeah) yano like just just kind of (I: yeah) feel a bit more.

More focused on the details rather than personal experience

Wanted to know about the child’s emotional experience to be able to fix the situation to make the child happy

Interviewer: Yeah. How did that feel for you before you found out the reason why [V: yeah] this boy was [V: ya just] struggling?

Vicky: Hard. Because ya don’t know how to deal with him sometimes (I: yeah) because it could have been anything yano (I: yeah) anything an ya think aw keep an eye on him yano (I: yeah) an ya don’t know. An obviously we’d always tell each other in the room the staff (I: yeah) yano like if yano for any reason I would be off the next day (I: yeah yeah) an you’d say oh so an so he’s just been yano he’s bin himself just keep an eye on him (I: hmm) an things like an any parents tell you anything let us know yano so (I: hmm). Erm sometimes it would depend on dinners an li ya might not have always have been there as a key person to give the feedback (I: hmm) if they went home earlier. Erm. So ya know ya would obviously as a key ya would do feedback as much as possible (I: yeah) if you were there in the room. So we did. We did always communicate with each other the staff (I: hmm hmm). Erm so yeah it was hard *(laughs)* it was hard to know (I: yeah) an ya think aw (I: yeah) the poor thing because ya know it’s hard on them (I: yeah) yano on them but yeah.

Laughter – is there some shame and uncomfortableness in finding something hard?

The need to know the reasons why to support a child emotionally. Helplessness in not knowing what the problem is

Interviewer: Yeah. Oh okay. An we’ve got the last one can you tell me a bit more about this?

Vicky: Settled?

Identified that she has given similar responses to the other questions

Interviewer: Settled yeah.

Vicky: Erm again we want the child to be settle in their erm where they are to feel settled (I: hmm hmm). Probably a bit like the others to be fair a bit (I: yeah). A bit like to be to feel calm an erm happy to play an things an learn and develop an just be settled an where they are an not be anxious (I: hmm hmm). I mean it’s it’s taken I can there is a couple of children erm even in this nursery (I: hmm hmm) that have took longer to settle than others (I: oh okay) an it’s because of their needs sometimes (I: right okay). So they need more settling in sessions then others. Erm. To get there some have had to do like smaller days. There’s a little boy now an he’s erm. He’s he’s got additional needs (I: hmm hmm) an he does afternoons but he just does quarter past one till quarter past four. Obviously our afternoon hours are one till 6 (I: yeah). But he just does quarter past one till quarter past four because of to support him. Because any longer I don’t think he would cope for too long (I: okay). Erm obviously when our rooms a lot bigger er busier an louder than doesn’t help him either (I: hmm hmm). So yano we want him to feel settled an if that means just doing a couple of hours to begin with then that’s fine (I: hmm hmm). An that’s to meet him needs maybe he can build it up over time. But at the moment he’s just doing erm like I say quarter past one till quarter past four. *(swallowing)* I think he came into our room in September. September last month he came in (I: hmm hmm). He moved up from toddlers (I: yeah). Erm an so because of pre-school’s a lot more independent a lot more co yano they they do a lot more for themselves where we try and enforce em to become confident (I: yeah). Erm I think it’s a bit a lot different to toddler room (I: hmm hmm). Erm so he’s just needed that bit of support (I: yeah) to become settled and for the parents to make sure. I mean he comes in quite it er. Mum has a bit more a job getting him in because he just. But once he is here he’s fine (I: yeah) it’s la I think for him it’s the thought of where am I goin an (I: hmm hmm). He knows that he’s goin nursery but it’s just getting him here (I: yeah yeah) is erm. Is hard for mum (I: hmm hmm) each day but I think he d he does he does (.) four afternoons. Four afternoons he does (I: hmm hmm). Erm I see him on a Wednesday Thursday Friday an erm yeah like ya say he’s he’s getting there (I: hmm). He has his moments again in nursery (I: hmm hmm) but again as I say it’s when the room are busier and louder (I: yeah) he’s. But again we want him to be settled (I: yeah). So we do what we can (I: okay) for the parents for the children.

Has lots of details. Are the shorter days of benefit for the children or staff? An emotional child difficult to manage? does not fit with emotion al culture of nursery?

Again, a need for only happiness? Children who take longer to settle is the need of the children not the staff ?

Interviewer: Hmm hmm. An what’s it like for you working with him at the minute?

I feel that there may be some challenges in managing the uncertainty of children with emotional needs and again this surveillance image came up for me

Vicky: Erm okay (I: yeah yeah). It’s okay. We know kind of his triggers (I: yeah). Erm. We know erm yeah what will set him off an what sometimes an what other children will like sometimes kind of wind them up a little bit I suppose (I: yeah) kids do don’t they do it to each other. Erm. But he kind of follows others as well (I: hmm). They start bein a bit loud an yano he will go an I think he gets to the point where he can’t settle himself back down again so it’s just watching out for it (I: hmm hmm). An were all aware of it all the staff so (I: hmm hmm) erm.

Interviewer: Has there been any children that have come over to your pre-school er over the two years that you’ve been there that have really struggled to settle?

Vicky: Erm. Well. There have been a couple. They’ve took a while they’ve took a while to settle some times they all take different amount of times to settle it depends (I: hmm hmm). Erm but we have had we had a little boy back in before the summer. Ermmm. He wasn’t English he was Russian (I: hmm hmm). And he cried every time he came in (I: hmm). He sat with his Dad (I: yeah). An once he was in he was okay (I: yeah). But I think the family thought he wasn’t settling. So. Over the summer he gradually stopped doing his sessions an then he he he was off for a while so. An when we rang they said oh he is going to a different nursery so wer wer thinkin that maybe they thought we wasn’t so. We said oh he’s fine once he's in (I: hmm yeah). It’s just that obviously it maybe upset the parents when they seen him upset bringing him in an (I: yeah yeah) thinkin he’s not settling which some just take longer they just need that nother week or two (I: yeah yeah). Or a month it doesn’t matter but we just keep trying. Erm an some I’ve know some children even to go through from toddlers to pre-school an they always cry coming in because of that separation yano from their mum an dad (I: yeah) but once they’re in they’re fine (I: yeah) an they are still like that before they go to school. Yano we have had a couple like that that’s just the way they are (I: yeah). Yano but the majority of children do settle yano (I: yeah) an they’re fine coming in but it’s just that coming in bit sometimes (I: yeah yeah). Erm so some take longer than others but ya just at the end of the day ya want them to be settled (I: yeah) an erm if for any reason they’re not then I think it is because their their needs are maybe too too much for us. Maybe they need more like a 1:1 support (I: okay yeah). Erm. Yano so.

Is this locating the problem in the child with a fixed perspective? Are the needs too significant of the child – not the skills of the staff?

Has there been a break down of communication?

Interviewer: An what was goin through your mind going back to the Russian little boy [V: oh yeah] who was struggling what was what was goin through your mind when he

Vicky: [when he come in] or when he stopped coming in or?

I was mindful to keep the questions open

Interviewer: Yeah both yeah

Vicky: Yeah well when he come in yano he was upset coming in yano he didn’t want to leave his dad (I: yeah yeah) his dad obviously brought him in. An we’d say he’s fine he’s fine. Erm. An he was. He was he’d be a he’d be er. Close to us as as yano the teachers in the room or the staff erm an an we’d encourage him to play (I: hmm hmm yeah) an join in. An he was very quiet erm an we just thought yano he (I: hmm) that’s that’s how he is. He would do things with you (I: yeah) if he was encouraged to do joint activities (I: yeah). He would do things but it was just that an when ya go home he’d be he’s cry again when he seen his dad an sometimes he probably thought he’d been cryin the whole time it’s hard (I: yeah). He’s he’s absolutely fine as we always say if there’s any issues any problems if they don’t settle (I: yeah) we’ll ring yano we always ring (I: yeah) the parents to say (I: yeah) listen yano they’re not settling. Erm of yano we always do that so (I: yeah). Yeah an an they we just thought oh maybe they think school nursery was better (I: yeah yeah) an stopped comin but we need to obviously know why so we rang a few times an he didn’t answer (I: hmm hmm). Erm an then finally when they did they said oh no he’s cos we needed to know about his place yano (I: yeah yeah) about his place in pre-school if it was still needed or not (I: yeah). Ermm. So yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. What was it like working with with parents who were Russian yano?

Again more specific details

Vicky: Yeah. It was only for a short amount of time (I: short yeah) because literally he started in the March time. An then by the June (I: yeah) he was he when stopped coming I think. An then I mean an then finally in July or August time we finally got through to them (I: oh okay) to say yano is he is he gonna come back cos he should have been off for the summer holidays anyway (I: hmm hmm). But then he didn’t come back after September an they said he’s startin a nursery school. Erm but yeah it was hard communication (I: yeah yeah). It is hard it is a barrier obviously (I: yeah). Erm. They did speak so much English (I: yeah). Er we’ve got a little Spanish girl now whose erm mum an dad are obviously Spanish but they speak very good English (I: yeah) so it’s a lot when they can understand them it’s a lot easier (I: yeah). Erm.

Interviewer: Is there other parents that you’ve worked with cos I know obviously you’ve quite a diverse [V: ee yeah] range of children that come to this nursery [V: yeah there is] where it’s it been yano is there one that stands out for you for you maybe where it was more difficult over the years?

There may be a sense of helplessness from the staff in feeling able to support the child in nursery. Could be evidence of defence mechanisms in intersubjective relationship with parents as they are perceived to be in denial

Vicky: Erm. Yeah. Not personally for me because I wasn’t his key person but the room leader who we had at beginning of the year erm she had a little boy who erm we knew he was gonna need additional needs an he just co his behaviour went an kinda through the roof in the room when it was very loud (I: hmm hmm) an busy an he was er. He was he wasn’t good towards other children (I: yeah) yano he’d hit an things like that so when erm we spoke well when the room leader spoke to mum. Erm. She was very in denial about it all an not wanting the support for him. So we found it hard we couldn’t support him (I: hmm) in the right way because we the mums the mum was saying no he’s actually fine we don’t think he needs any support (I: hmm) so obviously we can’t carry it any further cos yano the mum felt everythin was fine (I: hmm) an wouldn’t give us consent to do any referrals or anything erm. So it was it was yano tricky. An sometimes when I would take him out obviously (I: hmm hmm) when the room leader wasn’t in erm I would speak to me an I’d have to explain how he’s been an things an it was just a bit. Sometimes ya think the parents think yano (I: hmm) how truthful are you bein kind of thing? That sometimes they make you feel a bit oh yano (I: hmm) when they are in denial themselves an think well their not like that at home but (I: yeah yeah) but then over time (I: hmm hmm) things started to kind of like she mentioned a few things an we were like hmm okay that’s (I: hmm) that’s he was an only child so maybe she got no didn’t know (I: yeah). She didn’t know any different she knew no different (I: yeah). Erm. We had. She came in a couple of times for meetings an yano with the management (I: hmm hmm) to explain how he was here an by the time he goes to school he’s gonna need yano support anyway it was last September when he left for school. Yeah last September when he left for Reception. Erm. An since then like we’ve had a couple of phone calls from the school to say how was he here because there’s he needs 1:1 in school basically (I: hmm hmm) an. I think for the yano for the mum this kind of if we’d kind of helped more well obviously we couldn’t do anymore for him because she was just in denial an a bit like (I: hmm yeah) there’s no an everythings fine yano so. If we could have put that support in he would have maybe maybe received that before he goes to school (I: hmm) yano so that it wasn’t (: yeah yeah) in school till he got it.

Guilt – is this reflecting on them that this child has found it difficult in school?

Interviewer: Yeah. This wasn’t one of your children was it?

Vicky: No it wasn’t it wasn’t. But obviously he was in my room (I: in your room) an sometimes I would take him out an do feedback an that as well so.

Interviewer: Yeah yeah. What was it like feeding back to that mum? How did it feel yano?

Vicky: Yeah (I: yeah) well as I say it was a bit like this is how he’s been (I: yeah) an we couldn’t we’d have to say how he is (I: yeah) an it’s it’s knowing yano like ya’d find some positive (I: yeah) as well but obviously there was a bit of fe a bit of negative feedback as well (I: yeah) an how he’s been like an if he’s been biting an things (I: yeah) an hitting. Erm. An she she wouldn’t really respond too much she’d just be oh okay type of thing yano (I: hmm hmm) nothing erm I don’t know if she thought it was a big issue a big concern really an we thought well he's goin to school soon so he needs the support there in place but (I: hmm hmm) ya can only do some much when parents agree to like consent an things an to take it further so we can’t we can’t.

Interviewer: Yeah that’s hard isn’t it?

Vicky: I found. In fact this year again there’s another little boy whose just gone to September (I: hmm hmm) an it wasn’t since January February at the beginning of this year they agreed for support (I: hmm hmm). An a he’s he’s down to doing an hour in school because he’s he can’t yano he he’s struggling (I: oh okay) cos it’s not suiting it he needs that extra support yano.

Does this put external agencies as gate keepers?

Interviewer: When you say extra support what what is it that you that you mean? Is it external professionals?

Vicky: Yeah like he’s gonna need 1:1 (I: yeah yeah). I don’t even know if he was in mainstream school or whether he was gonna stay there in the end (I: oh okay yeah). I’m not too sure still a fresh kind of thing but erm.

Interviewer: So it is sometimes difficult to get that consent for people to come in from some of your parents yeah?

Vicky: Yeah. So we’ve got to say we have a meeting with them if we’ve got concerns (I: yeah) we have a meeting with them an we say listen this is what typically their not doing (I: yeah) an yano what they kind of should be doin an this is what they are doing an we say oh it’s kind of yano we say like how would you feel about getting either a Paediatrician referral or yano extra support in an we’ve just gotta sometimes they say oh yano their fine an we think they’re fine we don’t think there’s anything. It’s just because of their age or because there’s (I: hmm hmm) they live by themselves an they don’t have many friends around (I: yeah) yano they’re an only child erm.

Interviewer: That must be hard [V: yeah yeah] when you wanna help them an

Vicky: [Yeah]. An all were doin an sometimes ya think that it’s a bad thing but at the end of the day (I: yeah) it’s just support it’s ta help them (I: yeah yeah). An obviously as a key person then we would follow all what the outside agencies tell us to do (I: yeah). We have them all coming in an they give us things an we will do it with them but that obviously obviously only when the parents say (I: of course yeah) an they can do it at home so that’s consistence that it works better.

Ideas of good and bad support

Interviewer: Is there any of your parents that have said no yano [V: erm] to your key children that have said no I don’t want an EP or Community ..

Painting the picture of everything being okay with key children?

Vicky: [No no] I can’t say there is. Not my own child I had a little girl over the summer an she erm her mum was fine she was like support for everything (I: yeah). She was like yes (I: yeah). An a little boy actually whose just left for nursery school erm but again he was he was an only child (I: yeah) an I think. But mum was still fine for support but she ge I think every time I did feedback to her with him about him (I: yeah) she was always like he’s like an only child we live in a flat (I: hmm hmm) in a flat in a culdie sac an there’s no other children on the road (I: hmm hmm). So she’s always used ta sayin it’s always me an him yano like an we’d say about his sharing an turn taking in nursery an that he’d he’d want all the toys he’d (I: hmm) he wouldn’t want ta struggle to share an yano he it’s it’s kind of set him off a little bit an erm mum’s answer was kind of thing cos she thinks it’s just me an him yano her an her son (I: yeah). Which yano probably played a part (I: yeah) but also yano we did know that he needed the support there because obviously he’s goin to school next year but he’s gone to a school nursery now (I: oh okay). Erm. So yeah but they like he was fine an the little girl was fine but again them parents they were they were willing for the support (I: yeah). They were fine everytime they would come in for meetings they would be like yeah that’s fine. Erm. I know the little girl I had her mum’s mum was a Health Visitor (I: hmm) years ago so I think it helped that that she’d speak to the little girls mum an say there’s a few little red flags there maybe has his nursery mentioned anything an she’d be yano oh he’s letting me know (I: hmm). She’d always be at the door sometimes speakin to her for ages or I’d ring her over something like an assessment over the little girl which I did do an I was on the phone to her for ages last Christmas time (I: hmm). To do an assessment over the little girl aa as we do an she was tellin me all kinds over the phone an little triggers an how she’s doin this an she was she wanted to go down the stairs at one point but she was like the fear of walkin down the stairs but she was fine up to one point an then an then she yano she said like it’s like another little trigger that’s like set her off an her behaviour an that an get her (I: hmm) all worked up an that things like she had to turn everything off in the house (I: hmm) before she left like all the switches an the doors an even her mum had to like walk out of the door an then she had to close the door behind her just because she yano she was kind of like going down the pathway for like needin the (I: hmm) needin the an extra support (I: yeah). But she was all mum was fine with it she had her referrals an everythin an she’s gone to Reception this year erm so we done what we can (I: yeah yeah yeah) yano to help her (I: yeah). But it’s better when obviously parents are willing ta want the support.

I wonder if the ASD diagnosis actually gives the child extra support or is it that it helps the staff to better understand the child?

Interviewer: An come on board. Yeah no of course. Erm so (two second pause). Can you thinkin back to maybe when ya first became a key person [V: yeah] I don’t know whether you want to think about the first time ever in your job [V: along time ago – *laughs*] or erm here what ever feels more comfortable for you just just a bit like what that was like first becoming a key person?

Vicky: Erm. Okay well thinkin back when I first started. When I first started my first nursery I was in the baby room (I: oh okay) when I first started.

Is there some emotion here in potentially feeling some anxiety around not knowing? Vicky appears to have managed her anxieties by helping her to feel reassured in her role

Interviewer: So quite different?

Vicky: I was in the babyroom (I: yeah). Erm. I had no qualifications because it was all on site training (I: yeah). An I was thinking urhh *(laughter in voice)* obviously ya read all your policies an ya go through the key person policy an (I: yeah) thinkin aw when I read that I thought aw that’s nice because (I: yeah) the first time I heard about it I thought that’s nice to have that key group (I: yeah) so you get to know them as best you can. You get to know the whole class or the whole children in the room but obviously you have your own children that you know in and out type of thing an yano anything medical conditions anything that they need or their interests an (I: hmm hmm) erm dislikes as well (I: yeah). Erm. But yeah I remember thinking okay yano yano that that’s an seein how many I would get an obviously like I said when I first started baby room I would just get like one or two first erm cos I wasn’t qualified (I: hmm) so I was like learning obviously it all on the job getting to know all about the the babies at the time. Was it one or was it two? *(whispers).* Well obviously I had one first (I: hmm) then I don’t know how long it was after that an then I got two an then it just built up then cos I was doin my level two. So I was obviously learning more anyway doin that (I: hmm hmm). Erm. But no. ah yeah it was it was a nice thing its its its that bond that you get (I: hmm) an it’s nice to know like someone knows a lot about ya a lot about a lot about them obviously we all we all know as I say about we all know the whole class but (I: yeah) we have our little group. An yano the member of staff has their little group (I: hmm yeah) an then that child can can relate to them an then they could to nursery an see them then they feel happy coming to see them (I: yeah). Yano cos they have that relationship with them (I: yeah) that they’re building.

Does Vicky see the key person role as knowing information about the job to feel competent? I wonder what it was like for Vicky learning on the job?

Interviewer: An what about when you first became a key person when you started working with the older group what was that like? Is there is there a kid that really sticks out for you that’s quite memorable?

Vicky: Ermmm. When I first when I was in this nursery when I when I was in baby room like I say cos I was in there for a good few about three years I think in the baby room an then I moved up to the pre-school room (I: okay). An straight up from babies so it was a big difference (I: yeah). Erm an then I was given the key children an yeah it was a lot different cos yano the communication an the independence an they talk to you (I: hmm yeah). They tell you all about what they like. Yano babies you’ve got learn about what what they’re playing with an watchin what they are lookin for an things like that but with the pre-school it was all about they will tell you all about (I: hmm) what their favourite colour is an everythin an all about their family an everythin (I: hmm hmm). Erm. So it was a lot different erm I was like information overload sometimes (I: yeah) cos they are tellin you it all and you’ve just got to like listen to them an (I: yeah) ya just build up that relationship er each day ya in with them (I: yeah) ya sit down an play with them an find out what they like doin find out what they’ve been doin of a weekend with their parents or where they are goin. Er they would always share always share things in this age group (I: hmm hmm). Erm. An since then av been with pre-school ma the nursery before this one was the two to four year old room (I: hmm hmm). So it was a bit of toddlers an kind of preschool as well mixed together it was a smaller a room with the as I say the age range two to four an then obviously pre-school here (I: hmm hmm). So I’ve since then I’ve always worked with pre-school so erm. Yeah I know I know they some are obviously a lot quieter so it takes longer (I: yeah yeah) to get to know some. Yano but when they see you a a lot (I: yeah) an when they know you are there they’ll come out of their shell a bit more (I: oh okay) an it’s nice nice to see that (I: yeah yeah). Erm we’ve had a little boy over the summer erm he’s here now but he was off for the summer holidays an before then he was very quite we hardly ever heard him and we were thinkin oh he’s gonna need speech and language or he’s got yano (I: hmm) additional needs an. He would he would just sit with the last group of children he wouldn’t really interact with them (I: hmm hmm) an he would be sittin in the construction area just playin an erm. An wouldn’t yano we’d speak ta mum an say oh we’ve had to really encourage him to play today an she’d say she found that at home as well he’d go to football classes an he’s be reluctant to kind of join in as much (I: hmm). He was off the summer holidays an then he’s not gone to school this year he’s goin next year. An when he’s come back in September with this group now that we’ve got that have moved up from toddlers. It’s like (.) it’s a whole new well it’s a whole new class but it’s like he’s just made for that group (I: hmm hmm) because he is talkin more he’s he’s just when he first came back in September he. There’s a little girl whose quiet as well and the pair of them were sitting down together an they were chattin away together an talkin an we were just like *(gasp)* (I: aw). Aw it’s so nice to see them interacting (I: yeah yeah) an since then hes hes we’ve not er he’s singin an joinin in (I: aw okay) singin with our hello song. We’ve spoke to mum an I’m his key person an we spoke to mum an she said she was made up to hear that like how he an she had noticed a difference at home as well (I: yeah yeah). So obviously it’s reflecting her what he’s doin here as well as at home cos when he’s goin to soft play an things like that or out an about he’s goin over to other children (I: hmm hmm) an like yano he’s not sittin back anymore (I: hmm hmm). So it’s nice to know that he’s got that ability to do it (I: yeah yeah). It’s just it just the children that the class that he just (I: hmm) for some reason that he didn’t take to an then just this class he has (I: yeah). So it’s nice to see so when am talkin to mum an doin feedback an communicating to her about it she’s yano she’s so happy that he’s developed more as I think she was getting a bit worried as well (I: hmm). Erm. I would say to her there’s nothin to worry about now yano he's yano he still plays in the construction area he loves the trains but he will stand with other children in a group an watch what they are doing (I: hmm). Like er at times he would he would just sit back an not even (I: hmm) bother to look at what they are doing an join in yano so it’s nice to see that.

Does this mean that needs are able to understood more when children can verbally communicate them?

Interested to know what Vicky’s play experiences are like with her key children?

Some emotion here about children communicating

Parent is happy with the feedback this appears to be important to Vicky

Interviewer: What was what did what did that feel like for you being his key person an him making an startin to speak?

Vicky: Like it was Christmas honestly (I: yeah yeah). Cos it’s big things. Little things for some people are massive for others (I: yeah). An it was massive for him an I kept sayin to the other girls in the room I was sayin have ya heard him what he’s like with one of the other one of the other little girls (I: yeah). She was quite as well so it was nice to hear her voice (I: yeah). Erm. We were like. I don’t think they believed me at first until they heard him as well an they were like oh look how he is now it’s amazin how just this aged group is just I think maybe all the ones that were goin to school were maybe a bit he felt a bit more like ooh (I: yeah). Yano an erm unsure an that but this group is but honestly it does its amazin when it makes ya feel so like relieved as well like yano that he’s got the ability to do it but he can he’s just got that confidence now (I: yeah) that’s all it was with him I think (I: yeah yeah). Yeah.

I wonder what Vicky thought that this boy felt like?

Interviewer: An goin back to you bein a key person how how do you feel like things have changed over time since when you first took on the role years ago 13 years ago [V: yeah yeah yeah] to maybe what it’s like now for you? [V: yeah] how an obviously that might be you’ve changed or it’s changed the role or whatever [V: yeah erm]. What’s it like for you how different is it?

Vicky: Yeah over the years I’ve probably just become more aware of how ho important it is (I: yeah). Cos when I first started out I wasn’t qualified an that (I: yeah) an as the years have gone by I think how important it is especially with pre-school erm cos obviously their feelings are more (I: yeah). Erm obviously it’s important with babies as well (I: hmm hmm) cos that’s like the startin ground an that (I: yeah) but with pre-school an like if they are confident an independent an they need to know you are there cos obviously toilet training an things like (I: yeah) erm it’s er probably more like more important an you are aware of it now (I: yeah yeah) these days (I: yeah) the importance of it erm.

Interviewer: So more like the social and emotional side of it?

Vicky: Yeah definitely. Yeah yeah yeah definitely. Cos like ya say they’ve got all their feelings an emotions now (I: yeah) erm an were all tryin to like help them learn with the EYFS (I: yeah) erm all about like what makes you happy what makes you sad so they yeah its its its understanding them as well at this stage (I: yeah). As a key person like make making any noticing any any differences that happen (I: yeah) yano with them with their feelings as well.

Interviewer: yeah yeah. What would what would noticing different look like? Yano is there an example that could [V: erm] give?

Vicky: Well just the way. Just their character (I: yeah) just noticing them yeah like how they look yano one minute they could be like feeling erm like this little boy like over the summer he seemed very reserved an quite sad a lot (I: hmm hmm hmm hmm). Because he just wasn’t showing much emotion he wouldn’t erm but now like he’s a lot more smiley he’s happy he does seem happy in himself becos he’s got that confidence to talk to others an play. Erm which is is yano very important especially at this age (I: yeah) for school next year.

Interviewer: Yeah. Erm. Is there at time that you can think of maybe when you’ve felt maybe a lot of pressure or stress in your role as being a key person?

Vicky: Ermm. I’d probably say when when you’ve got a lot when you’ve got a lot of key children. erm.

Interviewer: So the amount of them?

Vicky: The amount of them. Cos you haven’t got that. You’ve got less time to spend with each one. if ya’ve got to do a lot of. I mean it’s just as bad na now but when I first started my first nursery when I was in X there was a lot of like paperwork (I: okay) things to do (I: yeah) observations were like so many a month. Erm assessments were so quite frequent an. It’s knowin them children to be able ta put into that assessments yano knowing that their interests an needs are an spendin that time with them but when you’ve got a lot ya don’t have as much time with them (I: okay yeah). Which you’ve gotta cos you’ve got ta yano you’ve got to kind of fit them in to the time frame an to get everythin done but now here erm we just do like the assessments we are less now twice a month twice a year now (I: oh okay) not three it’s gone down to two. We do like obs children with with additional needs an SEN we do observe them to see how they progress with their needs (I: yeah) an things. Erm but w as a key person not observing children you’ve got that time to spend with them (I: hmm hmm) an ya not sittin down doin paperwork an things (I: yeah) were jus just getting to kno them yano an knowin their likes an their likes an interests change week in week out an sometimes it depends where they go of a weekend (I: hmm hmm). Yano that can just (I: yeah) change their interests so quickly. So it’s you need to keep up with that as well (I: hmm hmm). So you’ve got more time so I think if you’ve got less children it is a bit easier (I: yeah) but obviously because I know because of the staff ratio (I: hmm hmm) an how big the nursery can be yano there are a lot bigger nurs. This nursery isn’t as big as what I’ve worked in (I: hmm). So it’s it’s a bit more like homely (I: oh okay yeah). Which is what our approach here is it’s different to the other nurseries. Ya home from home here (I: yeah). Erm s. As I say with only havin like seven at the moment (I: hmm hmm) even though I’m only part time I still have that time (I: yeah) to spend with them all.

I wonder what this looks like for Vicky?

Talking me through the assessment processes in nursery

Interviewer: hmm hmm. An you said once you you had 14 was that in another setting was it?

Vicky: Yeah (I: yeah) that was in the first (I: yeah) nursery the nursery I was in for 9 years in X. I started off with the baby an went to the pre-school room it was when I was in the pre-school room I had 14. Er 13 or 14. 14 (I: yeah). Er at one point er. But a lot of the staff had a lot (I: oh okay). Cos we had a lot of intake an we could have 35 in the room (I: oh okay) in the pre-school room on one day (I: right gosh). So we had a lot on the register. So they do different days (I: yeah yeah) an that’s just for pre-school (I: yeah). It was a very big nursery. Erm so it’s. It’s hard when it’s so big (I: yeah) be cos ya ya you haven’t got that time to spend which is crucial (I: yeah yeah) cos you need to get to know them.

Interviewer: An what did that feel like for you havin 14?

Vicky: Erm hectic (I: yeah yeah). It was a lot hectic it kinda it did make you feel a bit stressed with a load of paperwork (I: yeah). An it’s yano it’s ya’d still have time to speak to parents at the end of the day for feedback but it was just getting to know the children in the day. Yano sometimes you would be sittin their (I: yeah) writing observations an sittin erm (I: yeah) doin assessments an things like that an obviously ya need. Ya need to get information put in it erm but if you don’t do if you haven’t got as many to do you’ve got that time to spend with them (I: hmm). Which is nice to learn to learn about them (I: yeah). Which is good.

Interviewer: Yeah. So yeah that was everythin that I was gonna ask you (V: okay). So I was just wonderin erm what you felt at like how it went the interview?

The reflective role of the interview process

Vicky: Fine yeah yeah (I: yeah yeah). Yeah no (I: yeah) it’s just good sometimes to reflect back on where ya are (I: yeah) to why you’ve started sometimes.

Interviewer: Yeah. to think about ya job an that

Vicky: yeah yeah over the years (I: yeah) an you think how things have changed ya don’t have time to think about it (I: yeah). An things change an you just get on with it (I: exactly yeah) an go with it an ya think actually yeah actually over the years yano things do change obviously they do (I: yeah) life changes everythin (I: course) ya just move on with it all don’t ya (I: yeah). But yeah it was fine.

Interviewer: Yeah Brilliant. I’m glad I haven’t put you off anyway for next time *(laughter)*

Vicky: No no I’m fine with it.

Interview: Brilliant so as I said as I said I was going to ask ya. Is there anything that has upset distressed or confused you in the interview talkin about what you’ve spoke about?

Vicky: No no absolutely fine

Interviewer: That’s great I will stop the tape.

**Appendix G: An example of the semantic coding process for Lisa**

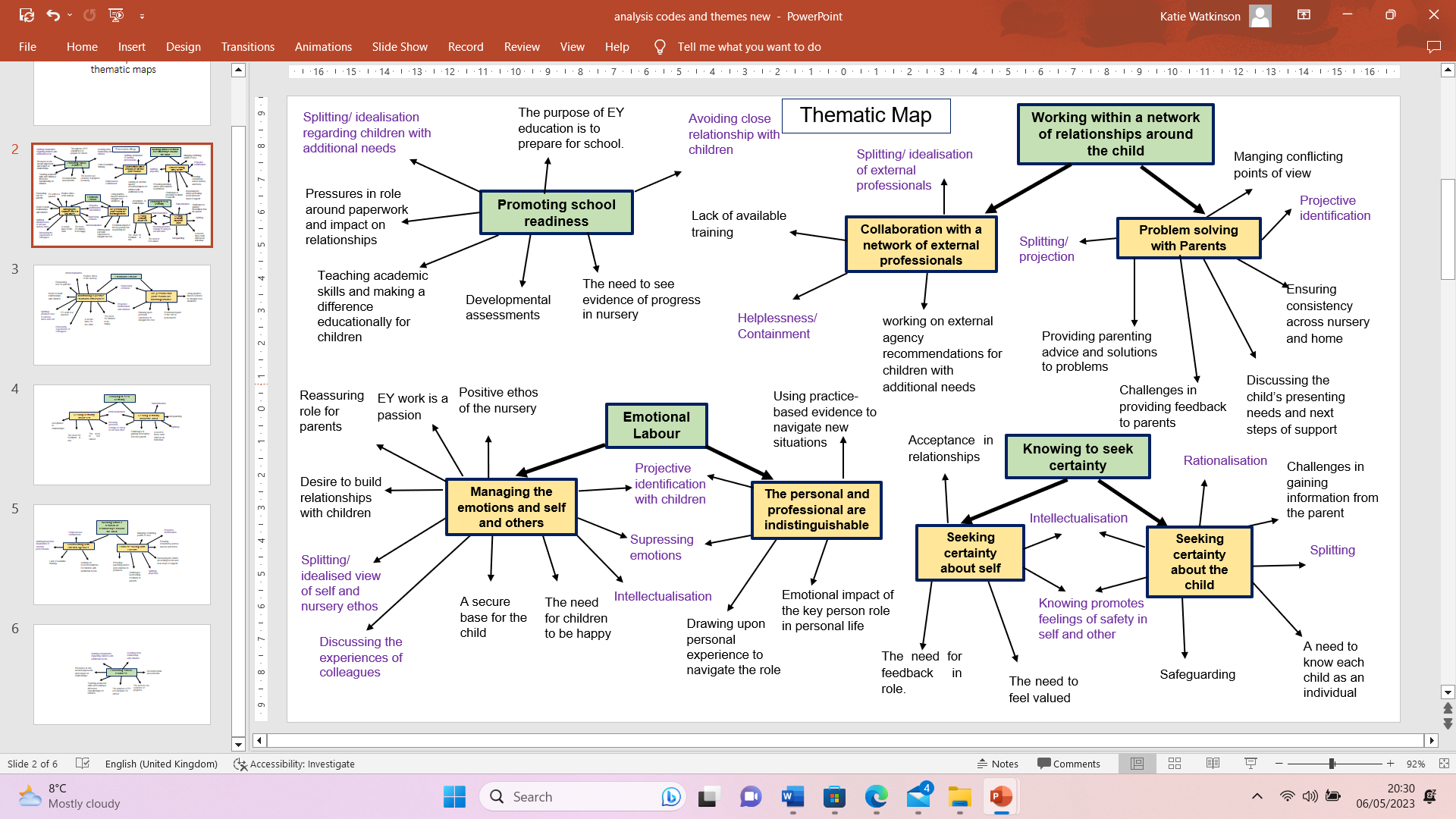
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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Data** | **Line number** | **Code label** |
| I wanted to work with the younger ones. That was where I felt like I fitted in better | (1) 12-13 | Acceptance in relationships |
| I AM always like really super excited an like want to get to know them and what their interests are. | (1) 12 - 113 | A desire to build relationships with children |
| And I do like to get to meet the families. I find that if you get on(.) If you get a good vibe if you get on well with the families it goes much better ((change in tone)) along the year because you’ve got that good bond with them (I: hmm hmm) and they feel (.) comfortable with you (I: hmm hmm) and things so yeah. | (1) 115-118 | Ensuring consistency across nursery and home to benefit the child |
| Erm she was quite a quite nervous. Quite upset and things (hh). An. Me and an her mum would like you know (.) share strategies and stuff to get her through the door comfortably coming in and all that. And I had built a really good relationship with her mum [I: hmm hmm] which (.) I think in turn, because she saw the way me and her mum were then helped her. | (1) 124-128 | Ensuring consistency across nursery and home to benefit the child  Providing parenting advice and solutions to problems |
| Always got lovely feedback from mum. | (1) 130 | The need for feedback in role in role. |
| So when it was like autumn and Halloween we used to get all erm pumpkins conkers and things and she would come in so excited everyday. So I used to get them out a bit more cos it would be [I: yeah] something to look forward to for her (gulp). | (1) 142-145 | A desire to build relationships with children |
| Because mum was actually quite (.) nervous herself like she was seeing her being upset and was like oh I can’t leave her (I: hmm) and I would be like she will be okay but I can get in touch with you. If I feel you need (I: hmm hmm) to come and pick her up and stuff. | (1) 147-150 | A reassuring role to parents |
| I get nervous meeting new people. So the excitement is there for it to happen (I: yeah) an I love like what comes and what develops of it. But I am also like (hh) what are they going to think of me? Cos yano the parents more [I: ah okay] the kids, kids are very accepting I find (I: yeah yeah). | (1) 160 - 163 | Acceptance in relationships  A desire to build relationships with children |
| And I have in the past like had it where parents like sort of look at me like (I: ohh) and then they find out I have children (I: yeah) and the next day their (.) attitude towards me has been completely different (I: ohh) like more oh right she does actually know what she is doing (I: ohh okay). | (1) 163-167 | Acceptance in relationships  Drawing upon personal experience to navigate the role |
| This this was more like maybe a couple of years ago when I was younger ((I & L: laughter)). I think they looked at me like is she older enough to be looking after my child. | (1) 167-169 | Drawing upon personal experience to navigate the role |
| So I am always a bit like (L: yeah) are the parents going to accept me kind of thing? | (1) 171 | Acceptance in relationships |
| One day we were just chatting an I I was like oh yeah my son. “wwhat you mean your son”? An I was like oh yeah yano in the conversation and they were like “oh my god” (whispers) “I didn’t realise you had kids”. An the next day it was like I was great and I knew what I was doing (laughs). It was just so strange that I have had that a couple of times. | (1) 176- 180 | Drawing upon personal experience to navigate the role  Acceptance in relationships |
| An then I said and my sixteen year old that is just another story. Wait till their sixteeth yano just chatting like that and she was like “really you’ve got a sixteen year old? wa how do you deal with this? How do you deal with that?”. It was just. Like. I had opened a new window for her. An you know I can. I have got ideas. I am not like anyone special (I: yeah) but I have been there I have had a go. And it was sort of like “oh wow” and then she started asking me for advice then. | (1) 186-192 | Drawing upon personal experience to navigate role  Providing parenting advice and solutions to problems  Acceptance in relationships |
| yeah it’s like. Sort of it is a bit like I am not like no nanny macphie or anything but I don’t mind giving ideas and stuff. An it was just nice for her to go. Oh actually yeah you know. I can do this kind of thing. | (1) 194 - 196 | Providing parenting advice and solutions to problems  Drawing upon personal experience to navigate role |
| parents some parents sort of think you are like. A babysitter (I: right oh) and I am bringing you here because I need to go to work. An these are ere. An then I think you have other parents who see just how important this job is. | (1) 196-199 | The need to feel valued. |
| To honest I think lockdown has opened a lot of people’s eyes of what we (I: oh right) of what we (I: that is interesting) yeah. Maybe not just particularly this in the nurseries. But what what you actually do (I: yeah) because it is not like when ya. I mean I I can compare it because I have got two kids (I: yeah). It is not like you are at home when you have got one or two. An. It is just then (I: hmm hmm) you could literally Erm (.) just be sorting an argument out, tying a shoe lace an playing a game of football. Can’t ya all at the same time (I: hmm hmm). An I think. Them being in lockdown and juggling work and their children they’ve all become a bit more thankful and appreciative of us (I: ahh yeah) that is what I think anyway (I: ahh right) as they just seem that over time and especially after that. They are just like “oh I am so happy you are open” (laughs) kind of thing. | (1) 208 - 218 | Drawing upon personal experience to navigate role  The need to feel valued. |
| sometimes like when it’s. When you know like you’ve got children with speech problems or autism and that (I: yeah) and you have to have external agencies coming in (I: oh okay yeah) I always get a bit like ((L: tensed her body to explain this point)) [I: yeah] about that. You know you work with them and things like that. But I do get a bit nervous an you just (hh). You hope ya doing (.) the best for that kid. And that is all [I: yeah] I think I am just going to do all I can. | (1) 227 - 232 | Lack of available training  Working on external agency recommendations for children with additional needs |
| An erm. A lot. Of the work was getting left to me which is yano it’s fine (I: hmm hmm) but I felt like (hh) I felt like. I was taking. It it was a lot for me to take on (I: oh okay) erm yeah considering I have never been trained in it ((laughter from both)) as a speech therapist. | (1) 247 - 250 | Lack of available training |
| so there was a bit of time where it was more being reliant on me. An am there yano thinking ahh if this (.) goes (gulp) horribly wrong. I was given stuff to do (I: yeah yeah) like do that ( ) an I am thinking am I doing it properly kind of thing (I: hmm). An there was. | (1) 252 - 255 | Lack of available training |
| I like it when the parents give ya that feedback (L: the feedback) and sort of go you’ve made a difference (I: yeah yeah) if you think about. I think that’s the best for them (I: yeah) you know I think that’s the best thing for them to go they’ve loved it or whatever | (1) 283 - 286 | The need for feedback in role in relationships |
| amazing an then an then sort of after your long year ya think dya know what that’s why I am here because that’s why I do this [I: makes it worth while?] them kids are having a fantastic time an the parents (I: yeah) are happy with whatever it is that I am doing ((laughter)) playing with dinosaurs (loud laughter). | (1) 289 - 292 | The need for feedback in role in relationships  The need for children to be happy |
| An like making sure. That there able to do. What they can for their age | (1) 303 | Developmental assessments |
| what I am finding now since covid there is a lot of erm like personal emotional and social (I: ah okay) they are all like (.) you know being able ta make friends an erm (I: ah okay) feeling happy (I: hmm) and positive about themselves. We’ve done a lot more about wellbeing with the children since lockdown.. | (1) 304 - 308 | The need for children to be happy |
| be able to manage and stuff an it is like you’ve you’ve just haven’t missed anything (I: hmm) like av av can the do that? Can the do that? Can the do that? An all the while your playing and your having a great time you just think (.) can the do that? (laughs) yeah they can do that? | (1) 312- 316 | Developmental assessments |
| yeah (laughs). I think so even like with mm sort of go direct away from that though erm I don’t feel that you can (.) shut off (I: hmm) like yano when you go home from work an (.) [I: oh okay] like in a café say, the first thing that comes into me head. Erm you go home an your jobs finished that’s it (I: yeah) until you come back the next day (I: yeah) (hh) I don’t think you can switch off like I (I: oh okay) like I sit at home goin (hh) I need to make sure such and such erm we need ta consolidate that counting or they were a bit quiet yesterday I wonder if there’s summin goin on or they could not be very well. Like if the’ve banged their head I would be like god I hope they’re alright I can’t wait to see them in the morning (laughter in voice). | (1) 318 - 326 | Emotional impact of the key person role in personal life  Teaching academic skills and making a difference educationally for children |
| you’ve got that but then ya on autumn but your already on Christmas Planning (I: hmm). Ya planning Christmas already and we’ve only just come back | (1) 328 - 329 | Developmental assessments |
| even when I’m out me family get upset with me because I go (hh). An the would go. I want I need that. An they will go “what do you need that for?” an then the look at me and go “preschool” and I go *yeah*(laughter). It’s like your always it’s always there in the back of your mind. | (1) 329 - 332 | Emotional impact of the key person role in personal life |
| I I suppose especially like when we do assessments (I: okay) erm ( 3 second pause) sort of ter. We do three (I: right) so termly. I am gonna say termly. (I: right). So ya first one will sort of (..) it’s not as in depth cos you’ve only just got ya just getting to know them (I: yeah) but it is trying to maybe highlight things you see (.) instantly. (I: okay) then your next one will kind of (..) erm give ya a more in depth look of their development (I: hmm hmm) then ya last one ya hoping is that one that says everything. There up to where they need to be kind of thing (I. oh okay). | (1) 335 - 341 | Developmental assessments  A need to know each child as an individual |
| it’s what have I done wrong here how can I fix this things like that. You do feel a bit guttered. | (1) 358-359 | The need to see evidence of a child’s progress in nursery  Providing parenting advice and solutions to problems |
| I think cos I started off voluntary I literally used to come and play and I had the best time ever an I just I just absolutely loved it. | (1) 368-369 | EY work is a passion |
| A bit longer than before lockdown actually (I: hmm hmm) ((speaks in quieter voice)) it was a ridiculous amount of paperwork. You’d you’d (I: right) feel that I wasn’t giving the kids enough of me (I: I see) because there was that much of that. It was more like that wasn’t (.) the important bit so I felt like (.) (I: oh okay) with the kids it was it wasn’t good enough. Dya know what I mean? | (1) 373-377 | Pressures in role around paperwork and impact on relationships |
| Recently we’ve gone digital (I: Oh okay) and again. We’ve gone more for a (.) like approach that not it wasn’t a case of right you need that many observations (I: hmm hmm) just get them. It’s more like *quality* (spoken slowly) like or what you think is important for that child. To be recorded. So I feel like there’s just a lot more important stuff going into it and because I am not particularly like oh I haven’t got that done like that or I haven’t done that many or I’ve only got that many weeks left to do. Ya ya more engaged with the children (I: hmm hmm) so ya seein a lot more. Ya know them better. So then your observation that comes out of it I feel has got a lot more meaning to it (I: hmm hmm) and is is actually better for them (I: hmm hmm). | (1) 380-389 | Pressures in role around paperwork and impact on relationships |
| You could just focus on that child then you could miss something over there (I: hmm) instead of just being really involved in what is going on and then going oh right this is actually great snap. The end. I would like that “what did you say”?”(laughter)  I would be stood there like that going to listen to what there saying (laughter in voice). But I think I’ve it gives me much more opportunity to be involved (I: okay) and have more time. | (1) 402-405  (1) 411 - 413 | Pressures in role around paperwork and impact on relationships |
| I think like I mean ya ya you’ve the kids it’s like yano we always laugh when yano your having a bad day at home [I: yeah] the kids put a smile on your face don’t the it’s like you see them and your like aw (I: yeah yeah) and you can sort of like come out of it. | (1) 419-422 | EY work is a passion |
| Erm I do get. I can find it quite stressful when like (.) it’s coming to the end of term and your sort of (I: hmm) an I an I do get a bit like (gulp) I’ve got too much going on in me head it’s like cos I’ve here and then home I’ve got two kids at home (I: yeah). So certain times of the year where I feel like there is way too much happening (laughter) an I get a bit stressed about it but erm | (1) 424-428 | Emotional impact of the key person role in personal life |
| yeah you do] cos you can come in and then you see the kids it’s like it just melts away and your just like “oh hello” (( in child friendly voice)) (I: yeah) so the stress melts away? [I: yeah] you just sort of forget then an ya you do what your doing an. | (1) 430-432 | EY work is a passion |
| Erm when you’ve got. Stuff coming up like if you’ve got your assessments coming up or if you know the’re like getting ready for skill school and your doing your foo sorry forms for school yano  that you send off for transition. I get a bit like (.) anxious about them and how they are going to turn out and stuff like that. | (1) 439-441  443 | Pressures in role around paperwork and impact on relationships |
| but like cos I I can (2 second pause) can get quite stressy (I: oh okay). But because I am here I think I can switch off | (1) 446 - 447 | Emotional impact of the key person role in personal life |
| You get like (.) times like times of year when where all like ready for half term where are all getting a bit tired and stuff like that but (.) I feel I think cos were all in the same sort of vibe off each other and that (I: oh okay) and keep each other. Like for ( ) the girl I work with (I: yeah). Like if one of us comes in all like that ((gestures unhappy face)) the other one will make them laugh (I: Brilliant) and they sort of like cheer each other up and stuff and if one of us is struggling or having a bad day (I: Hmm). Erm. We’ll we’ll do whatever we can to support each other really  I think. And it does help to have a sense of humour | (1) 447 – 454  (1) 456 | Positive ethos of the nursery |
| An She. I was I was sort of (2 second pause) shadowing would you say? An like I I basically she trained me up (I: oh okay) and erm showed me and showed me how to observe because I had done the training but nothing like actually doing it kind of … the practical side of it. So she erm. Showed erm me everythin she was amazing. | (1) 464 - 469 | Positive ethos of the nursery  Using practice based evidence to navigate new situations |
| Erm but I remember being I remember feeling really very overwhelmed (I: right) by the amount of information (laughs). An like yano the policies (I: oh right yeah) then the paperwork (laughs) an back then the paperwork wass unbelievable. | (1) 473 - 476 | Pressures in role around paperwork and impact on relationships |
| But I feel more comfortable here now (I: oh okay yeah) if that makes (I: yeah) and so like I would always then like have I done that right? Have I missed this? Oh I hope that’s okay? And I would like read my observations about a million times and think was that good enough? | (1) 492 - 495 | Pressures in role around paperwork and impact on relationships |
| I av (.) stayed with the older ones. Had a little go (I: oh okay) of the middle group (I: yeah yeah) cos I was like I want them to answer me back (laughs).  And I just want the one’s that can talk ((laughter in voice)) back to me.  An it’s good when you get feedback from parents or from ya manager and that (I: of course) and the go oohh that’s great.  So I was quite (.) worried about how they’d receive it (I: I see). How did it look? (I: oh okay). I mean I knew it wouldn’t be like maybe necessarily negative or anything. But ya still. You don’t know do ya so you think oh what if the go ((pulls an expression to illustrate another person’s emotion)) (laughing) (I: yeah yeah). What are we talking about why are we doing (laughs) | (1) 496-497  (1) 505 -506  (1) 511-513  (1) 568-572 | The need for feedback in role |
| Like cos I cos obviously I was going home had to sort the children out (I: yeah yeah) and then I had to do me work and stuff and erm an erm I was asking a lot of people here as well like yano (I: yeah) to go with the coursework. And I felt a bit like oh yano am doing everyone’s ed in ere. But the were very helpful anyway. An an I felt like a bit sort of a bit stressy over all that like yano I’ve gotta get this done (I: hmm) but I’ve still got to go to work. | (1) 535 - 540 | Emotional impact of the key person role in personal life |
| As I say the girls here are like super supportive. Erm the girl I work with whose in my room. We just like. I dunno. We’re so like (2 second pause) but that we can help each other out (I: yeah). Yano so if I have any concerns or like or her herself are worried anything even if it comes down to yano how’d you feel about this? Erm we do really support each other like that but then we also like joke about things you know to relieve you of it (I: yeah) and go well yano what we could give each other ideas or whatever to get through it. so I think that’s helpful.  relaxed and. Plus it probably helps that av been here that long so am comfortable around everybody now (I: yeah) as well. | (1) 577 –583  (1) 604 - 605 | Positive ethos of the nursery |
| To be honest the main thing the main thing I thought about was I hope I have been some use *((spoken with a tone of laughter))* (I: laughs). I felt like I mean like I was a bit like. Yano when your like put on the spot. Not like I was put on the spot sort of your mind goes blank and I was thinking (hh) I hope I was actually helpful. Cos I don’t feel like I was.  I tried to go over it and am goin (hh) wwhat more could I have said and then I sort of remember going. Oh I might mention that to her last time but I forgot what I said I was going to mention (sigh).  An as as initially I was quite a bit like oh my god yano the must think that I don’t know what am talking about kind of thing (hhhh). | (2) 6- 9  (2) 12-14  (2) 37 - 38 | The need to feel valued |
| So I asked her if she would like to have a little chat about it. An we did an she sort of come round ta understand why I’ve done that and it was a case of that (hhh). For me from my point of view he couldn’t do. it. here but he was doing it at home whatever it was he could do it at home | (2) 42 - 45 | Manging conflicting points of view  Discussing the child’s presenting needs and next steps of support |
| But when it first came up I did I did feel quite disheartened an was like oh av av what av I don’t here? Ive let him down a bit ere. | (2) 50 - 51 | The need to feel valued in role  The need to see evidence of a child’s progress |
| Ta be able to work together I find if ya if ya able to have the same strategies maybe in the same it’s good ta get a feeling of how they work so that you can work in a similar way (I: hmm hmm). An I just feel that ya get. On better with them an it’s beneficial for the kid then (I: yeah). So erm. | (2) 60 - 64 | Ensuring consistency across nursery and home to benefit the child |
| So like in in some cases ya’ll have parents that maybe don’t take on board what ya saying an stuff. An make ya feel a bit like wul. I feel like I can’t help them here if ya not going to support them that way at home. | (2) 67 - 69 | Manging conflicting points of view  Providing parenting advice and solutions to problems |
| An you cun you cun. Hope that their involved as much as you and wanna get the same outcomes an things like that. | (2) 71 - 72 | Ensuring consistency across nursery and home to benefit the child |
| I’ve had like I’ve had like the odd parent where maybe like for example they’ve for whatever reason they’ve not come ta me yano an they know what I am their key child. if there’s any messages or any queries or something they’ve gone to another. Member of staff. An like I use I used to take it sort of personal an be like “oh well yano what’s wrong with me?” ((whispers)) an that kind of thing. But I have sort of down the line just gone well they must jus feel more comfortable speaking to that person.  Erm yeah. ah I think mm now I think it’s the more most people come to me now. Now I don’t know whether it was just maybe I wasn’t as confident in my role then (: hmm) or whether I would question things like that more really maybe (I: ah okay). | (2) 77 – 82  87 - 89 | The need to feel valued in role  Acceptance in relationships  Manging conflicting points of view |
| Erm. An obviously as well av av learned more av changed that maybe helps (I: hmm hmm) the relationship with the them the way I am maybe. | (2) 89 - 91 | Using practice-based evidence to navigate new situations |
| So you do get like disheartened an I sort of think right how can I fix that? wwhat can I do? Ta change how they feel or their relationship with an I’ll (hh) try me best to do that (laughter). | (2) 95 - 97 | The need to feel valued in role  Providing parenting advice and solutions to problems  Manging conflicting points of view |
| an ta reassure him that it was yano an it was gonna be okay an we weren’t in there for long. | (2) 119 - 120 | A reassuring role to parents |
| Like we weren’t like this is what we will do so I had to really say about strategies. So I had to really say about strategies that we are gonna do at pre-school like how’d ya feel about doing that at home? But luckily she came on board with it. Over a bit of time it did improve quite massively. (I: Oh okay yeah). An took on board what we were doin | (2) 136 - 140 | Providing parenting advice and solutions to problems  Ensuring consistency across nursery and home to benefit the child |
| nerv. I was quite a bit nervous actually. Erm (.) cos (.) at the time I didn’t know mum so well cos it was so early on. So I didn’t know how she was gonna react [I: hmm hmm] an things an (.) the first conversation was a bit like. | (2) 143 - 145 | Challenges in providing feedback to parents  Discussing the child’s presenting needs and next steps of support |
| An we were like we jus shouldn’t plan stuff anymore because it’s ( ). An they had the most amazing time an ano especially this little boy who normally is like erm like ya if he’s playing with the bricks the bricks stay with the bricks. If ya play if ya writing ya stay on the writing table. Wul we were kinda involved in everything. We were using different things from different areas to create the ship. We weren’t drawing on paper we were drawing on boxes. All the other children are fine with that they could do that but he quite struggled a bit with that an he really engaged dead well with it. An he ended up joining in and stuff an got so much out of it an ya sor it’s things like that ya sort of go oh wow yano that is exactly what we want. An it was something where we hadn’t gone right well we will try that sort of let’s do this and see what happens an it was the best idea ever for him an it was lovely to just see his reaction an him to be able to come away from his quite structured play an av a little bit of fun really | (2) 158 - 175 | Pressures in role around paperwork and impact on relationships  EY work is a passion  A desire to build relationships with children |
| it was lovely to watch just to watch to see how happy he was an to go so actually yeah I can do this an nothin’s goin wrong kind of | (2) 177 - 178 | The need for children to be happy |
| ya just feel ya just get a lot of joy from watching them an an like ya sor sort of like relief to see that it’s there it just needs a little coaxing out of them an it made me feel good that that we’d been able to help them. Yano experience that an get ta that point. | (2) 182 - 185 | The need for children to be happy  A desire to build relationships with children |
| It it it’s very helpful when. It can be really helpful when I can say it to parents (I: hmm hmm) I’ve experienced or I’ve tried. I feel that you get more trust from them. Is that what you mean? [I: yeah yeah yeah] like that kinda thing? The they seem a bit positive an open to your ideas then (I: yeah) because they think well actually she has done it or she’s yano (I: yeah) or she’s not just chatting from a book kind of thing. | (2) 191 - 195 | Using practice-based evidence to navigate new situations  Acceptance in relationships |
| An I am like one of them I try everything out on my youngest first an go oh that worked I’ll have a go of that in work (I: laughs).  An a lot of workin here an have him have sort of give me ideas for both. Like havin some of the children here come through an seein the way they are an what supports them I’ve tried on him an it’s er worked with him. But in the same way stuff I’ve done with him to help him out I’ve gone oh I’ll give that a go in work [I: oh okay] and I’ve sort of [I: so like your] helping both ways.  I didn’t know as much with me first one an then I did all my training an had me second one an so it it give me a totally different outlook on me second one an I think it was at a really good time (I: oh okay yeah) as well to be able ta ta know more about how he thinks an how [I: yeah] does that make sense? | (2) 200 – 201  (2) 204 – 208  (2) 212 – 216 | Using practice-based evidence to navigate new situations |
| All of it was working fine but I still couldn’t help but go home an go (hhh). Is it yano is this. Have I done this right? Have I done that? Th the constant like makin sure everything was. Done right [I: hmm}. An all that I could do was done [I: yeah yeah] that kinda thing. So al when I had him I remember worrying a lot more about him just to be sure [I: oh yeah] that everythin. Even though when ya look at it it was it was. He had all the support he could possibly get. But I I still just seem ta constantly. | (2) 227 - 232 | The need to feel valued in role  Emotional impact of the key person role in personal life |
| An that an then. When things did come into like we’d be right we’ve got that sorted. Or mum said this is goin well at home. An then ya just each little even little things for him was like a huge thing an it was just really like a relief but really great to hear (I: hmm). Those that bits little bits of feedback to know that everythin was goin great an goin well for him | (2) 245 – 248 | The need for feedback in role. |
| Worried because I’ve realised I’ve I’ve seen an watched with him that actually it was all everything was goin fine (I: hmm hmm). Everyone was involved an everyone was helping so. It it is okay. I’m not as maybe overly (I: yeah yeah ) worried about it. | (2) 253 – 256 | The need to see evidence of a child’s progress |
| An I’ve got cos I’ve got a really great. Team. Round me (I: yeah) to help me and support me with it. That. Like ta see that rather than when it’s like look look what you’ve got ta help it’s actually okay don’t worry kind of thing (I: laughs). | (2) 256 - 258 | Positive ethos of the nursery |
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**Appendix H: Transparency of the process of naming themes**

I have documented how the theme names were amended in phases 3 to 5 of the thematic analysis cross the original eight themes. This was further condensed down following writing up in phase 6.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Theme | Subtheme | | Codes | Latent |
| First attempt - The need to be valued and accepted in key relationships in role  Second attempt - the need to feel a sense of belonging within the key person role  **Third attempt – A need to belong** | | | The need for feedback in role in relationships  The need to be accepted in relationships with children and parents  The need to feel valued in role | Knowing promotes safety in self and others  Splitting/ idealised view of nursery ethos  Intellectualisation  Omnipotence/ idealised self |
| First attempt - Drawing upon personal and professional experiences and identities to navigate the key person role  Second attempt – Draw on both ‘personal’ and ‘work’ experiences to navigate not knowing in the key person role  **Third attempt – the personal and the professional are indistinguishable** | | | Using previous work experiences in new situations  Drawing upon personal experience to navigate the role  The emotional impact of the role in personal life | Transference of personal relationships in role |
| Systemic factors | Systemic barriers | | Lack of resources and training available to support children  Pressures in role around paperwork impact on relationships  Managing unpredictable events in role  There has been an increase in children with additional needs in the nursery | Assessments and policies are a social defence  Intellectualisation |
| Systemic facilitators | | The importance of supportive peer relationships in work  The positive ethos of the nursery  Access to structure in nursery | Idealised view of the nursery ethos  Discussing the emotional experience of colleagues to avoid own experience  Knowing promotes feelings of safety in self and others  The application of emotional labour in working with children |
| Navigating conflicts of view when meeting with parents  Attempt 2 - Navigating conflicts of view when working in partnership with parents  Attempt 3 – **Managing emotive communication exchanges with parents** | | | Challenges in providing feedback to parents that may provoke an emotional response  Manging conflicting points of view when conversing with parents  Challenges in gaining information about the child from the parent | Splitting/ projecting regarding parents  Projective identification  Rationalisation  Knowing promotes feelings of safety in self and others  Intellectualisation |
| **joyful relationships with key children** | | | EY work is a passion  The desire to build relationships with children | Omnipotence/ idealisation of self  The application of emotional labour in working with children |
| Building a safe secure relationship with each individual key child | | Knowing the individual child | Connecting with child through their likes and interests  A need to know each child as an individual  Implement safeguarding policies and procedures | Knowing promotes safety in self others  Intellectualisation |
| Emotional support for the child | The need for children to be happy  The importance of social and emotional support from the key person to be able to learn and develop  The key person is a secure base for the child | Uncomfortable in close relationships with children  Projective identification in managing emotional demands in children  Splitting/ projection regarding feelings of children with needs to reduce anxieties  Idealised view of self  Intellectualisation |
| Working with parents to ensure consistency across home and nursery  **Reaching a shared understanding with parents** | | Sense making | Having initial conversations with parents about child’s presenting needs and future support  getting information about the child and home context from the parent to make sense of the child | Knowing promotes safety in self and others  Splitting/ projection regarding feelings of children with needs to reduce anxieties  Rationalisation |
| Practical parenting advice | Provides strategies around parenting  Helping parents fix solutions to problems for parents  Ensuring consistency across home and nursery | Transference of personal relationships in experience in role  Idealised view of self/ omnipotence  Splitting/projecting parents |
| Emotional support to parents | A reassuring role for parents  Having supportive relationships with parents | Splitting/projecting parents |
| Supporting children to be developmentally and academically ready for Reception  **Promoting school readiness** | | | The purpose of EY education is to prepare for school  The role requires developmental assessments of children  teaching academic skills and make a difference educationally | Splitting/ projection regarding feelings of children with needs to reduce anxieties  Idealisation of self/ omnipotence |
| Working with a network of others professionals to support the child  **Collaboration with a network of external professionals** | | | Working with children with additional needs requires relationships that extend to parents and other professionals  The key person is required to working on external agency recommendations for children with additional needs | Splitting/ Idealised view of external professionals  idealisation of self |

**Appendix I: Thematic Map detailing all four themes**



**Appendix J: The Grid Elaboration Method Sheet**

**I am interested in what you associate (think of) when you think of the emotional experience of your key person role in your nursery setting. Draw, write, tell me what comes to your mind when you think about the emotional experience of your key person role. Please put one image /word/ phrase in each box.**

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