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Conceptualisations of childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC): The experiences of children and practitioners based on practitioners' perspectives in the Scottish context during the COVID-19 pandemic

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PhD in Education

The University of Edinburgh

2023

ABSTRACT

As a large-scale health and education crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly changed the functioning of early learning and childcare (ELC) settings as a result of measures and restrictions implemented to reduce the spread and impact. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has spread to all aspects of children's and practitioners' daily lives and experiences in the ELC settings context. There have been recurring concerns about children and childhoods in the literature during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to the position of children as "pandemic innocents" and "pandemic problems" in relation to adult-centric assumptions around children's competencies. However, the roles, views and experiences of young children in the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic and crisis and disaster situations in the broader sense have been limited. Because researching with children was not possible due to COVID-19 pandemic regulations, this research listened to the views and experiences of practitioners working directly with children on children's experiences as well as their own experiences. Therefore, this PhD research has explored how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic in a Scottish context. This study positions itself within a childhood studies approach and provides a variety of insights into the understandings of children and childhoods that emerge from the findings of the study.

A qualitative methodological approach based on online interviews with adult participants and analysis of documents published by the Scottish Government was used for this thesis. I conducted online semi-structured interviews with practitioners who directly worked with children in diverse early learning and childcare settings across Scotland at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic (April 2020-April 2021), and stakeholders such as managers of ELC settings, academics in the childhood studies field and staff working in a local council (November 2020-April 2021). In addition, a range of texts, i.e. guidance and advice published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2020-May 2022) that had an impact on the functioning of ELC settings, were reviewed for the policy context of this study.

The findings chapters explore: (i) the daily life, practices and experiences of children and practitioners in ELC settings influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations,

with a particular focus on space, materials and relationships; (ii) the shifted experiences of children and practitioners in the context of ELC settings with a particular focus on experiences and conceptualisations of play and participation during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (iii) the conceptualisations of childhoods and early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings drew attention to the multiple, sometimes contradictory constructions of childhoods that exist in interconnected networks of relationships. The thesis highlighted that the lives and experiences of children and practitioners in the context of ELC settings were situated within and framed by the particular COVID-19 policies and regulations, as well as safety and health measures. Drawing on insights from practitioners' narratives, the thesis pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic had added another layer to some of the embedded challenges in the ELC field, i.e. realising children's participation, recognising children's competencies and maintaining care and education. This research emphasised the relational understanding on some concepts, such as children's agency and competencies and the interdependency of children's and practitioners' lives in situating their experiences in a wider policy context. Finally, this thesis highlighted the need for more attention to advocating for changes in embedded views towards children and the ELC system, taking into account the lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

LAY SUMMARY

This thesis turns attention to ELC settings in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic and the experiences of children and practitioners from the perspectives of adults. While the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and their educational experiences often appeared in the relevant literature, this thesis takes an in-depth exploration of the changed daily lives and practices of ELC settings and the experiences of children and practitioners, emphasising the published guidances by the Scottish Government that directly impacted their daily lives and experiences. Children's roles and participation in crisis or disaster situations are often ignored or underestimated for many reasons, from children's positions in society to adults' views on children and childhoods. Therefore, this study explored how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study positions itself within a childhood studies approach and provides a variety of insights into the understandings of children and childhoods that emerge from the findings of the study.

This research used a qualitative methodological approach based on online interviews. I collected the data over a year at certain phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland. Data was generated mainly from online interviews with adult participants. I conducted online semi-structured interviews with practitioners who directly worked with children in ELC settings at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and stakeholders such as managers of ELC settings, academics in the childhood studies field and staff working in a local council. In addition, a range of documents, such as the guidances and advice published by the Scottish Government, which impacted the functioning of ELC settings, were reviewed to understand the policy context of this study.

This PhD thesis focuses on the early learning and childcare settings context in Scotland. It aims to present an analysis of the impact of guidances and measures in ELC settings, situated within the context of Scottish policy, and the ways in which they were implemented in daily life and practices as well as how they impacted the experiences of children and practitioners. It then explores the play and participation experiences of children in ELC settings from the perspectives of practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The concepts of play, children's participation and child-centredness are discussed in how they were conceptualised and

experienced. Finally, the thesis draws attention to the constructions of children, childhoods and ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic by recognising the complexity and interconnected relations in children's lives.

The thesis concludes by elaborating on the implications of this study for academic literature, policy, practice and research. The thesis showed that constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare are complex, multiple, sometimes contradictory and exist within interconnected networks of relationships. It highlighted that the lives and experiences of children and practitioners in the context of ELC settings are situated within and framed by the policies, legislation, safety, and health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also questioned some of the embedded challenges in the ELC field, i.e. realising children's participation, recognising children's competencies and maintaining care and education. The research showed how the COVID-19 pandemic added additional challenges to them. Finally, this thesis demonstrated the opportunities to advocate for changes in the views towards children and ELC, both now and in potential future crisis situations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my admiration for the people working in ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic. Your strength has been a huge source of inspiration for this research. Firstly, I would like to thank all the participants of this study. Thank you for your time and sharing your experiences and insights during the challenging time.

My greatest gratitude to my amazing supervisors, Dr Marlies Kustatscher, Dr Kristina Konstantoni and Dr Laura Wright. Thank you for guiding me in this journey with critical, kind and rigorous support and care at every point. Thank you for supporting me throughout the learning process and always encouraging me personally and professionally.

My sincere appreciation goes to the Türkiye Ministry of National Education for the scholarship award that allowed me to study abroad. Without this opportunity, this PhD would not have been an option for me. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to the Türkiye Consulate General Education Attaché Office in Edinburgh for supporting us away from home.

Aynur, Bilal, Gökçe, Gözde, Kevser and Zerrin, thank you all my friends from back home for supporting me in diverse ways throughout this journey. Thank you for eagerly waiting for me to come back. Büşra, Çağla, Eda, Elizabeth, Minkyung, Sabina and Selin, thank you to my friends in Edinburgh who patiently engaged in academic conversations and encouraged me to keep going. Thank you to my office mates and colleagues who accompanied me in this process.

I would like to express my special thanks to my parents, Müberrah and Mehmet, and my sister İrem. Thank you for always believing in me from the very beginning and for your continuous emotional support, giving me strength and being my daily source of joy. I would also like to thank the dearest friends of my parents, Hasibe and Nedim, who have supported me since the beginning of my educational journey.

Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé Şerif for listening to my constantly renewed “new” ideas, for being an endless source of inspiration, strength and motivation, and for being there for me through the worst and the best of this journey.

Thank you all for the many valuable roles you have played in this PhD journey.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Scottish context. It focuses on changes in the daily life of ELC settings with the implementation of COVID-19 pandemic measures, the experiences of children and practitioners from adults' perspectives, and constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare. The thesis explores the complex, contextual and interdependent relations between children, practitioners, COVID-19 pandemic guidances, space and materials.

I begin this chapter by outlining the research background and presenting my previous experiences to explain my motivation for this PhD research. I then briefly provide the scope of this study and the key terms used in this thesis. I conclude this chapter by presenting the structure of the thesis.

1.1 Research background

The outbreak of a new coronavirus disease, COVID-19, was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in January 2020. Due to the high risk of COVID-19 spreading around the world, it was characterised as a global pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic marked not only a dramatic moment in global health but also the onset of multifaceted and complex global crises with serious consequences in the context of educational settings (Grosvenor & Priem, 2022).

To make the scale of this global crisis more explicit, examples of large-scale pandemics seen before throughout history, such as "Spanish influenza" in 1918, "Asian influenza" in 1957, and "Hong Kong influenza" in 1968 can be cited (Grosvenor & Priem, 2022; Smith, 2021). The 1918 influenza resulted in 40-50 million deaths worldwide and is considered one of the deadliest diseases in human history (Smith, 2021). As of 6 October 2022, the official global death toll from COVID-19 was over 6.5 million, and the number of confirmed cases was over

616 million[1]. Regarding the length and breadth of educational settings closures worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic differs from previous large-scale health crises (Smith, 2021). It is reported to have created the largest educational disruption in history by initially excluding 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries at the peak of school closures in April 2020 and leaving 500 million children without access to remote learning initiatives (Grosvenor & Priem, 2022; Srivastava & Srivastava, 2022; United Nations, 2020a).

This unknown development has created uncertainties worldwide and for my research itself. This PhD thesis explores how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings, from the adult participants' perspectives, both in times of lockdown and schools reopening in the Scottish context. It represents a wealth of research and reflection on the global pandemic of the 21st century that has greatly impacted the lives of children and practitioners worldwide (Brooks et al., 2020; Hoskins et al., 2023; Rose & Bimm, 2021). The possible adverse effects of natural disasters and traumatic events on children have been well presented in both the previous crisis situations (Frost, 2005; Le Brocque, 2017) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020; Goodwin-De Faria et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2021; Viner et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic became an extreme example of interruption in terms of its unpredictability and the common global threat and rupture to everyday routines (Kirby et al., 2023). Additionally, the educational experiences of children and young people have been severely disrupted. As the literature has put forward, many changes have had to be implemented in the organisation and functioning of educational settings all over the world (Gomes et al., 2021; Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021; Park et al., 2021). The limited literature leaves a gap in knowledge about life in ELC settings in the Scottish context, including children's and practitioners' experiences. As such, there is a need for further exploration of how fundamental policy changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic have been implemented in the Scottish context, how they have affected the organisation and functioning of ELC settings, and how children and practitioners have indeed experienced them.

Along with recognising the challenges and disruption the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the lives of children and practitioners, I view the COVID-19 pandemic as "another chapter in the story of childhoods" (Peleg et al., 2021, p.257) and as a process that sheds light on

[1] The interactive World Health Organization (WHO) Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard, accessed at https://covid19.who.int/.

questioning various well-established understandings, practices, and issues embedded in early learning and childcare. In this thesis, various insights on the understandings of childhoods emerging from the interviews, i.e. developmental perspectives, viewing children as competent agents, are discussed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and how some conceptualisations of childhoods that are thought to have changed in recent decades, as suggested in the childhood studies literature, remain dormant and surface in crisis situations.

Although this research positions itself within a childhood studies approach, it is important to note that less attention has been paid to the roles of children and young people in the disaster literature that goes back 80 years (Anderson, 2005; Koller et al., 2023; Mutch, 2014; Rose & Bimm, 2021). As the literature review shows, the issues, such as not viewing children as competent participators of the solution, have remained similar in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020; Tisdall & Morrison, 2022). Possible reasons for the exclusion of children can be listed as follows: the views towards children and childhoods in society, such as "incompetent", "innocent" and "in need of protection" (Goodwin-De Faria et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022); lack of children's participation in policy-making (Anderson, 2005; Cortes-Morales & Morales, 2021); widespread "medicalised" narratives of disaster situations, and viewing children as "passive" victims of disaster (Cortes-Morales et al., 2021; Tisdall & Morrison, 2022). As a potential consequence, some statements about childhoods appeared in the media and research papers. The cohorts of children influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic were called the "COVID generation" (Relief Web International, 2020). Expressions such as childhoods disappeared or dramatically changed (Peleg et al., 2021) and were "essentially on hold" (Koller et al., 2022, p.13) began to be used due to lockdowns and strict measures in children's lives.

In the literature, less attention has been paid to the concerns, perspectives and contributions of young children in the context of crisis situations (Bessell, 2021; Kusumaningrum et al., 2021; Million, 2021; Tisdall & Morrison, 2022). Therefore, the need to better understand the views and experiences of children in disaster situations, to have more effective programs to reduce disaster vulnerability and to recognise the role of children in response practices (Anderson, 2005; Fothergill & Peek, 2015; Rose & Bimm, 2021), has been emphasised. To achieve these, I suggest that more work is needed to explore the experiences and views of children and practitioners on the global COVID-19 pandemic. These are some of the gaps which this

research aims to address. In the next section, I share key moments from my personal reflections on the scope of this research and my motivations behind this research.

1.2 Reflecting on my PhD experiences and practices

My interest in exploring and understanding children's daily life and experiences in an ELC setting context emerged from my professional and academic experiences in the early childhood field. Before I started my PhD, I had many different experiences and positions working with young children in different country contexts. For example, I had a chance to be an observer practitioner in a Norwegian kindergarten for a few months, then worked as a teacher in a private preschool in Türkiye, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, and did my master's research in a nursery setting in England. The different pedagogies and practices in the settings I was a part of and the diverse daily lives constructed between children, practitioners, spaces, materials, arrangements and regulations influenced my thinking and questioning of the roles of children, practitioners and early childhood settings.

When I started my PhD with particular perspectives on early childhood due to my personal, professional, and academic experiences, something unexpected and unpredictable happened that affected the whole world. During my PhD, I experienced lockdowns, strict measures such as physical distancing and face coverings in public spaces and limitations on public gatherings due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the balance in the everyday forms of our social lives and shaped our experiences, concerns and attitudes towards others, including myself. In addition, my thesis took shape and evolved as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed. In this section, I present key moments from my experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic that shaped my thinking for this study throughout my PhD.

Firstly, throughout the lockdown, statements like "lockdown babies", that is, babies that had been born during that time, have frequently appeared in the media. New parents have had to respond to challenges in innovative ways, such as introducing their babies to family members over Zoom or having virtual meetings with friends (Children's Commissioner, 2020). For a long time, these babies did not have a chance to communicate with different people and peers other than their close family members. This made me think that the first experiences of "lockdown babies" would be very different in this rapidly changing world where it was hard to

know what measures the near future would bring. Similarly, children attending ELC settings have had educational experiences under very different conditions and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the lockdowns when the settings were closed and returning to settings that functioned very differently with strict measures. It was clear that children had very different experiences in ELC settings than before. For example, they could not visit the settings and meet with their practitioners in person before they started, or their parents/caregivers could not be with them inside of the setting in the early days. All of these made me think that it is important to research children's and practitioners' experiences and lives in the face of rapidly changing and unexpected circumstances.

Secondly, the first lockdown in March 2020 brought restrictions on international travel from the UK. For me, that meant being unable to travel and visit my family for nearly a year and a half. When I finally had a chance to visit my family in July 2020, I tried to spend as much time as possible with them, including my three-year-old cousin, Ediz. When I went to see him, I bought a few picture books to read together. One of them was a book about the adventures of cat characters in the winter season. While we were reading and talking about the pictures, one page had cats skating along the street with other animal characters in the snow. He suddenly turned to me and said hesitantly, "But they are outside." I answered, "Yes." "But they don't wear their masks," he continued. I thought about how my cousin and other children of the same age had lived an important amount of their lives with the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and the precautions and limitations it brought. On the one hand, it was disrupting that children were exposed to these limitations at a younger age. On the other hand, it showed that children were part of society in several contexts (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; James, 2009; Prout, 2005). This personal event got me thinking about children's positions in society during the COVID-19 pandemic and helped shape the focus of the second round of interviews.

Thirdly, as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, negative statements about young children and their development began circulating in the media and news. Some of them were that they fell behind in meeting some milestones (Geddes, 2022); they were "at risk" or "among the most vulnerable in society" (Bhopal & Fearon, 2021); they became more upset, violent and clingy during the lockdown (Linning, 2020), and they had poor speech and language development (Jeffreys, 2021). In my understanding, such negative attitudes can result in potentially discriminatory practices by positioning children as "deficit" (Murris, 2016), so they should be questioned. Additionally, videos and pictures of young children casually approaching and

touching random objects on the street and then rubbing their hands because they thought the objects were hand sanitiser pumps began to spread (Chauhan, 2021). This example clearly illustrated the reality of young children's lives under lockdowns and strict measures, the fact that anything could become hand sanitiser for them. At the same time, it showed that children were actively making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic and their own experiences by interacting, exploring, playing and learning. The emergency measures during the COVID-19 pandemic have reassembled children's everyday geographies and reshaped the social institutions, processes and relations in which children's daily lives are embedded (Mukherjee, 2021). Therefore, I concluded that there is a need to further explore the multiple, sometimes contradictory, constructions of children and childhoods in society, as they can be seen as vulnerable or at risk on the one hand and positioned as active actors who create their own meanings on the other.

All these nuances above were examples of my thinking and reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic during my PhD. They helped me shape the scope of this thesis, as the COVID-19 pandemic has primarily shaped my PhD experience.

1.3 Scope of the research

This PhD thesis explores how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic in a Scottish context. The following research questions are addressed to realise this aim:

> **Question 1:** How has the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy documents published accordingly, affected the daily life, practices and experiences in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives?
>
> **Question 2:** How have children's experiences of play and participation been shaped in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic?
>
> **Question 3:** How have the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?

I have explored the life and practices of ELC settings, the experiences of children and practitioners and the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare in the light of COVID-19 pandemic measures, with the narratives and examples shared by adult participants in the interviews and the guidances published by the Scottish Government. As explained in the following chapters, this PhD research did not directly include children due to the strict regulations and measures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, I conducted online interviews with adults who worked directly with children in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants include practitioners and stakeholders, managers of ELC settings, academics in childhood studies and staff working in a local council. Additionally, a number of guidances and advice published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic were reviewed to analyse the policy context in which ELC settings were situated.

1.4 Definition of terms

This section provides useful definitions and an overview of key terms used throughout the thesis.

Children: The term "child" refers to a human being below the age of eighteen years, aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) definition. More specifically, this research mainly focuses on children aged five and under; thus, it uses the term "children" instead of "children and young people". Sometimes "children and young people" refers to the literature, if appropriate.

Early childhood: The terms "early childhood", "early years", "early care and education", and "early childhood education and care" can be used internationally and often interchangeably in the studies. There are some debates regarding the age range of children, but most refer to young children from birth to age eight (Gabriel, 2017). For this thesis, I often use the term early childhood, but when quoting the literature, I maintain what is used in the literature.

Early learning and childcare (ELC): Early learning and childcare (ELC) is a generic term that covers the full range of early education and childcare for children up to school age across Scotland (Education Scotland, 2023). The unique term ELC in the Scottish context reflects the idea of removing the dichotomy between education and care, removing the view that it

only refers to the year before the child starts primary school, and expanding the term "childcare" so it can no longer be equated with physical needs alone (Siraj & Kingston, 2015). Therefore, this thesis uses the phrase ELC when discussing the Scottish context and findings of this study.

ELC settings: In line with the uses of a particular term, ELC, in the Scottish context, this thesis uses "ELC setting" to refer to the settings including family centres, day nurseries, nursery schools and classes, childminders and playgroups (Education Scotland, 2023). In the general literature, terms such as "nursery", "kindergarten" and "early years setting" can be used. These are retained when studies using these terms are discussed.

Practitioner: This thesis uses the term "practitioner" to encompass the adult professional working in ELC settings, except the managers of settings, when discussing the Scottish context and findings of this study. There are different job titles in the settings in this study, for instance, early years officer, senior early years officer and so on. As stated in the methodology chapter, this choice was made to protect participants' identities, as some titles might be easily identifiable. When discussing the general literature and studies, the context-specific phrases "teacher" or "educator" are followed depending on the context.

COVID-19: It is the official name of the disease causing the global pandemic. "CO" stands for corona, "VI" for virus, and "D" for disease. "19" indicated the year of the discovery. The COVID-19 virus is a new virus that belongs to the same family of viruses as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and some types of colds (Bender, 2020; Cuevas-Parra, 2021).

COVID-19 pandemic: The thesis uses the term "COVID-19 pandemic" to refer to all processes, experiences and impacts related to the global pandemic.

Lockdown: It was a series of stay-at-home orders introduced by the governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It includes the closure of many sectors, ELC settings, and schools in Scotland. In Scotland, the first lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, and the second lockdown was announced on 4 January 2021. The detailed timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland can be seen in Appendix 1.

Closures and reopening of ELC settings/schools: These terms refer to the time when all educational institutions were closed and reopened in a Scottish and global context following the lockdowns over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures imposed by the governments.

Social/physical distancing: Although the term social distancing has been widely used to encourage people to physically distance themselves from others to reduce the spread of the virus, they are not the same (Wasserman et al., 2020). As people could stay socially connected through technological devices or public initiatives under the lockdown limitations, the thesis uses "physical distancing" to refer to measures applied to staff, parents and carers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bubbles: The thesis uses the term "bubbles", in line with the uses of participants, to refer to "small groups" or "cohorts" formed by dividing children into smaller numbers in ELC settings. This division was required in the guidance published by the Scottish Government to limit physical contact.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

Following this introduction, in **chapter 2,** I provide the relevant theoretical perspectives for this research and a review of the relevant literature. I begin by examining different conceptualisations of childhoods by setting up the dominant views, i.e. developmental perspectives and socialisation theories and relatively recent discussions within childhood studies, i.e. "new" sociology of childhood, post humanist, new materialistic thinking. The chapter then provides key debates in early learning and childcare to discuss how some of these conceptualisations of childhoods come to life in the current state of ELC. I then explore COVID-19 pandemic literature by discussing existing studies to present emerging insights about children, childhoods and early learning and childcare in challenging times. The chapter concludes by presenting the rationale for this research, its broad aim and specific research questions.

In **chapter 3**, I present the methodological approach taken in this study. I outline the ontological and epistemological stance and justify the research design, including the approach to address the research aim. I then set out the methodological choices and the data collection

processes, including the justification for the participants, duration and steps I follow during the data collection. I also provide a detailed explanation of how I manage and analyse the data. The chapter next discusses the ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality and minimising harm. To conclude the chapter, I provide a reflexive account of my positionality as a researcher in relation to the research design and processes.

In **chapter 4**, I present and discuss the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and set out the policy context for ELC settings. I analyse the main guidances and relevant legislations published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted the organisation and functioning of ELC settings. This chapter aims to provide contextual background for ELC settings in Scotland during the COVID-19 pandemic to further analytically explore the findings of this research in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 5 begins to present the findings of the research. I first introduce what published guidances by the Scottish Government mean for ELC settings, managers, practitioners and other staff working there, and how the guidances are implemented in the ELC settings context. The chapter then begins to explore changes in the daily life and practices of ELC settings as a result of the guidances implemented and the overall safety and health measures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Relations with space and resources are explored as to how they are (re)arranged with the COVID-19 pandemic measures and how they impact the experiences of children and practitioners in ELC settings. Then, the shaped relationships between children and practitioners, including the care practices, are discussed. This chapter shows the messy and complex life in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic and the relationality between children, practitioners, the COVID-19 pandemic, spaces and resources.

Chapter 6 continues to look at shifted experiences of children and practitioners in the ELC settings context. This chapter explores the play and participation experiences of children in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic from practitioners' perspectives. The chapter explores some of the challenges embedded in early learning and childcare to illustrate the complex landscape on which the COVID-19 pandemic has landed. It then analyses the changes in the "nature" of children's play, i.e. it has become richer, more imaginative and creative under the COVID-19 pandemic measures, and the role of play in helping children cope with the challenges in their lives in crisis situations. The chapter then opens up space to discuss how practitioners approach children's participation, focusing on children's participation in decision-

making and the daily life of ELC settings by presenting a critical discussion of the "floorbook" noted by practitioners as enabling children's participation. Children's participation is found to be largely neglected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reasons are explained in this chapter by the debates on the current state of ELC, the conceptualisations of children in society, and the additional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 7 delves more deeply into the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic by following the discussions from the previous findings chapters that explore the changed practices and experiences of children and practitioners in the ELC settings context. This chapter examines a number of interconnected and relational, sometimes incompatible, constructions. First, the chapter looks at different constructions of childhoods during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how practitioners viewed and understood children's knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic and children's responses to measures and limitations. These include positioning children within developmental perspectives, viewing them as co-constructors of knowledge, and acknowledging their competencies and agency. The chapter then looks at multiple constructions in early learning and childcare, including the already dominant constructions in the field, such as emphasising children's learning and academic achievement, and some intensified focuses and concerns, such as prioritising children's feelings and wellbeing at different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter also discusses learning and childcare aspects, emphasising the increasing challenges for practitioners and the sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, in **Chapter 8**, I conclude the thesis, summarising the findings of this research and answering the research questions. The chapter then discusses the implications and contributions of this research for the debates in the academic literature, for policy and practice, and for further research. This study highlights how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted life in ELC settings and the experiences of children and practitioners through the implementation of guidance and measures in various complex ways. It also highlights that the children's lives and experiences and practitioners have been contextually and interdependently co-produced in relation to space, materials, social relationships, policy and guidance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it demonstrates that children's participation was easily overlooked during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the prioritisation of protection, safety, and health measures alongside existing issues in ELC. This research reveals that the COVID-19 pandemic has

exacerbated already challenging situations embedded in early learning and childcare. This research also highlights the existence of several interconnected and relational, sometimes incompatible, constructions related to childhoods and ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic. These constructions indicate that children were positioned as "incompetent" in some contexts, and their experiences were restricted during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, children's active participation and exercising their agency were exemplified, for example, through play experiences. By exploring the conceptualisations, this research sheds light on relational understandings of children's agency and positions it in the context of relations. Finally, it calls for critical reflection and awareness of the relationality and interdependency of children's lives, therefore advocating for changes in views towards children and the ELC system, taking into account lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW - CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDREN AND CHILDHOODS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature on conceptualisations of children and childhoods and the COVID-19 pandemic that focuses on the early learning and childcare context. For this, introducing the theories of children and childhoods is needed. Thus, the chapter starts with examining different conceptualisations of childhoods by setting up the dominant views and early understanding of childhoods from different disciplines. This section introduces relatively recent discussions within childhood studies, starting with the "new" sociology of childhood to recent critical understandings, emphasising ongoing dichotomies and key concepts in the field. The chapter then discusses key debates in early learning and childcare to reflect how some conceptualisations are operationalised or contested in the current state of ELC. Pedagogy and play in ELC, learning and care aspects of ELC and tensions between children's best interests, protection and participation are explored, respectively.

The chapter lastly discusses the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic in the early learning and childcare context. The empirical findings of numerous studies are discussed here to present emerging understandings of children, childhoods and early learning and childcare. Some of the concerns that appeared about children during the COVID-19 pandemic are explored. Next, the changing practices and pedagogies of ELC settings and the experiences of children and practitioners in ELC settings are discussed in detail. This study is based on the Scottish context, but the reviewed literature comprises the global context to reflect the experiences of children and practitioners from different parts of the world. Each section in this chapter concludes by identifying the key considerations for the overall scope of this thesis. The chapter concludes by providing the gaps, research aim and particular research questions for this thesis.

Mapping the literature

This literature review focuses on mapping the relevant literature on theories and conceptualisations of children and childhoods and the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic in the early learning and childcare context, which is relatively large and expanding. The amount and variety of research in which the COVID-19 pandemic has been discussed in a short time

globally are identified here. Thus, this section explains and justifies the reviewed body of literature throughout this chapter.

The literature on the theorising and conceptualising of children and childhoods in this chapter tends to build mainly on Global North[2] perspectives and debates as it has developed particularly in the Global North and in the English language (Jorgensen & Wyness, 2021; Tisdall, 2023), while also recognising the other literature from other parts of the world, which brings in further complexities around how childhoods are perceived, defined and inhabited by children in very different cultural, economic and historical contexts (Leonard, 2016).

Research related to the COVID-19 pandemic that this review included draws on various disciplines, e.g. childhood studies, early childhood education, early years, children's geographies and children's rights. Inclusion criteria involve journal articles, book chapters, and reports that explicitly include concepts such as children (childhood(s), early years, nursery, kindergarten and so on) and the COVID-19 pandemic in the title, abstract and/or keywords. Since this research focuses specifically on early childhood, studies related to the COVID-19 pandemic covering this age group are included. Depending on different country contexts, this could extend up to age 7. Studies with older children are also mentioned at the focal point without going into detail if they seem particularly relevant, e.g. identifying the gap or different impacts on older children. When discussing studies in different country contexts, I try to stick to the terminology used in the studies, for example, teachers, educators or practitioners and nursery, kindergarten, early childhood education and care or early learning and childcare settings.

Since a childhood studies lens frames this research, I have explicitly focused, whenever possible, on studies that have explored children's views and experiences in ELC settings,

[2] The phrase "Global South" refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania (Dados & Connell, 2012), while the phrase "Global North" is often used for Europe and North America (Collins et al., 2020). The terms "North" and "South" were first used by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues in 1980 to distinguish between "developed" regions and "developing" regions. Since then, for Collins et al. (2020), the terms have evolved to reflect the "geopolitical" power relations, not "geographical" (Liebel, 2020). They include "an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained" (Dados & Connell, 2012, p.13). While such differentiation is generalised and not consistently appropriate due to the particular cultural, economic, political and historical contexts of each country, uses of the terminology have been found useful in the literature (Collins et al., 2020).

resulting in a focus on particular methodologies– mainly qualitative research. However, I have also included research that does not have a clear lens of childhood studies if studies are relevant to the focus of this chapter. Studies included in this chapter view children and childhoods in different ways, focusing on children's lives and experiences from their own perspectives, and from the perspectives of practitioners and researchers. Studies on children's home experiences during COVID-19 are not included as they are beyond the scope of this thesis.

The literature review is limited to English language publications. Children's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been as varied across the globe as their childhoods; thus, they cannot be seen as universal experiences. Therefore, studies from different countries are explored to present the diverse experiences of children and practitioners and the variety of practices and implementations in the context of early learning and childcare worldwide.

2.1 The origins of childhoods

The concepts of children and childhoods and their evolution have been a topic of interest throughout history; thus, this section explores a brief overview of some historical perspectives.

Ariès' seminal work "Centuries of Childhood" (1962) has been a subject of great interest in childhood history. He posited that the discovery of childhood occurred in the late 16th and early 17th centuries (Corsaro, 2015; Leonard, 2016). His famous statement that "in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (Ariès, 1962, p.125) has been largely criticised by scholars (James & James, 2008) due to the claim that the medieval period is without a sentiment[3] of childhood (Hendrick, 2009). For some authors, Ariès argued that childhood was not valued and recognised as a distinct phase from adulthood in medieval societies (Cunningham, 2005; Hendrick, 2009; Leonard, 2016; Malone et al., 2020). Despite the criticisms, Ariès' work has been instrumental in understanding how childhood has been understood. For instance, childhood is not a universal or natural category but is socially constructed and open to change over time (Leonard, 2016; McNamee, 2016). On the other hand, some historians portrayed the history of childhood differently, as when children were hurt, tortured, and abused (Hendrick, 2009). For instance, DeMause (1976) famously stated that "the further back in history one goes,

[3] The English translation of Ariès' work used the term "idea" rather than "sentiment" which carries the meaning as the sense of a feeling about childhood.

the lower the level of childcare, and the more likely children are to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorised and, sexually abused" (p.1). For DeMause, children's rights, welfare, and care for them were not part of the public discourse in the past (Malone et al., 2020; Peters & Tesar, 2018).

As a general criticism of the work of the historians Ariès and DeMause, the focus remained on adults' conceptualisations of childhood, and children's peer culture was overlooked (Corsaro, 2015). Corsaro (2015), therefore, emphasises the importance of the historical study of children by focusing on what it was like to be a child at different periods in history and the "new" sociology of childhood[4], which I will discuss later (see Fass, 2003; Fass & Grossberg, 2011; Mintz, 2012).

From the 17th century onwards, with the emergence of a middle-class family model, the importance of education and focus on a child within the family was widespread (Clarke, 2010). The view that children were naturally innocent and needed appropriate care and education to become good citizens was raised with Enlightenment ideas in the 18th century (Clarke, 2010). However, Clarke (2010) emphasises that these views were initially largely confined to the aristocracy and the new middle classes and that the lives of many children in countries such as England and France were characterised by poverty and hard work.

The rapid industrialisation throughout the 19th century resulted in the separation of home life from work and widespread urbanisation, changing the nature of childhood and adulthood and, indeed, the relationship between them (Leonard, 2016). The idea of childhood as a special phase, underpinning the Romantic idea of childhood (Clarke, 2010) most obviously reflected by the spread of compulsory schooling and the rise of the importance of children's schooling experiences (Hendrick, 1997) in this century. Leonard (2016) argues that these images reflected "western" adult views of childhood as a separate period and ideally free from the adult world; thus, childhood became romanticised and idealised.

The 20th century has become known as the century of the child, with a clear focus on family, interactions, and education (Peters & Tesar, 2018). Further, growing scientific interest in

[4] The new understandings of children and childhoods had come to be called a "new" sociology of childhood over the past decades (Prout & James, 1997). They are now often termed "childhood studies" with increasing interest from other disciplines and research areas (Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

children and their development, a sense of children's rights and psychology as a discipline have greatly influenced ideas about children and childhoods in this century (Clarke, 2010; Leonard, 2016). Throughout this, the state has become more interventionist and has taken more responsibility in education and care, and the "modern" notion of childhood has become "legally, legislatively, socially, medically psychologically, educationally and politically institutionalised" (Hendrick, 1997, p.34).

The transformation from pre-industrial to industrial society, followed by changes in family life and the eventual introduction of compulsory schooling, had significant impacts on the lives of children (Corsaro, 2015; Leonard, 2016; Malone et al., 2020) and enacted as a set of disciplinary practices and thus setting ideals of what childhood should be (McNamee, 2016). Following these historical changes, childhood is dynamically and continually (re)produced through multiple encounters between children, adults, discourse, materials, histories and technologies (James, 2010; Lester, 2013). With the COVID-19 pandemic, new discussions about children and childhoods have appeared. These dynamic and sometimes competing constructions are explored in detail in the rest of this thesis, focusing first on the constructions of childhoods in the childhood studies literature and then on the COVID-19 pandemic literature.

2.2 Constructions of childhoods

As mentioned in the previous section, philosophical and scientific interest in children and childhoods has a long history. This thesis is located within the field of childhood studies, which encompasses a wide range of disciplines and subfields, such as developmental psychology, anthropology and sociology relating to children and childhoods (Kehily, 2009; Punch, 2020; Woodhead, 2006). This section aims to provide a broad review of various theoretical understandings of childhoods that inform contemporary analytical and everyday understandings.

2.2.1 "Conventional" constructions of childhoods

In this part, some constructions of children as "innocent", "evil", "tabula rasa", and "ignorant", which have shaped beliefs about children in western societies for centuries (Woodhead, 2005), are presented to provide the foundations to evaluate the contemporary views of childhoods.

- Young children are "innocent", "pure of heart", and "angelic". Thus, childhood is a golden age and time of innocence (Dahlberg et al., 2013; James et al., 1998). It is argued that this image of childhood is partially responsible for separating childhood from adulthood in some contemporary societies (Jenks, 2005; Pressler, 2010) and further led to the idea that children need protection (Hinton, 2008; Murris, 2016).[5]

- Young children are naturally "wild" and "unregulated", which is linked with the doctrine of original sin (James et al., 1998), where a child is born essentially sinful and therefore not reliable (Murris, 2016). Thus, children need to be shaped, regulated and controlled due to their essentially corrupt or easily corruptible natures (Malone et al., 2020; Peters & Tesar, 2018).

- Young children lack rationality (Murris, 2016) and innate capacities or knowledge, but "the dispositions and drives that children possess" are accepted as "a gradient of becoming" (James et al., 1998, p.16). This is also known as Locke's idea of "tabula rasa" (blank slate) (Malone et al., 2020). In this view, children need to be pushed and reasoned with by parents/carers, educators or society and become rational and productive elements in society through education (James et al., 1998; Peters & Tesar, 2018).

- Young children are "unfinished" and "incomplete", and their development is viewed as an innate process (Dahlberg et al., 2013). Piaget is argued to be the most influential figure in this image, in which a child's growth is predicted through inevitable and clearly defined stages (James et al., 1998; James & James, 2012) towards completion as a human adult (Murris, 2016).

[5] It has also been stressed that these understandings are "an alien notion" for many cultures where "children assume critical social and economic roles", and children take on adult burdens such as childcare or income-generation (Hinton, 2008, p.288).

In the images emphasised above, the differences between children and adults are established, and the supremacy of adult competence ensures the view that childhood is "an inadequate precursor to the real state of human being" (James et al., 1998, p.18). Thus, they position childhood as a time of becoming and highlight the absolute power of parents/carers, educators or society over children due to children's deprivation of any rights or power (James et al., 1998; Pressler, 2010). In these understandings, adults seem to contribute to the construction of the production and control of children, and children have become dependent subjects in need of protection and support (Malone et al., 2020; Pressler, 2010). Although these constructions have been dominant in certain times and places, they can still be found today (Tisdall, 2023).

2.2.2 Developmental psychology for understanding children

Developmental psychology was firmly established and has been considered the dominant paradigm for researching children and pedagogies and curricula in educating and caring for young children throughout the 20th century (James & James, 2012; Woodhead, 2006; 2009). Leonard (2016) suggests that developmental psychology promotes a particular construction of childhood; childhood as a preparatory phase, from incompetence to competence or incapacity to capacity (James, 2009; Qvortrup, 2009); an apprenticeship for adulthood that can be achieved through the predetermined stages such as age, cognitive ability and physical development (Kehily, 2009). Thus, children are accepted to be in a state of "not yet being" within the developmental paradigm (Woodhead, 2009). Due to the widespread use of age as a universal trait and indicator (Woodhead, 2009), Woodhead (1999) claims that developmental research reflects "a standardised story about the years of childhood" that does not adequately represent children's experiences in different contexts, and insufficiently encompasses the possibilities for childhood past, present and future (p.4).

A range of critiques have appeared from scholars in the "new" sociology of childhood (discussed below) towards developmental psychology. These include: being obsessed with the "normal" child and its universal, standardised and inevitable developmental stages (James et al., 1998; Tatlow-Golden & Montgomery, 2021); having "adultist" and "individualistic" views (Mayall, 1996), which view children as passive objects with little autonomy (Hardman, 1973); adopting the notion of the universal child (Leonard, 2016); and seeing child development as a

journey towards "mature, rational, responsible, autonomous, adult competence" (Gabriel, 2021; Woodhead, 2008, p.27). The field was further criticised for treating children as a homogenised group (James & Prout, 1997) and taking little account of diverse childhoods while researching "exclusively middle-class children in Western countries, thus failing to understand the complexity of children's different competencies and cultural diversity (Tatlow-Golden & Montgomery, 2021, p.3).

However, some scholars emphasise the importance of recognising the diversity and complexity of the field of developmental psychology while also acknowledging that cruder versions of developmentalism[6] may no longer be useful (Woodhead, 2009) and the need for deconstructing it and moving beyond the study of the child as an isolated individual (Burman, 2017). For Woodhead (2008; 2009), developmental approaches did not completely ignore the views of the active and competent child. Instead, developmental researchers often informed the child-centred practices, focusing on the integrity of children's ideas, interests and activities in 20th-century Europe. However, it has been accepted mainly that Piaget's work had flaws in recognising children's competencies in context (Tisdall & Punch, 2012) and no longer dominates theory and research (Woodhead, 2008; 2009). Developmental psychology has moved on (Tisdall & Punch, 2012), and alternative approaches within the field highlight cultural variations, contexts and relationships that are much more closely aligned to the principle of the social construction of childhood, e.g. social constructivist or socio-cultural approaches which build on Vygotsky's views and ideas (Woodhead, 2008; 2009). On the other hand, Woodhead (2009) argues that the "new social studies of childhood" discussed below dismisses the contributions of developmental approaches, which recognise the importance of "change and transitions in children's growth, learning and wellbeing" (p.57). Therefore, some scholars emphasise the importance of the fruitful interdisciplinary engagement of childhood studies and non-mainstem psychology of childhood (Gabriel, 2021; Tatlow-Golden & Montgomery, 2021).

[6] The perspective, mostly central to the biological model of childhood in which the nature of children is shaped primarily by physical, emotional and psychological development, depending upon age and stage (Gabriel, 2020; James & James, 2012)

2.2.3 Socialisation theories for understanding children

The early focus on childhood within the discipline of sociology concerns the theories of socialisation, of children becoming members of a society (Kehily, 2008) through the process of learning (Leonard, 2016), and internalisation of adult knowledge and skills (Corsaro, 2005). Socialisation as a term can be used to represent the process of children learning to conform to social norms (James et al., 1998) and to meet the expectations of society (James & James, 2012). In this understanding, social order and its reproduction are closely related to the success of socialisation, and therefore the family and education system are critical sites in socialising the child according to adult values and norms (Leonard, 2016).

These views of childhood are found to be problematic due to the individualistic doctrine, which considers children's private internalisation of adult knowledge and skills regarding social development (Corsaro, 2005). These approaches, while emphasising the socio-cultural context, tend to see children as "becomings rather than beings" (Qvortrup, 1994), thus evoking the idea of preparing the individual child for the future (Corsaro, 2005) and adult society (James et al., 1998). James et al. (1998) state that the assumption of "becoming" renders the child incomplete. Further, Jenks (2005) argues that the "'growth' metaphors that are readily adopted in discussions about childhood all pertain to the character of what is yet to be and yet which is also presupposed" (p.9). Further criticisms are found in the literature as researching childhood based on adult interactional skills, the reproduction of social order (James & Prout, 1997), and adult life (James, 2009), ignoring the everyday experiences of children and children's lives in the present, and, for lack of an idea, to research with children about their own rights (James, 2009; Leonard, 2016; Prout & James, 1997).

2.2.4 Childhood studies: from the "new" sociology of childhood and beyond

By the 1980s and 1990s, the developmental and socialisation perspectives on childhood in which children were largely seen as "immature", "incompetent", and "becoming" (Mayall, 2002; Woodhead, 2009) were beginning to be critiqued and questioned (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Punch, 2019; Spyrou, 2018). Building on these debates, Prout and James (1997) suggested an "emergent paradigm" for the study of childhood and specified the key features that have been embraced over the past decades (Tisdall & Punch, 2012). The shift in paradigm made it possible

to account for children's active roles and participation in society within several contexts while increasing awareness of children's positions in society (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; James, 2009; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup et al., 2009; Spyrou, 2018). According to James and Prout (1990; 1997, pp.8-9), some key features of the "emergent paradigm" were:

> Childhood, as distinct from biological immaturity, is neither a natural nor universal feature of human groups.
>
> Childhood is a variable of social analysis. …Comparative and cross-cultural analysis reveals a variety of childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon.
>
> Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.
>
> Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right.

Since the publication of James and Prout's groundbreaking work, childhood studies has seen unprecedented growth (Spyrou, 2018), and new understandings of children and childhoods have been created (Tisdall, 2023). Numerous empirical studies have shown that children are indeed social actors and active and constructive members of society, while researchers have developed new, innovative and child-sensitive ways to study children where children can actively contribute to the research processes (James et al., 1998; James & Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup, 1994, 2009; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Woodhead, 2008).

Childhood studies has a recent and particular history, and it has gained a place for itself by positioning itself against previous "conventional" discourses, dominant developmental psychology and sociology understandings, and by adopting certain mantras in theory and research (Spyrou, 2018; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Woodhead, 2008). The field has become increasingly multi- and inter-disciplinary, with involvement from a wide range of disciplines (Prout, 2005; Spyrou, 2018; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Woodhead, 2009). However, the field itself is not free from critiques.

Theoretical and methodological assumptions widely shared in the field have come to be expressed as constraining rather than enabling, so the need for reconsiderations within the field to explore the complexities and ambiguities of children and childhoods is often emphasised by scholars (James, 2010; Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Ryan 2008; Spyrou, 2018; 2019; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). In the preface to the second edition of their book, James and Prout (1997) considered the main components of the "emerging" paradigm listed above to assess developments in the field after their first publication. James and Prout (1997) argued the potential limits of the social constructionist approach. They identified the unproductive juxtaposition of the "biological" and "social" and the problematic focus on the belief that children could be studied apart from adults (James & Prout, 1997, pp.ix-xi). Later, social constructionism was accused of becoming a "theoretical orthodoxy in the field" (Wyness, 2015, p.19). As Prout (2005) highlights, childhood studies have largely gravitated towards making arguments for children and childhood that seek stability and coherence, appealing to still dominant modernist frameworks that often reduce ambiguity and complexity through binary categorisation. To take these criticisms further, some ongoing dichotomies and key concepts in the field, now more commonly called childhood studies, are explored later in this section.

Social constructionism, as it has been used in the "new" sociology of childhood, failed to recognise ideas around "relationality, materiality, fluidity and complexity" (Tisdall, 2023, p.30). Spyrou (2019) states that these critiques in the field can also be noted as the emerging interest in ontology in childhood studies (e.g. Alanen, 2015; 2017). In recent years, theorising that recognises posthumanist and new materialist thinking has been increasingly encouraged in the childhood studies literature (Kraftl & Horton, 2018; Malone et al., 2020; Murris, 2016; Peters & Tesar, 2018) (see Esser et al. 2016; Hultman & Lenz-Taguchi, 2010; Lenz-Taguchi, 2010; Oswell, 2016).

This focus in the field embraces a broader realm in which human, nonhuman and technological forces are recognised as being involved in making the social world and generating knowledge about its character (Spyrou et al., 2018). Posthumanism is stated as turning away from the idea that the child is an autonomous agent, turning to the idea that the child is entangled in an enormous web of material and discursive forces (Murris, 2016). A more explicit consideration of the materiality of children's lives opens a research inquiry that considers, in addition to the human, the multitude of nonhuman forces that act with and constitute what one comes to see

and recognise as child and childhood (Spyrou, 2019) (see some empirical studies, Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012; Watson et al., 2015).

Another critique is that childhood research and the categories it has developed to date are largely based on children and childhoods in the Global North, and it continues to be dominated by researchers from Global North geographies, leading to the exclusion of other forms of knowledges and thinking (Jorgensen & Wyness, 2021; Liebel, 2020; 2021; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2023). Childhood history in non-western regions has tended to be overlooked for a long time, and the absence of Global South theories in childhood studies has been emphasised by several scholars (Abebe, 2022; Ansell, 2017; Pérez et al., 2017; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2019).

In order to deconstruct the dominant and Global North scholarships, in recent years, efforts in the research that deploy indigenous and decolonial perspectives on the study of childhood and explore the everyday experiences and relationships of children in parts of the Global South (Abebe, 2013; 2019; Abebe et al., 2022; Balagopalan, 2018; Rabello de Castro, 2021; Spyrou, 2017; Spyrou et al., 2018; Twum-Danso Imoh et al., 2023; Vergara Del Solar et al., 2021), with different and culturally sensitive perspectives (Cheney, 2018; Liebel, 2021) have been made within the scope of childhood studies. From a broad sense, "decolonisation" aims to "undo historical and ongoing processes of colonialism, with a focus on the intellectual, emotional, economic and political reversal of colonial injustices" (Kustatscher et al., 2022; p.19). In relation to childhood studies, Abebe et al. (2022) note that decolonising does not mean never engaging with western knowledge. Rather, they state the need to "redress the complicity and legacy of western supremacy … in silencing, erasing, or rendering irrelevant certain ways of thinking, knowing, holding, and sharing knowledge while simultaneously engaging deeply and critically with all forms of knowledge" (Abebe et al., 2022, p.268).

Some researchers mention the need to go beyond the critiques and dichotomies in the field (Spyrou, 2018) by integrating the contrasting positions (James, 2010) and including "an interdisciplinary approach and an open-minded process of enquiry" to see childhoods as "heterogeneous", "complex" and "emergent" (Prout, 2005, p.2). Kustatscher et al. (2022) highlight that the experiences of children and young people in both the Global South and the Global North "are not homogeneous", and "simplistic binary assumptions about Global North/South childhoods do not do justice to the complexity and interconnected power relations

that frame children's lives globally in terms of materialities, education, participation and so on" (p.20). Therefore, as Spyrou (2017) argues, there is a need for decentring the field from its categorical object of study and reconnecting with the wider world of scholarship while engaging with more diverse issues in which children are implicated (pp.433-434).

The dichotomy: beings/becomings

Early developments in the "new" sociology of childhood depended heavily on the distinctions between childhood and adulthood (Ryan, 2008; Tisdall, 2023). Leonard (2016, p.3) states how the distinction between children and adults has been commonly portrayed, emphasising:

> different traits and capabilities, with children being seen as immature while adults are seen as mature, and children being seen as irrational and closer to nature compared to the cultural, reflective, rational adult.

The distinctions are not only embedded in social and cultural understandings of what children and adults can entail but also stem from the framework of chronological age and biological immaturity (James & Prout, 1997). Prout (2005) argues the unproductiveness "to arbitrarily separate children from adults as if they were some different species of being" (Prout, 2005, p.81). Instead, Prout proposes to consider "the complex interplay, networking and orchestration of different natural, discursive, collective and hybrid materials" that children and adults bring out (Prout, 2005, p.81).

This dichotomy between children and adults has come into question in the field of childhood studies by focusing on how it has changed over time, within and between societies (Alanen, 2009; Qvortrup et al., 2009) as well as the critical attention towards viewing the child as "human being rather than human becoming" (Qvortrup, 1994). The "becoming" has been the focus of the debates based on the notion of the stability of adulthood, "being" has been problematised when challenging what it could mean to "be" (Lee, 2001; Uprichard, 2008). For Lee (2001), children and adults are incomplete, subject to uncertainty and ambiguity in the modern world and dependent on "'extensions' and 'supplements' for their powers and abilities" (p.106). Thus, children and adults should be seen as beings and becomings since "the condition of human becoming is spreading throughout the life-course" (p.85). Uprichard (2008)

challenges the dichotomy in a different way by underlying the importance of "looking forward to what child 'becomes'" to explore "the ways in which this may itself shape experiences of being children" (p.306). Further, the "been" aspect has been addressed by Hanson (2017), emphasising that attention should be paid "not only to how present and future are balanced but also to more explicitly embrace children's and childhood's past" (p.281). Hanson (2017) argues that the "triolectical" conceptualisation of "been", "being", and "becoming" can offer a more balanced lens in the research of children and childhood by considering the past, present and future of children (p.282).

Children's competencies

A "competence paradigm" emerged in the 1990s in line with the main ideas from the "new" sociology of childhood, for instance, to seek to "take children seriously as social agents in their own right" (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998, p.9). After several years, Freeman (2007) comments that the concept of "competence[7]" "has tended to be treated as if it were unproblematic" (p.12), and it is rarely explicitly debated and defined in childhood studies (Le Borgne & Tisdall, 2017; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019). The most common use of the term in childhood research was found in statements such as "children are competent social actors" or "competent child", which often contrasted with the "traditional" notion of children being dependent, incompetent and vulnerable (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019).

One particular view of social competence is to see it as "mastery of some task-domain", implying a developmental perspective (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998, p.17). Similarly, competence can often be framed as something children intrinsically have or lack and is often associated with chronological age (Blaisdell, 2020; James & James, 2009). In this understanding, children's competence is often treated as a subject position or status "granted" to children by adults (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019). Thus, children who have not reached the age of majority might not be considered competent to fulfil social and political responsibilities, for instance (Abebe, 2019; James & James, 2009). Also, children are likely to be considered competent only when they are coherent and their views align with adults (experts or

[7] The terms competence and competency can be interchangeably used in the literature (Oswell, 2013), as I did for the rest of this section.

researchers) (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019). Otherwise, the value of children's perspectives and capacities has failed to be appreciated (Lansdown, 2010).

Alternatively, children's competence and competency should not be viewed as intrinsic or an individual characteristic but as relational and situational, something progressed and expressed in context (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019; Tisdall, 2018). Competency is "more than knowledge and skills but the actual application and demonstration to them" (Le Borgne & Tisdall, 2017, p.123). Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (1998, p.17) comment on the relational nature of social competence:

> is a constantly negotiated dynamic, a phenomenon which is stabilised, to greater or lesser degrees, in and through the interactions between human actors and the material and cultural resources which are available, and which can be recruited to play a part in the constitution of specific, situated activities.

Overall, Spyrou (2018) argues that despite the existence of still powerful discourses which position children as largely incompetent, there have been strong arguments that push the recognition of children's competence by childhood researchers.

Reconceptualising agency in childhood studies

Demonstrating young children as competent social actors and recognising their agency has been a significant part of childhood studies (Blaisdell, 2020; Esser et al., 2016; James, 2009; Mayall, 2002; Prout & James, 1997; Qvortrup, 1994; 2009; Tisdall & Punch, 2012) and critical approaches which view the agency as complicated, ambivalent and multidimensional have gained momentum in the field over the last decades (Esser et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2019; Oswell, 2013; Spyrou, 2018; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Valentine, 2011). The "almost dogmatic insistence on agency and its constitutive importance for childhood studies" are based on a critical reaction in the field, such as previous "conventional" discourses and dominant developmental psychology, as noted above (Esser et al., 2016, p.17; Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Children's agency has been found problematic in a number of ways in the literature. Many scholars have argued to treat agency in dichotomous and simplistic ways in childhood studies.

For instance, viewing children simply as "having" or "possessing" agency (Corsaro, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Raithelhuber, 2016), therefore being able to "exercise autonomous will" (Hammersley, 2017, p.119); to "act purposively" (Valentine, 2011, p.349), and to make a difference (Raithelhuber, 2016, p.91). However, agency cannot be understood as the "exercise of authentic choice or self-directed action" (Valentine, 2011, p.348). Instead, it is dynamic, situated, and contextual.

Some researchers draw attention to the tendency of assuming children's agency is inherently good (Abebe, 2019; Gigengack, 2008), constructive (Hoggett, 2001) or innately positive (Hammersley, 2017; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019; Tisdall & Punch, 2012) in the literature on childhood studies. This can lead to the prevalence of the romanticised agency concept, for instance, in rights-based discourses and participatory studies (Abebe, 2019; Gallagher, 2019; Wyness, 2015). In this discussion, Hoggett (2001, p.43) remarks:

> …there is a danger that we then slip into equating agency with constructive coping, as if the two were synonymous. The point is that there is nothing necessarily constructive about agency and we should beware of smuggling normative assumptions into our thinking here, as if agency is good and absence of agency is bad.

Following the criticisms, how the concept of agency is reconceptualised in the field to reflect children's complex and interconnected social lives is explored. In one understanding, agency is understood as dynamic and in a continuum, and it can appear to be inhibited or encouraged over time by different (opportunistic and constrained) contexts and relationships (Robson et al., 2007a; 2007b). For example, Robson et al. (2007a) see children and young people's agency in rural areas, "whose ability to act is not just simply constrained by structural forces, yet neither are they entirely free and competent actors". Rather they see them "to have and to be able to exercise some kind of agency on their own" (p.138).

Taking this further and following the continuum of children's agency, Klocker (2007, p.85) suggests a more nuanced theoretical approach by distinguishing between the "thin" and "thick" agency:

> … "thin" agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterised by few viable alternatives. "Thick" agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options.

Klocker (2007) approaches children's agency in light of variable constraints they experience in their daily lives and exemplifies how "structures, contexts, and relationships can act as "thinners" or "thickeners" of individuals' agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices" (p.85). Although Klocker's viewpoint of children's agency is driving, there are critiques of her model. In Klocker's model, the agency is seen as a variable property across a single dimension (Hammersley, 2017) and as the exercise of free will against the constraints of social structures (Abebe, 2019). In other words, it is theorised as an attribute held by an autonomous subject (Esser et al., 2016). Abebe (2019) argues that "this kind of agency descends from western philosophy that privileges individual capabilities" (p.5), and the spread of the belief in "the autonomous and responsible subject" as a key feature of "contemporary neoliberal capitalism and mode of governance" (p.4). This has been seen as problematic due to the separation of children's lives from the broader cultural and social contexts and overlooking the relational aspects of children's rights and competencies within cultural and social practices and interactions (Abebe, 2019). Along with a lot of criticism against it, Hammersley (2017) highlights the danger of thinking of agency in a binary way: to contrast a model of a passive child with a model that is not entirely constrained or determined in their behaviour, and in which, therefore, can exercise autonomous will. Therefore, Hammersley (2017) further suggests seeing children, like adults, "as active in some respects and to some extent but not in any absolute sense" (p.119).

Bordonaro and Payne (2012) suggest the notion of "ambiguous agency" when the behaviours children demonstrate, the activities they do and the space they inhabit go against the social norms and established and normative understandings of childhood (p.366). In line with this, Bordonaro and Payne (2012, p.367) argue that:

> The limited notion of agency as resourcefulness, resistance to hegemony and domination, and as something inherently positive short-circuits when we deal…, with actions that go 'against the grain'.

Similarly, Robson et al. (2007b) state that identifying children's agency might be blurred, especially under exploitative and oppressive circumstances such as slavery and child labour. The tension, then, can be expressed as between recognising children's agency versus acknowledging their vulnerability in extreme situations (Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Alternatively, agency could be located in social relations and interdependency (Esser et al., 2016) by "decentring" the child to facilitate a relational understanding (Esser et al., 2016; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Gallagher, 2019; Lee, 2001; Oswell, 2013; Prout, 2005; Raithelhuber, 2016; Spyrou, 2018), in which reconstructing agency is possible outside of the dualisms of child and adult; actions and structure, and so on (Esser, 2016). Oswell (2013, p.269) similarly conceptualises children's agency as produced by dynamic networks of actors. Here, agency is understood as:

> …neither [starting] nor [finishing] with any individual agent. Rather, agency is understood as more akin to agency as discussed within narrative analysis in as much as characters might be said to have agency but only in as much as that agency is orchestrated within narrative structure and forms of narration and in the context of other characters with agency.

Approaches which view agency as embedded in social relations are more attuned to accepting power as fluid and dispersed (Spyrou, 2018). Authors like Gallagher (2019) and Oswell (2013), drawing on Foucault's theorisations of power, argue that networks also create relationships of power. Then, the children are constructed "as a position within regimes of power and knowledge" (Oswell, 2013, p.63), and they are implicated within hierarchies and networks of power (Valentine, 2011). Similarly, Gallagher (2019, p.197) comments on agency:

> Agency is better thought of as a quality of acts that happen within heterogeneous assemblages. This line of thinking does not discount children's agency or intentions. Rather, it seeks to analyse these things as forces that emerge from, and contribute to, larger assemblages.

From this perspective, children's agency is "not constituted as a solution". Instead, agency constitutes "a problem space" that "invites further questions, investigations and analyses" (Oswell, 2013, p.271). Overall, there is a persisting need to address children's agency in a non-

celebratory, critical, theoretical, relational and reflective manner in childhood studies (Huijsmans, 2011, p.1308).

Considering generational ordering

Parallel to James and Prout's critique in the field, Qvortrup (1994; 2009) suggests a viewpoint that childhood is a permanent structural component of society, which "never disappears, even if its members change continuously, and even if it is itself historically at variance" (Qvortrup, 1994, p.23). A structural approach enables historical and generational insight into childhood (Qvortrup, 2009) with interrelationships with other categories (James et al., 1998). The structural approach to childhood has been elaborated by Alanen, Mayall, and Punch (Alanen, 2001a; 2001b; 2009; Mayall, 2002; Punch, 2020), with the ideas of generation, generational approach and generational orders (Spyrou, 2018). These developments are important to reveal more clearly children's agency within these social structures of generations (Tisdall, 2023).

It has been suggested that children, like adults, cannot escape structural constraints (Tisdall & Punch, 2012), and their agency is inevitably influenced by society, reflecting the hierarchies in which they live (Valentine, 2011). Children's various social positions "offer different opportunities and constraints for children to act and, in doing so, exercise their agency" (James, 2009, p.43). In relation to this, "generational ordering" draws attention to "the power dynamics of its constitution and the active role played by children in their lives through the work they do from the particular social locations they are afforded within the generational order" (Spyrou, 2018, p.24). Children's agency is here reconceptualised as relational, and the relationships between children and adults have the potential to present themselves as the condition for children's agency. The focus then is on the child as a member of the generational category of children (James, 2009).

Within generational order, the constructions of childhood and adulthood are understood in a complex set of social processes, and the existence of each is seen in relation to and interacting with the other (Alanen, 2001a; 2001b). These processes potentially involve a diverse range of children's relationships with adults, peers and siblings (Mayall, 2002). While the relations between individuals located in different life stages are described as "intergenerationing", relations between individuals located in the same life stage refer to "intragenerationing" (Punch

& Vanderbeck, 2020). For Esser et al. (2016), generational ordering concerns these ongoing social constructions of categories of children and adults and makes it possible to analyse the practices and discourses. Alanen (2009, p.161) explains the core idea of the notion of generational order:

> …there exists in modern societies a system of social ordering that specifically pertains to children as a social category and circumscribes for them particular social locations from which they act and thereby participate in ongoing social life. Children are thus involved in the daily "construction" of their own and other people's everyday relationships and life trajectories.

Leonard (2016) uses the term "inter-generagency" to emphasise the agency aspect of the concept by "locating children's agency within the positioning of childhood relative to adulthood" (p.132). Hereby, this term embraces the active agency of children in generational relations, on the one hand, and the structural positioning of childhood on the other. Leonard (2016) further recognises relationships within generations, such as across peers and uses the term "intra-generagency" to frame such relationships.

In the two decades since the ideas of generationing and generational orders were introduced, the concepts have not spread as much in childhood studies as agency or the social construction of childhood (Punch, 2020; Tisdall, 2023). First, key criticisms of the dichotomy between children and adults have spread to the generational order, which is emphasised to be stuck between these dichotomies (Punch, 2020). Second, generational order has often been taken as a "natural" and unproblematic feature of society (Millei, 2018; Punch, 2020). Therefore, it is not very advanced in theory and lacks detailed empirical research (Punch & Vanderbeck, 2020).

Section summary

This section has presented the foundations of childhood studies, starting with some dominant views and early understandings of childhoods, mainly viewing children as "immature", "incompetent", and "becoming" with little autonomy (Mayall, 2002; Woodhead, 2009). As a critique towards them, the "new" sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990; 1997) gained

growing interest in theories and empirical research that suggest childhood is socially constructed and recognise children as social actors and constructive members of society within their own right. While the field has expanded to a wider range of disciplines, there has also been criticism, especially around the dominant social constructionist approach, unproductive dichotomies and uses of key concepts, e.g. agency, competencies, generationing. With these criticisms and debates in the field, children in research are now understood to be both beings and becomings, their agency is understood as something dynamic, situational and contextual, and both their agency and competencies are located in social relations and interdependency. Critical views and works in the field of childhood studies, i.e. posthumanism, new-materialist and decolonisation, were also mentioned in this section, as they productively help to challenge certain ideas and dominant Global North viewpoints.

While recent insights and debates in childhood studies have challenged certain constructions that dominated at certain times and places, as argued in this section, these particular constructions can still be found to predominate today, e.g. emphasis on children's ages and developmental stages, immaturity, and incapabilities. Following this, three key debates in ELC have been identified for this study to discuss further how some of the constructions discussed in this section have come to life in early learning and childcare settings. These are discussed in the next section.

2.3 Current key debates in early learning and childcare (ELC)

After reviewing the literature on theories and conceptualisations of children and childhoods, this section discusses how some of these conceptualisations come to life, are operationalised or contested in the current state of ELC. These debates include questioning pedagogy and play practices in ELC, learning and care aspects of ELC, and tensions between children's best interests, protection and participation.

2.3.1 Pedagogy and play: early childhood spaces and practices

The dominant discourses of early childhood embody particular understandings towards childhoods, institutions for children, learning and evaluation (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). For Dahlberg and Moss (2005), these understandings offer "a regime of truth about early childhood education and care as a technology for ensuring social regulation and

economic success" (p.vii). Similarly, Vandenbroeck et al. (2010) argue that early childhood services are sites where many interests, domains and social actors intersect. Some functions of early childhood education in the literature can be listed as follows: "economic", sustaining parental employment; "educational", concerned with the individual development and wellbeing of children; and "social", contributing to more equal societies and diminishing inequalities (Campbell-Barr, 2014; Vandenbroeck et al. 2010; Van Leare et al., 2021; Wong, 2007; Woodhead, 2006).

Early childhood services and schools are often the places where children spend most of their time during the weekdays and places where children play and develop relationships (Hammond, 2023). Place has been debated in geography and is often considered the combination of location, meaning and sense of place (which can be individual and shared) (Cresswell, 2008; 2013). Some Scottish Government's policy documents define the place as "where people, location and resources combine to create a sense of identity and purpose" (Wood et al., 2023, p.4). Similarly, places can be understood as "continuously reconstructed through the social processes that intertwine in a given location" (Christensen et al., 2015, p.591).

Another related concept, space, is often used interchangeably with place, but they can contain different meanings. On the one hand, place can be positioned as the counterpoint of space, viewing spaces as "scientific, open and detached" and places as "humanised versions of space" (Anderson & Jones, 2009, p.293; Hammond, 2023). On the other hand, from children's geography perspective, spaces are understood as more than a 'place' "a location where things happen"; instead, they are complex, fluid and containing several trajectories, where the exercise of relational agency takes place (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023, p.4). Therefore, space is actively shaped by children in relation to others, and spaces are "all sorts of complex, contingent and on-going connections that always *make* spaces (an) *under-construction*" (Horton & Kraftl, 2006, p.88, original emphasis). Similarly, spaces are "always becoming, interacting, transforming and being transformed by the bodies moving through them" (Djohari et al., 2017, p.357-358). Hammond (2023) argues that the relationships between people, place and time-space matter because "place matters to a person's embodied experiences of the world and space matters to the (re)production of societies and places" (p.342-343). Therefore, in this thesis, the term space is used while discussing the (re)production of ELC places and resources within the scope of COVID-19 pandemic regulations.

Early childhood services are also spaces where children are supported through curriculum and pedagogy to think in new ways about the world and everyday life (Hammond, 2023). Following the arguments above, understandings and advances in early childhood pedagogy have been argued as increasingly based on research through multiple disciplines informing the academic field in early childhood, e.g. the fields of neuroscience or return on investment (Murray, 2015; 2019). Additionally, child development and developmentally appropriate practices have defined what early childhood education and curriculum should be and who the child and educator should be in the past decades (Malone et al., 2020; Vintimilla & Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2020). These have resulted in increased investment, policy interest and regulation of early childhood pedagogy (Murray, 2015) and have intervened in the pedagogical space where practitioners have opportunities to listen to children's views or take action (Murray, 2019). Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2020) suggest that to engage pedagogical thought, early childhood education needs to "be released from its dependency on its sources of legitimation", particularly in child development (p.632).

Pedagogy is contested and ambiguous, defined and experienced in different ways (Murray, 2015). For instance, child-centredness in early childhood has long been promoted and advocated as a pedagogy or practice (Tzuo, 2007) by drawing on the late twentieth-century ideas on children and childhoods in which children are repositioned more centrally within relations, policy and practice, and the work of developmental psychology (Jorgensen & Wyness, 2021). For Dahlberg et al. (2013), the term child-centred might adopt a particular modernist understanding of the child "as a unified, reified and essentialised subject" that can be viewed separately from the context and relationships (p.46). This contradicts the postmodern perspective, which views the child in a particular context through relationships with others.

Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw (2020) critique that early childhood spaces organised by developmental discourses lack social relationships and relations with the outside world. Therefore, space became artificial. Similarly, Lenz-Taguchi (2010) states that the tendency for pedagogical practices to be increasingly mainstreamed and normalised according to universal standards reduces the complexity of learning in a world of diversity. Alternatively, effective pedagogy is argued as depending on the "learning of all those who support the learning of others" (James & Pollard, 2011, p.307) through discussion and dialogue (Bancroft et al., 2008). Cohen et al. (2004) explain pedagogy as involving "theories and practices premised upon a

holistic approach to working with children and the inseparability of learning, care and, more generally, upbringing at the level of daily work" (p.13). It goes beyond planning the activities and values the daily interactions and relations.

In participatory pedagogy, the child is seen as a competent and social being who constructs their own knowledge and understanding collaboratively (Lyndon et al., 2019). As an integral part of participatory pedagogy, "listening to children" or "children's voices" has been more recognised in the literature with rights-based research and focusing on children's participation (Lyndon et al., 2019). Although there is no consensus on the definition of these terms, it has been widely accepted in recent years that children's voices accept pluralism in children's perspectives and that attention has been paid not only to hearing but also to children's feelings, wishes, beliefs and preferences, by acknowledging children as active and valuable contributors to decision-making processes that affect their lives (Brooks & Murray, 2018; Murray, 2019). The pedagogy of listening can be seen as a part of a way of relating in which listening is "adaptable", "participatory", "reflexive", "sensitive", and open to connections and changes (Rinaldi, 2005).

In early learning and childcare settings, pedagogical and curricular approaches can often be considered play-based (Rogers, 2022). In the literature, children can play and learn together (Broadhead, 2006) and play is used as a basis for pedagogy, an opportunity for discovery and exploration, thus supporting learning (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). The term "play" encompasses a range of ideas that "touch a strand of human experience beginning in childhood and, perhaps in different forms, continuing throughout life" (Wiltz & Fein, 2006, p.127). Although the concept, and its importance and place in children's lives, has been discussed and contested from a variety of perspectives (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2022), there is no widely shared, rigorous definition (Adams, 2005). Lester (2016) critiques the obsession with identifying and classifying play according to specific patterns and adults' obsession with trying to figure out "why we play, what it is and what it all means" (Lester et al., 2019, p.20). Therefore, the following perspectives on play offer an overview rather than a definition of play.

In the literature, play has been seen as an opportunity to "burn off energy"; "recreation" or as a reward after finishing work, and "rehearsal" or as preparation for future adult life (Bruce, 2018; Wood, 2007). Affective theories of play have focused on children's emotional and

internal worlds and the self-healing possibilities of play. In connection with these theories, the importance of play has been greatly emphasised in the literature as enhancing children's self-efficacy, confidence, self-esteem and feelings of wellbeing (Wright, 2018). In times of crisis and uncertainty, play has been stated to help children cope with challenging situations and prepare for potentially stressful events (Rogers, 2022). Play offers a safe space for expressing emotions, fears and anxiety (Graber et al., 2020; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021) and provides stability, normalcy and enjoyment in children's lives (Chatterjee, 2017). In addition, play allows children to transform their crisis into a form that they can understand and make sense of (Neale, 2020) by helping children reintegrate into their environments (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2022) and supporting their self-regulation and adaptive capacities (Fearn & Howard, 2012).

Within child-centred pedagogies, the concept of "free play" and its value is well embedded (Wood, 2014). The widely cited Garvey (1977, p.10) and Bruce (1991, pp.59-60; 2015, 2018) conceptualisations of play are "spontaneous and voluntary… freely chosen", "active engagement" and "intrinsically motivated" without "external pressure to conform to rules, pressures, goals, tasks". The studies explore children's views on their own play (King & Howard, 2016) and recognise its importance for children's own rights (Bonsdorff, 2018), revealing that children emphasise play as their free choices rather than adults'; their freedom without adults' expectations and instructions (Wood, 2014); and their decisions on uses of the space, time and materials (Wiltz & Fein, 2006).

From an alternative view of play, it is understood as a form of "political activity" (Rosen, 2017) and "negotiated terrain" (Ryan, 2005, p.112), where a variety of interactions and ongoing negotiations are constructed (Bonsdorff, 2018). For Lester (2011), playing is "children's way of participating in their everyday environments to appropriate moments of time/space for being different from the demands of the adult designed world" (p.1). For Rosen (2017), play is a way that people position themselves and others and thus form social relations. Following these alternative views, play cannot be seen as something provided by adults, but the conditions adults construct influence children's experiences. Therefore, play is a highly political space where engaging with discourses and actions is possible, and children and adults engage in messy and joyful political practices (Rosen, 2018).

As exemplified in this section, pedagogy and play have strong relevance in practice in early learning and childcare settings. The discussion continues by exploring the concepts of "learning" and "care" in the following section.

2.3.2 Debates on "early learning" and "childcare"

After reviewing the literature on certain pedagogies and the term of play in the context of ELC, this section thoroughly explores the "learning" and "care" aspects. A conceptual and practical division between the care and education aspects of the early childhood field has historical roots and is still present in policy and provision (Cohen et al., 2021; Cooper, 2020; Kaga et al., 2010; Moss, 2020; Peeters et al., 2015; Van Laere et al., 2014). This split system has been debated (Kaga et al., 2010). For Moss (2020), the division militates against an "integrated, coordinated and holistic approach" as well as young children's right to early childhood education (p.124). Moreover, the split is argued to cause the following problem (Kaga et al., 2010) that while younger children primarily need only care, strong educational focuses can be seen in services for children of 3 to 6 years. Also, differences between services in welfare and education are stated in the literature regarding funding, workforce, access and regulation, leading to inequalities and discontinuities between the two services (Kaga et al., 2010).

One consequence of the separation is the "lower" positioning of care relative to education. Langford and Richardson (2020) argue that the widespread belief that "care work carried out in ECE programs comes "naturally" to women legitimises its subordination and glosses over the inherent complex, messy, contextual, and emotional nature of working with young children" (p.33). So, early childhood educators' work historically has been taken for granted; badly paid; lacking any formal qualifications, and rendered invisible amid market mechanisms that publicly deny the value of their work (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Fairchild, 2021; Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021; Langford & Richardson, 2020; Moss, 2020; Osgood, 2021; Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008; Van Laere et al., 2014).

The shift from a context of care to education has been argued in the field in recent decades, under the influence of neuroscience and the consideration of early years as the best preparation for later academic success as well as for a thriving labour market (Ailwood, 2017; 2020; Peeters et al., 2015; Van Laere et al., 2014). The consensus in academic research and policy that

stresses the importance of early childhood education to tackle educational inequalities has also framed it as a site for intervention and the possible solution for the issues (Vandenbroeck et al., 2010). Similarly, these views stress the importance of early years experiences as a strong foundation for increasing the chance of a "healthy happy" child and decreasing the chances of later difficulties (Deacon, 2011), as well as implying that the early experiences are the path to the whole person or adulthood (Alderson, 2008). Within this, developmental perspectives can be argued as one of the oldest, enduring and influential in early childhood policy and education (Woodhead, 2006). It resonates with programs aimed at intervening in socio-economically disadvantaged situations and other adversities and preventing negative consequences on children's future (Woodhead, 2006).

For some scholars, the shift from a context of care to education may lead to "schoolification", in which more cognitive and language competencies have been emphasised in the early years (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Van Laere et al., 2014). The driving force for greater efficiency and accountability has transformed teaching into "performing" through assessment and measuring performances. Similarly, the dominant discourse on standardisation in early childhood education has been shown to result in "testing" and "shaping" children all over the world (McNair et al., 2021). It has been stated that the testing of young children has been encouraged by governments to ensure that children acquire the accepted knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to become successful learners (McNair et al., 2021). For instance, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has recently planned to introduce the International Early Learning Study (IELS), a comparative test on five-year-olds' cognitive, social and emotional skills. Auld and Morris (2019) comment on this advent as it could stress the paradigm of "cognitive skills" and "children's role as future sources of human capital" in the early childhood sector (p.11). Moss (2020) critiques this standardised measure due to the possible adverse implication of the IELS for diversity in early childhood education as such "measures come to be adopted as national norms by countries wanting to improve their position in league tables" (p.129).

However, while the importance of learning in the early years is easily articulated as above, care is often marginalised (Ailwood, 2017; 2020). Care is often understood as "a package of practical activities applied to dependent others, children or adults" (Moss, 2020, p.124), and the social, affective and physical existence of children tends to be neglected (Van Laere et al., 2014). Due to the lack of great depth or robust discussion of care (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005),

the need for critical discussions has been emphasised without slipping into the assumptions such as the following (Ailwood, 2020). Care has often been assumed as "inherently good" in ECEC and to be simply part of what "naturally" and "straightforwardly" occurs among children and early childhood educators (Ailwood, 2017; 2020; Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021). For Ailwood (2017), the word "care", a problematic nostalgic connotation about home life where care, maternalism and mothering are idealised, goes along with the language of early years associated with providing a safe place for children to be supervised and their needs met. Accordingly, the idea that care is "natural" to women has undermined care work's social and economic value (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

Alternatively, care is understood as relating to others (Ailwood, 2017; 2020; Van Laere et al., 2014). From an ethics of care perspective, it is "a set of valuable processes within the complex power relations, rather than a means to an end in which the caregiver exercises power over the care receiver" (Langford & Richardson, 2020, p.43). In these understandings, care is relational, messy, situated and contextual (Ailwood, 2020), and it encompasses an "emotional, societal and political dimension" (Van Laere et al., 2014, p.235).

Furthermore, for Hamington (2015), care consists of "a series of actions, some large and explicit actions and some small and subtle actions, that inform the quality of a relationship, thus making it caring" (p.281). For Langford and Richardson (2020), care is viewed as "a normal aspect of the human condition, necessary for human flourishing and wellbeing", thus ethical care practices are central in the work of early childhood settings (p.34) and significant components of children's everyday lives (Ailwood & Lee, 2020; McCormick, 2018). Following this view, Langford and Richardson (2020) assert that when the power relations are acknowledged within the context of care relationships, children are placed in "a greater position of competency", and they can become "active participants in their own care" (p.34).

Finally, some scholars question the traditional divisions between care and education (Moss, 2020; Lee, 2020). Lee (2020) argues that they are two inseparable aspects of early years, and without the care work, there would be no education and learning in early years. Moss (2020) argues that integrated early childhood services should be "based on 'education', with care retaining an important role but understood as a relational ethic" (p.123). Cameron and Moss (2020, p.xvi) summarise the need for integrated services for children and families and further advise the transformation towards:

> a revalued early childhood workforce that is trusted and supported, a pedagogy of listening that values all learning, accountability that is participatory and meaningful – and with the whole system of early childhood education inscribed with an ethic of care and the values of equality, democracy and solidarity.

As Cameron and Moss (2020) discuss above, it is becoming more important to reevaluate and revalue the work carried out in early learning and childcare settings. The following section discusses the tensions between children's best interests, protection and participation.

2.3.3 Tensions between best interests, protection and participation

The concepts of "best interest", "protection", and "participation" cannot be thought separate from the discussions and debates about children's rights. The 1989 UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been described as revolutionary because the importance of children's autonomy and views were recognised, different from earlier declarations on children's rights (Kjørholt, 2008). Thus, it has significantly impacted the social construction of children and childhoods, in which children are portrayed as separate human beings with individual feelings, needs and wishes (Gal & Duramy, 2015). The UNCRC has offered "a complex mix of protective, social and liberal rights to children" (Gal & Duramy, 2015, p.1), which had an impact on the conceptualisations and practices of the concepts of protection and participation (Collins et al., 2021).

A range of rights in the UNCRC are encapsulated as "participation rights" (Gal & Duramy, 2015; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022), and the use of the term participation is explained by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child as follows:

> This term has evolved and is now widely used to describe ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes.
>
> UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009, p.3

Similarly, Gal and Duramy (2015) suggest that if children are human beings whose individual feelings, perspectives and views are worthy of consideration, they must have the right to express them freely and be taken seriously. Further, this also stresses the importance of constructive exchange between children and adults and the need for children to receive feedback on how their views are considered (Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

The right of children to participate in decision-making processes points out the change "in the perception of children from objects of protection to subjects of their own rights" (Gal & Duramy, 2015, p.2). Similarly, McMellon and Tisdall (2020) argue that participation rights confront "traditional" views of children with alternative views of children, i.e. as social actors, competent and autonomous. Additionally, participation often promotes children's best interests, and it might have an empowering and therapeutic role for some children, especially in crisis contexts (Gal & Duramy, 2015). Moreover, Kjørholt (2008) argues that it has long-term significance for the community, nation and the world, as it promotes the development of values, skills and knowledge fundamental to a democracy.

However, the literature refers to consistent challenges to children's participation, both practically and conceptually (Gal & Duramy, 2015; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). These include being tokenistic, lacking sustainability, having limited impact on decision-making and concerns about the representativeness of children and young people (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Tisdall, 2015a; 2017; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). A further challenge in children's participation is discussed as adults unwilling to address power dynamics and share power with children (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Tisdall (2017) suggests that power relationships are inadequately addressed within the children and young people's participation; therefore, they are at risk of exclusion due to generational hierarchies in many societies.

The literature suggests that participant rights are necessary to realise other rights, such as children's rights to protection (Kjørholt, 2008). However, adults' concerns about children and young people's protection and best interests have often been in tension with children's participation rights (Gal & Duramy, 2015; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). Tisdall and Konstantoni (2023) argue that adults likely remain key decision-makers in determining the best interests of children and assessing children's evolving capacities. Thus,

adults' views can easily undermine children's participation rights and exclude them from being involved in decision-making (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

The concept of best interests is an elusive principle lacking a single authoritative definition (Vandenhole & Türkelli, 2020). For Vandenhole and Türkelli (2020), challenges around best interests are related to the "vagueness of the norm and the lack of an authoritative definition" (p.209), and they highlight the danger within the best interest principle as becoming paternalistic implementation and creating a space for manipulation by states, parents and professionals in determining the best interests of children. Similarly, the concept of child protection lacks a clear definition, and it is mainly discussed in the context of policies, rights-based perspectives and formal protection systems (Collins et al., 2021; Tisdall, 2017). Tisdall (2017) argues that adults conceptualise understandings around protection; thus, the focus moves to adult actions, prevention and protection rather than children and young people's participation in determining their own concerns and solutions.

While children's rights to protection from abuse, neglect and ill-treatment is an important principle at UNCRC (Woodhead, 2005), concerns about the vulnerability of children and young people appear to predominate in child protection responses (Tisdall, 2017). Thus, conceptualisations of protection continue to frame children as victims (Collins et al., 2021). In addition, in "best interests" and "protection" discourses children are often valued as "proto adults", and adults are seen as knowing the best interests of a child (Collins et al., 2021; James & James, 2008). The prevalence of these discourses results in the right to protection inadequately reflecting the impact of other rights and closing off opportunities for children and young people to participate (Collins et al., 2021; Tisdall, 2017). Similarly, strong emphasis on children's needs and protection may be harmful when it overshadows their agency and autonomy, thus acting in a child's best interests may require looking beyond special protection for children and recognising that children have valid insights, solutions and roles as agents in their own right (Vandenhole & Türkelli, 2020).

On the other hand, Bae (2009) warns against the possible danger of putting too much emphasis on children's views as competent, autonomous and consistent beings while underestimating children's dependent and vulnerable sides. For Bae, the problems with such a position, pointing to educational practices that foster individualistic ways of being, interpret children's participation primarily as self-determination and individual choice. Similarly, Kjørholt (2008)

highlights the critics of children's participation that the danger of placing "a heavy burden on children by giving them too much responsibility and exposing them to inadequate care and protection" (p.19).

Overall, it is essential to acknowledge that the rights to protection and participation are closely intertwined and that children's autonomy and dependency are mutually dependent and fluctuating (Kjørholt, 2008). In line with this, Woodhead (2005) proposes that the balance between respecting the competent child and recognising children's needs for guidance in realising their rights is crucial for the practical application of participatory principles. Thus, Woodhead (2005) suggests adults have responsibilities about "how best to respect and support young children's expressions of competence as rights bearing citizens", and that requires the recognition of interdependencies between children and adults (p.94).

Section summary

This section has examined three key debates in ELC, specified for this study, to illustrate how conceptualisations of children and childhoods have been operationalised or contested in the current state of ELC. It has started presenting the pedagogy and play embedded in the practices of early learning and childcare settings. It has suggested the importance of valuing interactions and relations in participatory pedagogy by "listening to children". Then some functions of play in crisis times have been argued. The discussion has continued with exploring the concepts of "early learning" and "childcare" and suggested the importance of relational thinking in ELC. Finally, the terms "participation", "protection", and "best interest" have been acknowledged as closely linked. This section has offered recognising children's competencies and the need for guidance to realise their rights. Children might be both vulnerable and competent at the same time. As adults or researchers, we are responsible for reflecting on how we end up positioning children one way or another (Spyrou, 2018). All sections have suggested the interdependencies between children and adults in early learning and childcare while recognising that children are "active participants" in their own lives.

2.4 Children, childhoods and ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic

After discussing the theories and conceptualisations of children and childhoods and how some of the conceptualisations are operationalised or contested in the current state of ELC, this section shifts the focus to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic by reviewing the growing literature.

With the declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020), measures such as social/physical distancing, restrictions of movements within and between countries and closure of educational settings began to be implemented globally. The lives of children have been directly and indirectly affected in different ways and to varying degrees through social isolation, quarantines and other restrictions as a part of transmission reduction strategies in order to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020; Gomes et al., 2021; Hoskins et al., 2023; Rose & Bimm, 2021). The COVID-19 crisis has severely transformed children's day-to-day lives (OECD, 2020; Save the Children, 2020) across the home (O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021), as well as formal care arrangements, such as ECEC settings, schools and other organisations that offer education and leisure services (OECD, 2020).

This section discusses the following: firstly, the concerns regarding the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children; secondly, on the contrary, some "hopeful" narratives that emerged during the pandemic; thirdly, the context of early learning and childcare settings, focusing on practices and pedagogies; and finally, the experiences of children and practitioners in early learning and childcare settings.

2.4.1 Concerns about children during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been recurring concerns about children and childhoods in the public domain and literature. Adults' concerns about children are nothing new and associated in the literature with the assumptions that children are entitled to a "good" childhood, as well as they are incompetent and vulnerable, thus in need of protection (Devine, 2000; Valentine, 2000) and children lack self-control, thus need to be regulated. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many studies and policies, e.g. the United Nations (UN) policy brief in

April 2020, stated that children were at risk of being among the biggest victims of the pandemic (United Nations, 2020b).

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and educational disparities by affecting more "vulnerable[8]" children the hardest and by reducing the opportunities for those living in rural and poor areas to continue their learning (Acevedo-Rincón & Flórez-Pabón, 2022; Ailwood & Lee, 2020; Levine et al., 2020; McNair et al., 2022; Nolan & Bueno de Mesquita, 2020; Srivastava & Srivastava, 2022; UNESCO, 2022; United Nations, 2020b). The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have not been felt equally. Many children were disproportionately adversely affected, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, living in poverty, immigrants or refugees, children from minority ethnic communities or children with disabilities (Blaisdell, n.d., Bouah & Sloth-Nielsen, 2021; Cameron & Moss, 2020; Cowie & Myers, 2020; Ghosh et al., 2020; Howes et al., 2020; Jalongo, 2021; Khoso & Noor, 2021; Kusumaningrum et al., 2021; Levine et al., 2020; Lundy et al., 2021; Pascal et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

Within the measures taken, ECEC/school closures were used worldwide as a mitigation tool to slow down transmissions and ranged from no closures to more than an entire school year in different countries (UNESCO, 2022). In the literature, the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic with the ECEC/school closures for children were multidimensional, with its impact on children's learning outcomes and academic achievement, health and nutrition, family financial status and interpersonal relationships, and children's wellbeing (Buheji et al., 2020; Pattnaik & Jalongo, 2021; Smith, 2021; UNESCO, 2020b). In the next part, some of them are discussed in detail.

2.4.1.1 Concern about the "learning loss"

The debates on the closures of ECEC/schools have often been linked to its detrimental effects on children's learning and motivation to learn (Kim & Asbury, 2020) by looking at data on previous pandemics or disaster situations, such as earthquakes or the Ebola pandemic (Andrabi et al., 2020; Conto et al., 2021) and previous incidents of school interruptions to estimate

[8] Even though the use of this concept is contested in the field of early childhood and education, it is widely used in both English and Scottish Government documents published during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"learning loss" due to "gaps" in children's learning during the COVID-19 outbreak (see Eyles et al., 2020; Harmey & Moss, 2021; Howard et al., 2021a; Maldonado & De Witte, 2022). There have also been studies and the UK Government reports revealed the actual learning losses (see Engzell et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2021b; Maldonado & De Witte, 2020; Rose et al., 2021a), and they evidenced the widening gap between affluent and disadvantaged students (Eyles et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2021a; Themelis & Tuck, 2022).

In line with the discussions about children's learning loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a tendency among policymakers and some researchers to work on reducing the impact of ECEC/school closures on children (Blaskó et al., 2022; Harmey & Moss, 2021) by suggesting an intense academic focus on children's learning. That mainly dominated the agendas of governments, including the UK and resulted in the over-emphasis on the need to "catch up" on lost school days fast by ignoring the broader social and disruptive issues in children's lives posed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Harmey & Moss, 2021; Holt & Murray, 2021; Maynard et al., 2022). Additionally, playful approaches to learning might have become more marginalised due to the intense focus on learning loss during this time (Rogers, 2022).

2.4.1.2 Concern about children's "safety"

Unexpected school closures have been associated not only with the disruption of children's and young people's academic progress, as discussed above, but also with other aspects of their lives, such as increased adverse experiences (Brooks et al., 2020; Goodwin-De Faria et al., 2021; Lewis et al., 2021; Viner et al., 2020). More specifically, the closure of school/ECEC resulted in interruption of access to social and protective services (Levine et al., 2020; Villegas et al., 2021), social isolation (Yu et al., 2021), increased incidences of domestic violence against children, and an increased number of children who could be considered as "vulnerable" both in the global context (Atiles et al., 2021; Chun & Kim, 2020; Million, 2021; Morrison & Houghton, 2022) and the UK context (Home Office, 2020; Khan & Mikuska, 2021; Levine et al., 2020).

On the one hand, the impacts of the closure of ECEC/schools are evidence that in many contexts, educational settings are proposed as not only a place for learning but also as safe spaces for children and as a source for access to services (Giannini et al., 2020; Haffejee et al.,

2023; Spiteri, 2021). It is stated that early childhood settings and programmes play an important role as a "protective factor" by often first recognising the needs of children and families or identifying potential harm to a child (Scottish Government, 2014; Woodhead, 2006). Similarly, they have appeared to have a critical role in countering the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, families and communities (Van Leare et al., 2021). It has been argued that children's right to food provision, safety, health, and protection has been compromised due to the closures of educational settings (Mallon & Martinez-Sainz, 2021).

On the other hand, the adverse experiences of children under the COVID-19 lockdowns have revealed the discourse that children are seen as in adult possession, where various forms of physical, emotional and psychological violence can be sanctioned at home and in nonhome settlements (Adami & Dineen, 2021). Adami and Dineen (2021) argue that "violence against children is allowed to become a 'silent pandemic' endured in the private" (p.357). Further, the literature reviewed under this part might argue that children were the most vulnerable group during the COVID-19 pandemic due to their dependency on adults and lack of access to spaces and resources, especially in disadvantaged communities during the ECEC/school closure (Kyriazis et al., 2020; Rogers, 2022). These studies tended to focus on the "vulnerability" of children in the crisis situation, emphasising how to protect and prepare them for potential future crises.

2.4.1.3 Concerns about children's wellbeing

There has been an expanding literature focusing on children's mental health and wellbeing[9] during the COVID-19 pandemic (Brown et al., 2020; Capurso et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2021; Fegert et al., 2020; Fenmachi & Edah, 2022; Ghosh et al., 2020; Imran et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021; Mochida et al., 2021; Spinelli et al., 2020; Spiteri, 2021; Veraksa et al., 2021a; Zhao et al., 2022). Negative physical and psychological effects of the COVID-19 crisis and related lockdowns on children and young people, such as anxiety, fear and stress, were well reported in these studies considering the fears, uncertainties, and substantial changes they experienced. It was reported that the closure of ECEC/schools,

[9] I recognise the complexity of the concept of wellbeing, with many different definitions and conceptualisation around it. This thesis uses the term "wellbeing" to refer to the social, emotional and mental wellbeing of children, in line with Realising the Ambition (Education Scotland, 2020) in both the literature review and findings chapters. Promoting and supporting children's wellbeing is strongly emphasised as the fundamental basis of the GIRFEC approach in the Scottish context.

restrictions with quarantine procedures associated with social isolation and loneliness, and changes in family practices were the primary sources of stress and anxiety for most children (Loades et al., 2020; Mochida et al., 2021).

In a systematic review by Jones et al. (2021), children's death anxiety, fear of their parents/carers catching the virus, and fear associated with the possibility of infecting others were also clearly stated. The large Co-SPACE study conducted in the UK (Shum et al., 2021) and the COVID-19 Early Years Resilience and Impact Survey (CEYRIS) in Scotland (Public Health Scotland, 2022) reported emotional, behavioural, and attentional difficulties in children and young people throughout the pandemic. They were highest when the restrictions were stricter.

These studies so far tend to research "on" children and portray children from a "passive" and a deficit view without concerning their views and experiences. It can be suggested that the ideas and images about children in the studies impact how data is collected and discussed. Therefore, they contribute to positioning children and young people as "victims" of this pandemic by ignoring how they can be active agents in dealing with the situation.

2.4.1.4 Concerns about children's rights

The COVID-19 pandemic was not only a global health crisis but also a children's rights issue because young children's views have been lacking in the discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic at both the policy and research levels (Spiteri, 2021). Children's views and perspectives tended to remain invisible in the UK government narratives (Russell & Stenning, 2020) and many other contexts. The experiences of children and young people and their participation in public health measures tended to be overlooked during the COVID-19 pandemic, as in previous public health crises (Anderson, 2005; Koller et al., 2023; Mutch, 2014; Rose & Bimm, 2021). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the emergency closures of educational settings driven by the need to protect human rights for life, survival and development have put other equally fundamental rights at risk (Colucci-Gray, 2022; Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021; Mallon & Martinez-Sainz, 2021). As children's rights are interconnected (Koller et al., 2023), children's right to play has been identified as curtailed and has become collateral damage while managing the threat to public health (Casey & McKendrick, 2022).

As the measures were taken with little or no consultation with children and young people (Campbell et al., 2021; Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021), Couper-Kenney and Riddell (2021) stated that Article 12 of the UNCRC, which assures the right of children to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, was difficult to ensure during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other research has reported that in many contexts, including Scotland, no attempt was made to listen to children, respect their views, or involve them in decision-making processes, even about the decisions that directly affected children's lives (McNair et al., 2022). Children's views were not sought when planning and implementing key policy responses to the pandemic, and concerns such as protecting public health outweighed children's best interests (Lundy et al., 2021).

The Scottish Government has adopted variations of the slogan "Making Children's Rights Real" in Scotland over two decades. It has also taken steps to consider children's rights during the COVID-19 pandemic, including publishing children's rights and wellbeing assessments on the key COVID-19 policies (Tisdall & Morrison, 2022). An independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) was undertaken to analyse the impacts of COVID-19 policies on children's human rights in Scotland by the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland (Adamson, 2021). Many important concerns regarding children's human rights have been highlighted by the independent CRIA, including:

- The restrictions have raised significant concerns for children's physical and mental health.
- Inequalities in learning were likely to have widened and certain children faced risks of being more disadvantaged.
- There was inadequate information for children and young people and inadequate involvement of them in decision-making processes.

This demonstrates that the ambition of the Scottish Government to put children at the heart of planning was not considered efficiently during the COVID-19 crisis (McNair et al., 2022).

Discussion and gaps

The large number of studies presented in this section have focused on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's learning, safety, mental health, and wellbeing. Attention has been given to "recovering" the "learning lost" with "catch up" narratives, especially during the lockdowns (Egan et al., 2021; Rogers, 2022). These reflect the concerns of adults and society about children and childhoods during the crisis time by researching on them. These studies reflect the positioning of children as passive "victims" of the pandemic and as a "vulnerable" part of society by ignoring their views and experiences.

The reviewed literature in this section has shown that children were positioned in a complex and oppositional way during the COVID-19 pandemic and that sometimes the narratives of "protecting" children and ensuring their "best interests" were taken over. The reviewed literature clearly showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has played a catalytic role in the erosion or ignoring of other fundamental rights of children, such as play and participation, and it became apparent that children's rights can be easily sidelined (McNair et al., 2022; Themelis & Tuck, 2022), especially in "the pursuit of the wider public interest" (Lundy et al., 2021, p.282) both in the global and Scottish context.

The narratives with adult-centric views towards children resulted in prioritising children's health, development and survival, while other rights, such as education and play, have been found to play a secondary role (Lundy et al., 2021; McNair et al., 2022; Peleg et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022). These were in line with the narratives that emerged in the early stage of the pandemic concerning children, such as "learning loss", "safety", and "wellbeing" discussed in this section. I argue that both the narrative of prioritising children's health, development and survival and the narrative of concerns were interrelated and fed off each other.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, far greater than those discussed above, have spread to all aspects of children's daily lives. However, little attention has been paid to children's experiences and perspectives, especially at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, more focus has been placed on the concerns narratives as presented in this section. So, an urgent need for social researchers has been stated to make children's experiences and views relationally visible from different perspectives (Cortes-Morales et al., 2021). Before exploring the studies focusing on ELC settings practices and the experiences of children and practitioners

in ELC settings, I present some hopeful narratives unfolding at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.4.2 The COVID-19 pandemic experiences: "hopeful" narratives

In a very different depiction from the previous section, the literature has shown the new possibilities for solidarity within the community and interactions within families during the pandemic (Freeman et al., 2021; Stoecklin et al., 2021), and these can be considered moments of hope in a crisis situation. The study of Egan et al. (2021) reported positive impacts of lockdown periods on children's socio-emotional development as children had increasing opportunities to play with their siblings and play alone (see the studies focusing on older children, Gray, 2021; Larsen et al., 2021; Twenge et al., 2020; Widnall et al., 2020). In Balenzano et al.'s study (2020), families reported rediscovering the values of being together in their house and spending more time with their children during the lockdown. Similarly, it has been argued that "children suddenly went from a condition of little autonomy… to a condition of lots of free time" (Gray, 2021, p.48) in the absence of institution-based and other adult-directed activities (Romero, 2021). These studies have revealed a different narrative than the previous section suggested. For Rogers (2022), the adaptability and autonomy of children in their relationships can counterbalance the common discourse of "learning lost" due to the closures of ECEC/schools and exemplifies the potential gains from this time.

At a community level, some initiatives have been taken worldwide when the nationwide lockdowns were applied. For instance, children displayed drawings of rainbows on windows with hopeful slogans in many countries (Mukherjee, 2021), such as thank you notes for the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK (Doherty, 2020; Freshwater, 2020). These narratives created by children have also attracted significant attention from the media and portrayed signs of "positivity", "hope", and "solidarity" within communities. This has shown that children found ways to take purposeful action in response to the COVID-19 crisis (Beier, 2020). Another example was the "teddy bear hunts", in which children displayed teddy bears on their front window, which allowed others to hunt bears during daily walks (Mukherjee, 2021). This became quite popular in New Zealand and quickly spread to many other countries, including the UK. This public form of play was interpreted as a response to the negative consequences

of social/physical distancing and self-isolation (Heljakka, 2021). Furthermore, it has been interpreted as a vehicle for children's participation and lived citizenship (Mukherjee, 2021).

Following these public initiatives, the importance of play was gaining visibility in COVID-19 narratives in contributing to children's development, early learning, health, and wellbeing and ensuring children's right to play was argued in the literature (Russell & Stenning, 2020). Children were reported as having very limited access to leisure activities, play and playgrounds worldwide, less social contact with their friends and longer screen time, especially during the lockdowns and ECEC/school closures (Atiles et al., 2021; Bao et al., 2020; Graber et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Veraksa et al., 2021a). Some forms of initiatives were taken at a policy level to advocate play through the COVID-19 pandemic, such as Play Scotland (2020); Let's Play Ireland (DCYA, 2020); Play Wales and Play Australia (2020) (see Casey & McKendrick, 2022). Efforts were made to promote the value of play by sharing play ideas for children and families during the lockdowns and pandemic.

Having illustrated both concerning and hopeful narratives in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I explore early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic in the next section.

2.4.3 Early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the COVID-19 pandemic has pointed to multifaceted and complex crises with serious consequences in educational settings (Grosvenor & Priem, 2022). This chapter now focuses on ELC in line with the focus of this research. In this section, I discuss the studies focusing on the shifts in the pedagogies and practices of ELC settings in different contexts to present the rationales behind the measures taken and to further link with how children were positioned in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Then, I focus on studies investigating the connections between home and ELC settings, particularly during the lockdowns, and the critical roles of practitioners and ELC settings.

2.4.3.1 Changing practices and pedagogies in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

The reviewed literature showed that ELC settings had to dramatically change their ways of operating all over the world, dealing with new tasks such as disinfection of the environment and recourses, new ways of interacting with parents/carers, and new ways of providing remote learning activities over the COVID-19 pandemic (Bigras et al., 2021). Children's activities in settings and their interactions with indoor and outdoor play activities also shifted to many new forms due to the COVID-19 regulations, such as physical distancing and health and hygiene measures (Gomes et al., 2021). Socio-political factors, including government policies and public health measures, the spreading of the COVID-19 virus and the strategies adopted to manage it over time, have impacted ELC provisions (Park et al., 2021). In some contexts, little changes were implemented; in others, stricter measures were introduced that significantly impacted life in ELC settings. Overall, children experienced disruptions in predictable routines and familiar practices of their ELC experiences (Cortes Morales et al., 2021; Romero, 2021; Zecca, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fact that a large part of the population with young children has an increased reliance on ELC services. The reviewed literature showed that the decisions behind keeping settings open or closed during the COVID-19 pandemic differed depending on the value and meanings attached to ELC in different countries. The political decisions to keep the ELC settings and schools open evoked critical debates in different contexts (Lee, 2020). For instance, Pramling-Samuelsson et al. (2020) argued that the rights-based position of early education[10] in Sweden and Norway created an obligation to keep preschools open to the greatest extent possible, while in the US, without such an obligation, the main discussions for ECEC/school openings were around allowing parents to return to work to restart the ravaged economy. Similarly, in Australia, the ECEC sector was seen as "essential" to the economy; therefore, it was required to remain open while paying close attention to safety and cleaning measures (Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021).

[10] It is explained in the paper of Pramling-Samuelsson et al. (2020) as children and parents' right to early childhood education and care, from infancy to school entry age.

In addition to the value and meanings attached to ELC services, the measures and practices implemented in settings showed some similarities globally. For example, for various contexts, but not limited to these, the following measures were noted from the literature reviewed:

- restrictions on the use of materials and reduced space and play equipment's availability in Croatia, Canada and Denmark (Lafave et al., 2021; Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021; Wistoft et al., 2021)
- strict infection controls and strict measures such as checking the body temperature of staff and children upon arrival in Hungary, China and Japan (Park et al., 2021; Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021), as well as strict cleaning measures
- using face masks for children and educators in Hungary, Türkiye and Thailand (Park et al., 2021; Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021)
- creating small groups for physical distancing purposes in Spain and Iceland (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; 2022; Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021)
- staggered returning to the settings starting (limited days of attendance to the centres) in Türkiye and the Republic of Korea with physical distancing (Park et al., 2021; Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021)

Overall, the authors who reported the practices and policies from different contexts above argued that the "best interests of all children" should have been a priority for countries' policies to overcome the crisis (Visnjic-Jevtic et al., 2021). However, the views, perspectives and experiences of children, or the importance of this, were not part of these discussions.

As a result of the measures implemented in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic, some positive changes have been reported. Firstly, less cleaning requirements and easier physical distancing resulted in practitioners being outside more often (Lafave et al., 2021). Many countries have experienced varied changes in outdoor play opportunities due to the pandemic. Outdoor play and learning have certainly become more prominent and approached more positively (e.g. Norway, Australia, Ireland, Sweden, and Denmark) (Abbott & Flynn, 2022; Engdahl & Pramling Samuelsson, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Lafave et al., 2021; Wistoft et al., 2021).

Secondly, reductions in the number of children each setting could accommodate, and there being fewer children resulted in better interactions with individual children and more discussion about the impact of these changes on the pedagogical work of settings (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2020; 2022; Lafave et al., 2021). The changes in the surroundings were stated as giving rise to self-transformation of pedagogical practices with the help of resources available in the institutions and professional competence within the staff team (Marschall et al., 2022).

The studies reviewed in this part all have demonstrated certain changes and shifts in the practices and pedagogies of ELC as a result of responding to the COVID-19 crisis. These circumstances have some degree of detrimental impact on children's experiences by limiting the opportunities for interactions, exploration, play, learning and meaning-making. On the other hand, the literature indicates the "discoveries" on how early years settings and everyday life reorganised, re-established and re-interacted under the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions.

2.4.3.2 Keeping online communication and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

In many countries, ELC settings remained closed for several months during the lockdowns (Gomes et al., 2021). So, it became necessary to make alterations to keep communication and teaching-learning practices with children. Thus, face-to-face education was replaced by remote learning and teaching practices (Gomes et al., 2021; Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021). Many countries have reported the inclusion of various remote or online learning alternatives such as online platforms, television, radio and home packages (Novick et al., 2021; UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank, 2020) to recover "learning lost" and mitigate the short and long-term impacts of ECEC/school closures (Conto et al., 2021; Otero-Mayer et al., 2021).

The studies revealed that online platforms were used to interact with children by encouraging their active participation and engagement via inviting children to the online sessions (Kim, 2020; Szente, 2020) and creating online learning platforms where practitioners could upload videos, songs, stories and learning activities and share them with parents and children (Hu et al., 2021). These efforts to connect the home and ELC spaces helped keep connections with children and parents/carers and provided space for children to connect with their peers (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; May & Coulston, 2021; Merfeldaite et al., 2021; Veraksa et al., 2021b). These

benefits have also been highlighted as a protective factor against the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children by creating a caring, stimulating and safe environment (Tan et al., 2021) and by supporting children's wellbeing and learning (Fenmachi & Edah, 2022; Luo et al., 2021).

Many research studies reported the implications and related challenges of the shifts in early years education from face-to-face to online platforms for practitioners (Alan, 2021; Aslan et al., 2022; Atiles et al., 2021; Camović, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2021; Kruszewska et al., 2020; Merfeldaite et al., 2021; Novick et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023; Timmons et al., 2021; Zecca, 2021) and children themselves (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Kruszewska et al., 2020; Spadafora et al., 2023; Veraksa et al., 2021b).

Firstly, the studies revealed practitioners' comments on the challenges of online learning, particularly for young children. Practitioners were found to associate challenges with the nature of ELC that required close contact and hands-on activities with children (Gomes et al., 2021). Further, challenges were linked to the developmental realities of young children (Chalari & Charonitis, 2022), such as their limited attention span (Kruszewska et al., 2020; Novick et al., 2021) and finding appropriate tools to meet the children's developmental needs (Fenmachi & Edah, 2022).

Secondly, the benefits of distance learning were highly dependent on the child's home environment, the resources available to them and parental support and engagement (Hu et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023). Young children were argued to depend highly on their parents/carers to access the learning materials, understand the instructions, and navigate the technology (Spadafora et al., 2023; Timmons et al., 2021). It is important to note here that the shift to home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities both in accessing educational provisions and the ways in which quality education was understood (Barnett et al., 2021; Colucci-Gray, 2022; Timmons et al., 2021).

Thirdly, facilitating children's learning by taking children's individual differences and interests into account through online platforms was challenging for educators (Gomes et al., 2021). Adapting the learning activities for children and families that could be done at home and keeping play-based inquiry practices that met curriculum expectations within distance learning and teaching were reported as other challenges (Spadafora et al., 2023; Timmons et al., 2021).

The play-based pedagogical approaches were found to be challenging to translate online (Rogers, 2022), and some practitioners reported their online teaching as lacking hands-on, playful learning opportunities, thus inconsistent with their values and pedagogies (Hu et al., 2021).

Based on both children's and practitioners' experiences, the above studies investigating online learning/teaching used during the COVID-19 pandemic tended to address developmental discourses. These include, in particular, that children are "naturally" incompetent and incapable due to their young age and developmental stage and their dependency on an adult to be able to use communication tools. The nature of early learning and childcare that requires close contact with children was also mentioned as another drawback for this period.

Besides the challenges of online communication and teaching/learning, the importance of keeping a connection between home and ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic has been highlighted in the studies reviewed. A greater extent of collaboration between educators and families was required, especially in the time of ELC/school closures (Negrette et al., 2022; Otero-Mayer et al., 2021) to ensure the interactions between children, educators and parents/carers (Alan, 2021). It was suggested that ELC settings began to enter the home life (Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021; May & Coulston, 2021; Zecca, 2021) and the boundaries between settings and home intertwined (Stoiljković, 2020). Million (2021) argued that children's space for learning and leisure were concentrated within households, so defined times and spatial boundaries of education and leisure, which were largely controlled and designed by ELC settings, such as schools or playgrounds before, blurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion and gaps

The studies in this section have shown many changes in the practices and pedagogies of ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many similarities were found when the measures taken and the limitations imposed in ELC settings were examined in different country contexts. This could indicate similar responses to the COVID-19 pandemic globally in the context of early learning and childcare. These studies have reported changes and some consequences for children and practitioners without a deep analysis of how these changes (policies) were implemented, activated or disregarded in the context of early learning and childcare.

Some changes were reported to be devastating to children's experiences, while others were said to lead to unexpected opportunities, for example, using outside spaces more often and valuing relationships and interactions. The studies focusing on the experiences of practitioners and children around online learning/teaching or online communication during the lockdowns have exposed some insights about children and early learning and childcare. Children were considered predominantly with a focus on their developmental stage, for example, very young, incompetent and dependent on adults to use tools. Close contact with children, hands-on activities and play-based pedagogies were highlighted as necessary for early learning and childcare.

On the one hand, decisions to close and reopen ELC settings in various country contexts pointed to the role of early learning and childcare services as part of the economy and a crucial place to get parents/carers back to work during the crisis, beyond thinking about children's wellbeing, "best interests" or children's right to education. On the other hand, the role of ELC settings in reconnecting homes and settings or children, parents/caregivers and practitioners during lockdowns has emerged as protective and supportive. Overall, the literature has indicated everyday life in ELC settings has been reorganised and re-established during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this thesis, I argue that looking at the changes and shifts in detail and questioning how they were implemented help explore both the constructions of children and childhoods and early learning and childcare.

2.4.4 The COVID-19 pandemic experiences in ELC settings

After presenting some of the changes (e.g. practices, pedagogies and communication) in ELC settings, this section discusses the studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in the global context of ELC settings, focusing first on the experiences of children and second on the experiences of early years practitioners.

2.4.4.1 Children's experiences in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

The reviewed literature, which focused on children's views and experiences in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic, has suggested that the studies often explored children's views

and experiences *through their parents' perspectives* via online surveys, questionnaires, and documents (Barnett et al., 2021; Cohen & Bamberger, 2021; Egan et al., 2021; Mantovani et al., 2021; Mochida et al., 2021; Novick et al., 2021; Tan et al., 2021). Some research focused on the media reports and other studies' findings to explore children's experiences (Holt & Murray, 2021; Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021; Mukherjee, 2020).

There have been studies focusing on children's views and experiences in the context of ELC settings, in consideration of the changes in pedagogy and practices and their impacts on children's lives and experiences, predominantly from the *practitioners' perspectives* via surveys, questionnaires and interviews (Hu et al., 2021; Lafave et al., 2021; May & Coulston, 2021; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021; Quinones et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2022; Stoiljkovic, 2020; Timmons et al., 2021; Veraksa et al., 2021a, 2021b; Wistoft et al., 2021; Zecca, 2021). Besides this literature, there have been studies exploring children's experiences through the following ways: (1) practitioners' documentations (Di Giandomenico & Picchio, 2022; Engdahl & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2022; Kahuroa et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021); (2) analysing children's narratives and documentations (Nikiforidou & Doni, 2022; Pascal & Bertram 2021); (3) ethnography (Romero, 2021); (4) a questionnaire with children (Toniolo et al., 2021); and an online survey for children (Cowan et al., 2021; Toniolo et al., 2021).

The studies focusing on children's narratives, experiences and voices have tended to conceptualise children as "competent" and "agents", suggesting children make sense of the reasons for the COVID-19 measures and are well aware of public announcements on this subject. Therefore, in the literature reviewed in this part, children are more commonly recognised as active, competent humans who can make connections between their own lives and the wider world (Richardson et al., 2021) and global citizens both now and in the future (Engdahl & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2022).

Kahuroa et al.'s (2021) study aimed to explore four-year-old children's sense-making experiences around COVID-19 through teachers' documentation of children's discussions and artwork and storytelling methods to work with children in the New Zealand context. The study revealed that children's understanding of COVID-19 has evolved, and the complexity of their thinking has deepened over time. Children seemed to create a sense of personal control over their experiences by making sense of the virus's actions and identifying the measures to keep themselves and the community safe. In this study, ECEC settings are seen as places where

children can communicate their feelings, experiences and ideas, and teachers as providing opportunities to create supportive environments and to learn from each other (Kahuroa et al., 2021). Similarly, Di Giandomenico and Picchio's (2022) study, which explored preschool children's experiences when they returned to centres after the first lockdown in Italy, specifically focusing on their transition experiences, showed children's capacity to adapt to the new organisation of their ECEC services and the measures introduced by the COVID-19 safety protocols, and their active role in complying with the changes.

Toniolo et al.'s (2021) study of 960 children (aged 3-11) living in Portugal explored children's knowledge and perception of COVID-19 through a questionnaire, including open-ended questions for children between March-April 2020. Key findings from the study included the children's ability to identify the disease, assess the related risks and state the frequent measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Most children were reported as having fears for the consequences of COVID-19, particularly the death of themselves or family members. That fear was interpreted as the children's adaptation to more preventive behaviours. The researchers tended to perceive these age groups of children as subject to greater parental control over the consumption of information from social media or television. Therefore, children's fear mainly was seen because of parents'/carers' negative perception of COVID-19, through adults' fear being passed on to children.

Nikiforidou and Doni's (2022) research explored how 4 to 6-year-olds express their feelings and meanings around COVID-19 through children's drawings and narrations. When children's drawings of coronavirus were analysed, they were found to be very similar to the familiar images in media (such as a ball or a green monster with a crown). So, the researchers have argued that the socially constructed image of coronavirus was perceived and represented by children and "lending children in being and becoming meaning-makers of this novice reality" (p.10). Children were also found to be able to identify, form, and share both interrupted and extra activities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic and their views and feelings about them. Overall, this study highlighted the importance of recognising children as rights holders to participation and engagement by recognising their meanings, representations, and feelings more, especially in challenging times.

Some studies have shown children's capabilities to express their views, feelings, and knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic when given the opportunity. In the study conducted

by Wistoft et al. (2021) in a Danish kindergarten, most children were not afraid of the virus in general, but some children were afraid of touching things in nursery settings due to fear and insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The study conducted by Pascal and Bertram (2021) explored children's COVID-19 experiences through the narrative and documentation collected by practitioners in England, Scotland, and New Zealand nursery settings. The findings suggested children had a good knowledge and understanding of the virus, the risks associated with it and the measures to reduce risks, as well as having a strong desire to regain routines and daily lives such as spending time with their friends, being outside and having extended time to play. Children's desire to reconnect with their peers and their nursery settings after the period their settings stayed closed was emphasised in other studies as well (Egan et al., 2021; Fenmachi & Edah, 2022; Timmons et al., 2021). Another study from Sweden aimed to listen to children aged 3-6 years, to better understand their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic through interviews prompted by an image of the coronavirus, which was a common representation in media (Engdahl & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2022). It was found that preschool children collectively shared both their knowledge related to the ongoing discussion in society about the pandemic and their own ideas and the effects on their lives.

2.4.4.2 Practitioners' experiences in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

An emerging field of research discusses not only children's experiences but also the experiences of those working with them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examining and discussing them is important for a more complete picture and for the constructions of childhoods in ELC settings.

During a time of crisis, the importance of the wellbeing of early childhood educators was particularly recognised by researchers because of its direct association with young children's experiences, learning outcomes and responsive interactions with their educators (Bigras et al., 2021; Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Eadie et al., 2021; Hudson & Huston, 2021; Logan et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023; Swigonski et al., 2021). The studies argued the stressors for the wellbeing of educators as physical risk of transmission (Hudson & Huston, 2021); heightened anxiety and fear; financial stress such as threats of job losses and financial insecurity (Dayal & Tiko, 2020; Swigonski et al., 2021); feelings of being unprotected and undervalued (Logan et

al., 20211) and difficulties in balancing work and home life (Bigras et al., 2021; Spadafora et al., 2023).

Global studies have shown that educators underwent dramatic changes in working conditions. They were required to conduct new forms of teaching with young children (Camović, 2022; Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Ebrahim et al., 2021; Quinones et al., 2021; Veraksa et al., 2021b) and to master new forms of connecting and communicating with children and families (Atiles et al., 2021; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; Quinones et al., 2021; Zecca, 2021). The literature has revealed practitioners' concerns regarding working in early childcare settings, especially at the beginning of the pandemic and applying the measures such as distancing rules and cleaning regimes to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bigras et al., 2021; Engdahl & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2022; Spadafora et al., 2023).

The findings of the study by Quinones et al. (2021) suggested that the work conditions of early years educators were highly challenging during COVID-19, accompanied by high emotional intensity due to an overload of information and increased responsibility over children's and children's families' wellbeing and health, as well as their own. Similarly, the studies of Atiles et al. (2021) and Crawford et al. (2021) showed the commitment and concerns of educators for the children's and families' wellbeing. That exemplified the significant role of staff in supporting the children and families during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Khan & Mikuska, 2021; Moss et al., 2020). The demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as constant communications with parents/carers and other educators, and the protocols and measures to keep children and staff safe, significantly increased the workload of staff (Crawford et al., 2021; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; Gomes et al., 2021; Kruszewska's et al., 2020; Quinones et al., 2021).

In some studies, practitioners mentioned that they received positive feedback and recognition from families when children returned to the settings, so their self-acknowledgement and professional identity were positively impacted (Di Giandomenico & Picchio, 2022; Quinones et al., 2021; Wistoft et al., 2021). On the contrary, it has been found that the public's perception of educators' work was not given enough importance and was not sufficiently recognised (Quinones et al., 2021). In the study of Logan et al. (2021), educators from Australia shared their widespread disappointment due to a lack of appreciation for their work while being recognised as "essential services". The study of Dýrfjörð and Hreiðrasdóttir (2020) with

preschool staff in Iceland has revealed their criticism that there was little discussion about staff wellbeing and infection risk and local authorities lack knowledge and understanding of staff work when making decisions. The study from Greece argued that early childhood education was given the lowest priority in treatment and continuing education compared to other grades (Chalari & Charonitis, 2022).

Other studies have presented a positive picture regarding collaboration among the staff of early years teams during the COVID-19 pandemic. The studies from a variety of contexts (Italy, Australia, Serbia, Norway, Singapore, India and Bangladesh) reported great collaboration and supportive relations among practitioners and positive, increased and more focused communications with the management team during the challenging time (Logan et al., 2021; Quinones et al., 2021; Zecca, 2021) to overcome the challenges in practice and create ways to support children's development and learning (Stoiljković, 2020).

The literature reviewed above demonstrated the ambiguous narratives towards the experiences of practitioners and their work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion appeared from the literature that, on the one hand, the government policies and responses reflected children's and families' rights to access education and care. On the other hand, this could be against the educators' right to protect themselves from the possibility of exposure to the virus (Engdahl & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2022; Pramling-Samuelsson et al., 2020). The practitioners' experiences discussed in this section have supported these ambiguities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Discussion and gaps

This section has looked at the studies focusing on the experiences of children and practitioners in the context of early learning and childcare settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many studies focusing on children's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic focused on the perspectives of adults, parents/caregivers, and practitioners/teachers through surveys and interviews. While relatively few, some studies that focused on children's narratives and perspectives tended to view children as "competent" and "agents" and revealed children's expressions of their views, feelings, and knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research focusing on practitioners' experiences often discussed practitioners' wellbeing and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. They included increased workload and responsibilities. The studies revealed dramatic changes in the way practitioners worked in ELC settings, such as teaching, communication with children and the COVID-19 pandemic measures in practice. On the one hand, studies have revealed that government discourse recognised practitioners and their work during the COVID-19 pandemic as "essential services". On the other hand, research has also stated that the necessary value was not given to the practitioners at that time, and their experiences and views were not sought while making decisions. This study argues that children's and practitioners' experiences are necessary to obtain a complete picture of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of early learning and childcare.

2.5 Conclusion: research aim and questions

This chapter has examined the conceptualisations of children and childhoods in the childhood studies literature, the key debates in early learning and childcare in the reviewed literature, and the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the ELC context. While there has been some emerging literature on how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped, disrupted or perpetuated these debates (section 2.3), we do not know much about this. This thesis aims to question these debates and tensions in the ELC from the practitioners' perspectives through the experiences of children and practitioners. Furthermore, there have been common and dominant understandings of childhoods during the COVID-19 pandemic globally and in Scotland specifically that seem quite enduring, have a long tradition, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, and have still shaped the ways childhoods are experienced and conceptualised. The images of children and childhoods, such as the "child as a deficient being", "child as a developmental being", or the "child as a vulnerable being", have been found dominant in the majority of studies, reports and government narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, relatively few studies have questioned these dominant conceptualisations with alternative and more critical understandings and considerations of children and childhoods.

The alternative understandings can be found in some research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which challenged the traditional childhood discourses that portray children as innocent, vulnerable, and needing increased protection (Goodwin-De Faria et al., 2021). There

have been studies demonstrating that children were actively engaged with the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020; Donegan et al., 2023; Goodwin-De Faria et al., 2021; Lundy et al., 2021) and exploring the experiences and perspectives of children from their perspectives, not only focusing on their vulnerabilities, but also looking at their strength, agency, and the ways of coping during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Bray et al., 2021; González-Calvo et al., 2022; Koller et al., 2023). However, the vast majority of them appeared to focus on older children and young people. Therefore, studies focusing on young children's agency, competence and ways of living in crisis situations have been limited in the COVID-19 pandemic context. This study aims to focus on early childhood through research in the context of ELC. Additionally, this study aims to have a balanced approach to recognising children's agency and their needs for guidance by focusing on children and their experiences in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives. This approach is in line with the warnings of some researchers that while children are positioned as competent, autonomous and consistent beings, their dependent sides may be underestimated (Bae, 2009; Kjørholt, 2008). Therefore, having a balanced approach and recognising children's interdependencies and relationality has become more important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In many contexts, the researchers reported that insufficient attention was paid to young children, and their perspectives and contributions were largely overlooked during the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking at the reviewed literature, ignoring children's views and perspectives in policymaking and practice is nothing new but a rather persistent discourse. Additionally, the need for more studies on children's issues, views and experiences in the disaster research agenda is stated by various researchers (Fothergill & Peek, 2015; Rose & Bimm, 2021) to improve understanding, of the consequences of disasters for children, for more effective programs to reduce disaster vulnerability and of the role of children in response and recovery practices (Anderson, 2005). Since this has been identified as a gap in the literature, I attempted to research with children that included their views and perspectives on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this was not possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic regulations, measures, and ethics restrictions, as I will explain in the methodology chapter. Therefore, researching children's experiences and those of people working with children in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic was crucial for a comprehensive understanding in this study. The limited literature leaves a gap in knowledge about life in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Scottish context. Therefore, this study focuses on the experiences of both children and practitioners in ELC settings through practitioners' perspectives, considering how

policy-imposed measures are implemented in practice, affecting the lives and experiences of children and practitioners and the further constructions.

Based on the literature review, I argue that there is a **gap** in relation to research during the COVID-19 pandemic that:

- explores the social constructions of childhoods in the ELC context in crisis situations, focusing on young children in ELC settings in Scotland.
- explores the constructions of childhoods through practitioners' perspectives and experiences, focusing not only on the vulnerable sides of children but also on children's competencies and agency.
- explores "new" life in ELC settings in the shadow of the COVID-19 pandemic and related regulations and measures, including young children's and practitioners' experiences.
- addresses the drastic policy changes that affect ELC settings and dynamic changes in practice through policy implementing, activating or silencing.
- explores early learning and childcare in crisis situations and how crisis situations shape practices, debates and tensions in ELC.
- focuses on more studies in this area in the Scottish context.

Based on the gaps identified in the reviewed literature and the frameworks and key themes drawn upon in this chapter, **the broad aim of this research** is, therefore:

> to explore how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Scottish context.

The following **research questions** are addressed to realise this aim:

> **Question 1:** How has the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy documents published accordingly, affected the daily life, practices and experiences in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives?

Question 2: How have children's experiences of play and participation been shaped in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Question 3: How have the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The following chapter discusses the methodological approach I have adopted in this study in order to answer these research questions.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In this chapter, I explain and justify the methodology that I applied for this research. I begin by providing an overview of ontological and epistemological perspectives that have influenced the research design and shaped its particular focus. I hoped to have a qualitative research design with an ethnographic method for this research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic limitations and measures, I had to change my methodology and methods to collect data. The research design for this study, namely a qualitative methodological approach based on online interviews and document analysis, is presented in this chapter. Next, I explain the methods used for data collection. The discussion is followed by explaining the processes of data analysis and writing. The chapter then discusses research ethics and the dissemination of the research findings. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the reflexive stance adopted in this research.

3.1 Ontological and epistemological considerations

In this section, I begin to describe the research paradigm for this research, which is a "net that contains the researchers' epistemological, ontological and methodological premises" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p.31). It is argued that research is guided by "the researcher's set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p.32). Similarly, Gallagher (2009) suggests that childhood researchers need to be aware of their own assumptions about children and childhoods, which can be reflected in questions such as "what is a child?"; "what is a childhood?"; "what can we know about children and childhood?" and "how can we acquire this knowledge?" (p.66).

In the previous chapter, I have emphasised and justified the overarching aim of this research, namely, exploring how childhoods and early learning and childcare have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Scottish context. Considering the discussion about childhoods in chapter 2, I have situated this study within a childhood studies approach, which is an umbrella term that includes "various social science sub-fields that relate to childhood" (Punch, 2020, p.129). This study sees childhood as socially constructed (Leonard, 2016) and fundamentally complex (Spyrou, 2018). The ontological framework acknowledges that there are diverse childhoods rather than a single and universal phenomenon (James & Prout, 1997) and recognises that

children are active and competent social actors and agents in their own lives and their wider world (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019).

While this study is situated within childhood studies, relational thinking has influenced the understandings (Alanen, 2009; Mayall, 2002). As discussed in chapter 2, this goes beyond recognising children as social actors, by locating children's agency in social relations and interdependency (Esser et al., 2016), recognising the relational processes and expanding the networks of relations which link children with other human and nonhuman actors (Spyrou, 2018). Following these understandings, children's experiences in ELC settings were not thought of or acted in isolation but in relation to space, time, social relations, policy and the COVID-19 pandemic measures. Children were neither seen as actors passively shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic nor as independent actors dealing with the whole situation on their own. Rather, they were seen interacting with others. A relational view here acknowledges ontological multiplicity challenges the essentialist understandings of the child (Spyrou, 2018).

I used a qualitative research approach based on online interviews and document analysis following the ways of knowing mentioned in this section. The epistemological position of this thesis was to gain insights into the socially constructed nature of the reality of the participants through interviews. A social constructionist perspective states that people are constantly engaged in meaning-making processes "through participation in relationships the world comes to be what it is for us" (Gergen, 2015, p.4). The methodology allowed me to understand how participants present their reality (Silverman, 2020) and how participants and I, as a researcher, actively participate in meaning-making and the constructions of knowledges (James, 2009; Yeo et al., 2014). My role was to make sense of various meanings and perspectives and present them in meaningful ways (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). These understandings refer to an interpretative paradigm adopted in this research: "reality is socially constructed as people's experiences occur within social, cultural, historical or personal contexts" (Hennink, 2020, p.15). In the following section, I discuss the reasons for my choice and my approach to knowledge in more detail.

3.2 Qualitative research design: Online qualitative research

In this section, I explain why a qualitative methodological approach that used online research design was very relevant as a methodological approach for this study and highlight the main features and debates concerning conducting online research during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following parts then present the research context, participants and duration of this research.

Considering my ontological and epistemological position and the theoretical assumptions about children and childhoods, a qualitative research design was theoretically and methodologically well-suited for this research. Qualitative methods allow for "the construction of reality and knowledge to be mapped out", and they cannot be understood without understanding the thoughts, beliefs, feelings and actions attributed to the knowledge by individuals (James, 2009, p.7). In this study, I chose an online research design based on interviews and analysis of the documents published by the Scottish Government because its feasibility and suitability allowed me to conduct research in line with the Scottish Government and the University of Edinburgh guidelines, following health and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, I discuss the online interview approach. I will address how the documents were analysed later in this chapter.

Online research methods involve "the gathering of novel, original data to be subjected to analysis in order to provide new evidence in relation to a particular research question" (Hewson, 2017, p.57). Face-to-face interviews have traditionally been the preferred method and are often treated as the "gold standard" of qualitative research (McCoyd & Kerson, 2006, p.400; Novick, 2008). On the other hand, online interviews are presented as an alternative or second choice when face-to-face interviews are not possible (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Although online interviews cannot completely replace face-to-face interaction, they can work as a valid and effective data collection tool for qualitative research (Carr & Worth, 2001; Lo Iacono et al., 2016) and they should be treated as a viable option rather than an alternative (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Additionally, online interviewing is now increasingly valued as a legitimate and valuable research method with its own benefits and drawbacks (Janghorban et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2017; O'Conner & Madge, 2017; Yeo et al., 2014). Also, its prevalence has increased with the COVID-19 pandemic (Keen et al., 2022; Lobe et al., 2020; Mikulak et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2021; Teti et al., 2020).

The benefits of using online interviews in this research align with those mentioned in the literature. Firstly, communicating over the Internet with a synchronous connection opens up new possibilities, increasing the variety of participants in a time-efficient and more affordable manner (Gray et al., 2020; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). It also allows researchers to override distances and eliminate the need to visit an agreed location for the interviews (Rowley, 2012; Seitz, 2016) and gives "an opportunity to talk to otherwise inaccessible participants" (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013, p.607). This allowed me to reach various participants located in different parts of Scotland. Otherwise, it would not have been possible to interview them due to travel restrictions during my fieldwork.

Secondly, interviews have been one of the prominent data collection tools in qualitative research (Brinkmann, 2020; Silverman, 2020) to generate descriptions and interpretations of people's social worlds (Mears, 2021; Yeo et al., 2014) and access people's meanings, perceptions, definitions of situations and constructions of reality (Punch, 2014). In this research, the qualitative online interviews made it possible to hear the experiences, stories and interpretations of participants who worked directly with children and supported staff during the COVID-19 pandemic, where no other data collection method was readily available, e.g. face-to-face interview or observation. The interviews work out "a coherent explanation by piecing together what different people have said while recognising that each person might have his or her own construction of events" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.11). As a researcher, I sorted and analysed what the participants said and reflected on their complex and interrelated experiences and views during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although online interviews offer great advantages for qualitative research, their application involves various challenges. Thus, they should not be perceived as an easy option (Cooper, 2009; James, 2009; James & Busher, 2009; Keen et al., 2022; Novick, 2008), and careful considerations, including the design of a study, reliability, validity and trustworthiness should be taken (Hewson, 2017) as with other research designs. Similarly, James and Busher (2009, p.6) state that:

> The online interview presents both methodological and ethical potential and versatility in social science research. It also presents methodological and ethical challenges that need to be addressed when using the Internet to conduct research.

One obstacle to online research is stated in the literature as the participants' access to resources, such as a computer and the Internet, and their ability to use the technology (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). In my research context, all participants were familiar with technology and communication tools such as Teams or Skype, as they interacted with colleagues and some children through online communication tools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Technical issues such as loss of connection interrupted ongoing interactions. However, these were overcome by resuming the conversation and remembering the few last sentences when the connection was restored.

Another disadvantage of online interactions and interviews is being unable to look into each other's eyes (Petralia, 2011). Therefore, it is argued that its absence affects building trust with participants. In this study, the participants and I kept our cameras on so we could look into each other's eyes. Additionally, both participants and I quickly got used to online interaction, as online meetings and interactions were a large part of our daily lives during the COVID-19 lockdown periods (Lobe et al., 2020). Participants seemed comfortable with technology, so this did not affect their ability to build rapport (Gray et al., 2020). Other concerns related to online interviews are the lack of some non-verbal data such as body language and facial expression, hence the impact on the richness of qualitative data (Hesse-Biber & Griffin, 2013; Keen et al., 2022; Novick, 2008; Seitz, 2015). With the video calls, both in Skype and Teams, some of these concerns were avoided as we could see each other's facial expressions, but cues from the rest of the bodies were missed. Seitz (2015) suggests that "this makes it even more vital to listen to the tone of the participant's voice and be very conscious of their facial expressions" (p.232). During the interviews, I often tried to smile and nod when participants seemed hesitant about their responses to overcome these missing interaction elements.

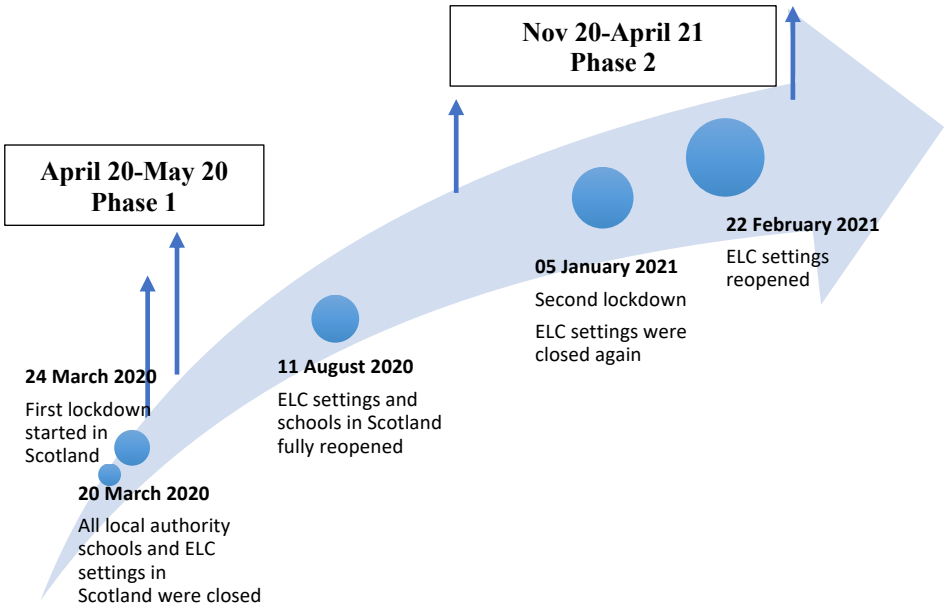
Moreover, an interview is "the art of asking questions and listening", and "it is not a neutral tool, for the interviewer creates the reality of the interview situation" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.353). Therefore, it is argued that interview data is neither simply raw nor a report on external reality, but it is always textual and situated and a reality constructed by both parties (Brinkmann, 2020; Mason, 2018; Punch, 2014). In-depth interviews with participants in this study enabled the generation of in-depth personal accounts to understand the context and complex processes, e.g. motivations, decisions taken and their implications, and to explore individual perspectives of the situation or issue in detail involving private subtexts, e.g.

challenges and worries in a participant's personal or professional life (James, 2009; Lewis & Nicholls, 2014).

3.2.1 Research context and timeline of fieldwork

As mentioned earlier, this research intends to explore the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare in the context of ELC settings in accordance with the gaps identified in the reviewed literature. The initial plan for this PhD research was to conduct ethnographic research with children in an ELC setting. Therefore, the initial preparations were made accordingly. Before I changed my research method to online interviews, I made initial contacts with ELC settings that could be a potential research area for conducting an ethnographic study. I made six visits to different ELC settings between February 2020 and early March 2020 to get an overview of their practices and meet practitioners. At that time, the news began to spread about positive COVID-19 cases, the first related deaths, and even strict quarantine measures in some countries. Educational institutions in many countries had already started to close. Following this, the closure of all schools and ELC settings in Scotland was announced, and from 24 March 2020, the UK went into its first lockdown. Figure 1 below shows the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and the timeline of the fieldwork.

Figure 1 The course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland



In a short time, the situation became even more chaotic worldwide, and the exponential increase in cases and death rates started to signal that this situation would not end anytime soon. Therefore, I decided to make changes in my methodology until it was possible to resume the ethnographic fieldwork. After I amended my ethics application for conducting online interviews with practitioners in ELC settings, I contacted the managers or heads of ELC settings I visited before the outbreak. For recruitment, I prepared a one-page document on the research details. I identified four ELC settings where I could conduct online interviews with the practitioners. This was the first phase of data collection of this study. As I did not know how long the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions had been in place, I saw these interviews as learning opportunities to reflect on what was going on in ELC settings during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and to understand how the measures and limitations were reflected in practice, in the hope that I could do ethnographic fieldwork soon.

I kept my hopes up as ELC settings and schools fully reopened in the summer of 2020. In late August 2020, I once again contacted the gatekeepers of the settings to see if it was possible to do fieldwork. In line with some of the measures taken in ELC settings, my proposals to keep my physical distance from adults and children or to be only in the outdoor areas of the ELC settings were also unsuccessful. Considering the strict measures implemented in settings, for example, not allowing mixing groups of children and adults or not allowing parents to be inside the ELC building, I was sure in early October 2020 that it would not be possible for me to begin my ethnographic work anytime soon.

The unexpected course of the COVID-19 pandemic forced me to change the data collection method again. With a new amended ethics approval, I planned to conduct a second phase of online interviews with more participants. I contacted the gatekeepers of the same ELC settings and practitioners who participated in the first phase of interviews. One of the gatekeepers was sceptical of my invitation, not wanting to burden her staff, considering the stress and workload placed on the staff during that time. Therefore, participants in this ELC setting were not included in the second phase of this study. I did not have a systematic design for the longitudinal study, so I did not intend to look at changes in individual lives or ELC settings. I aimed to gain an overarching understanding of the changes and complexities within ELC at different time points of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, I attempted to reach out to more ELC settings in Scotland as a potential research site to see if the managers or heads of ELC settings and practitioners working there would be willing to participate. To achieve this, I

employed the snowballing sampling strategy (Rowley, 2012), allowing me to access other ELC settings through the managers of ELC settings used as research sites in the first phase. This strategy helped me reach other participants when it was difficult to reach them due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures. In addition to the three ELC settings included in the first phase, the second phase of this study included participants from three more ELC settings.

The ELC settings in which the participants were located were in urban areas of Scotland. They were all local authority-run settings in two different authority council areas of Scotland. The characteristics of the settings are important in terms of impacting the research, given the focus on how the local council interpreted and implemented the COVID-19 pandemic measures due to the needs of their catchment areas. The participants described ELC settings as predominantly large, accommodating more than 60 children. It was also noted that the majority of these adopt more progressive pedagogical approaches, such as free flow and child-centred practices, compared to mainstream settings. This was a self-identification by participants, explaining how they described their pedagogies and practices in their settings by othering themselves from others. Some of the ELC settings were identified to be located in areas described as disadvantaged by the participants. In addition to what was said in the interviews, this is linked to the literature on groups of children disproportionally adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Cameron & Moss, 2020; Cowie & Myers, 2020; Ghosh et al., 2020; Howes et al., 2020; Lundy et al., 2021; Pascal et al., 2020). Other ELC settings were determined to be located in areas identified as advantaged by the participants. Some ELC settings were located around areas where many NHS staff, key workers at the time of the lockdown, lived. Therefore, participants working in these settings explained that they needed to do more work at the time of the lockdowns, either to support children and families or to keep their settings open as hubs[11].

This section demonstrates that the research context has evolved in line with the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and public health and safety measures. Besides being the main focus of this study, the global pandemic has caused inevitable and necessary changes in the research context and method, as explained in this section. The various ELC settings in Scotland selected for this research and participants located there provided rich and diverse contexts for the

[11] At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were centres that provided support with learning tasks and childcare to the children of essential workers.

practice of ELC settings and the experiences of practitioners and children from an adult's perspective during the COVID-19 pandemic. More information about the participants of this study is shared in the next section.

3.2.2 Research participants

The particular research context and design allowed online interviews with adult participants only. I acknowledged that this study was within the scope of childhood studies but did not directly involve children, their views and perspectives. The COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to conduct research in ELC settings or interact with children face-to-face, as discussed above. This resulted in online interviews with people who directly interacted with children at the time of crisis, asking them to illustrate their daily lives and experiences in ELC settings by giving examples and narratives from their practices. Therefore, this study focuses on the views and experiences of practitioners and other stakeholders (managers of ELC settings, academics in the childhood studies field and staff working in a local council) on children and childhoods experiences.

For the first phase, I invited practitioners working in four different ELC settings operated by local authorities through the managers or head teachers of ELC settings. For recruitment, I developed a one-page information sheet about the research and shared it with the ELC settings. The managers or head teachers disseminated the details of my research and contact details to their staff via email. 15 practitioners were interested in participating in the study and were invited to interview. These were practitioners actively working either at home or in hubs at the time of lockdown.

For the second phase, I invited the same practitioners, except those working in the ELC setting that chose not to participate. Some practitioners who participated in the first round did not want to participate due to the increased workload and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. These were extremely valid justifications considering the challenges of the period, so they were not included in the second phase of this study. Seven out of fifteen practitioners agreed to participate in the second phase. Due to the change in research method to online interviews and the absence of some participants in the second phase, I decided to increase the number of

practitioners. The same recruitment methods as in the first phase were followed. In the second phase, ten new practitioners were interviewed.

For the second phase, I also decided to include stakeholders in different roles relating to early learning and childcare to explore multiple facets of the overall COVID-19 pandemic. I included managers and staff working in local councils to determine how decisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic measures for ELC settings were taken at the local council and setting management level and how they spread to implementation at ELC settings. The managers of the ELC settings were invited to the study, and two of them were interviewed. The staff working in local councils were selected from local councils where ELC settings in this study were located. Academics in the field of childhood studies were also invited to participate in the research to get their views on the current pandemic and its potential impact on the ELC field. To recruit a staff member working in a local council and academics in the childhood studies field, I used my personal contacts, whom I contacted at the beginning of my fieldwork, to ask for assistance in choosing ELC settings. I shared my research details with them and asked them to disseminate the research to their colleagues. In the end, two staff members working in local councils and two academics in the childhood studies field were included as participants in the second phase of this research. I asked for written consent from all participants and explained the purpose of the research, the kind of questions to be asked and any ethical concerns around their participation.

Although practitioners held slightly different roles, in both phases, such as senior early years officer, early years officer, and early years practitioner, they are all referred to as "practitioners" in this study to avoid confusion and protect participants' identities. Participants in this study were predominantly female. The experience level of practitioners in the ELC settings ranged from 1 year to 23 years. Stakeholders had worked in the ELC field for many years and were very experienced. I have decided not to include specific information regarding the participants' identities in this thesis. As it was a small community, this decision was made to maintain the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Table 1 Summary of participants interviewed in this study

Participants	***First round*** *Apr. 20 - May 20*	***Second round*** *Nov. 20 - Apr. 21*
Practitioner	15	17
Managers of ELC settings		2
Academics in childhood studies field		2
Staff working in a local council		2
Total	15	23

3.2.3 Research duration

I conducted the research from April 2020 to April 2021. This time covered the stages of lockdowns and the reopening of ELC settings, so it allowed me to explore the major changes in policies and their implications in practice throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition from home to ELC settings (see figure 1 above).

Phase 1 (April 2020 - May 2020)

This phase started after the first lockdown in the UK. During this period, I conducted interviews with practitioners. This phase helped capture the initial changes in ELC settings and their impact on the experiences of children and practitioners when the first COVID-19 pandemic measures were implemented.

Phase 2 (November 2020 – April 2021)

This phase began before the second lockdown in the UK and included the second lockdown and reopening of ELC settings. During this period, I conducted interviews with practitioners and stakeholders. I also reviewed relevant news, guidance and regulations published by the Scottish Government and local councils during this phase and selected some for further analysis as a part of the data collection method for this study.

3.3 Methods of data collection

In this section, I present the methods of data gathering for this research (see table 2 below). As part of the data generation process, online synchronous individual interviews with practitioners and stakeholders (managers of ELC settings, academics in the childhood studies field, and staff working in local councils) via the tool of Skype or Teams were conducted. Participants could also take part in a visual methodology, namely photo elicitation, as part of the interview if they chose to. I used an interview with a practitioner at both the first and second phases as a pilot interview to ensure that the questions were relevant and understandable to the practitioners. Additionally, some key guidances, news and documents published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic were selected as data for a critical review of the policy to situate this study within the policy context.

In order to address the first research question, which attempts to understand how the daily life, practices and experiences in ELC settings were affected during the COVID-19 pandemic, I reviewed the published guidances and interviewed practitioners and managers of the settings. To address the second and third questions, I also interviewed adults interested in childhood studies (academics) and staff working in a local council to understand their perspectives and the constructions of childhood and early learning. The following sections describe in detail the theoretical and practical considerations for the selection of data collection methods and procedures for this research.

Table 2 Summary of data gathering for this research

	Time	***Tool***	***Role of participants***	***Number***	***Tools***
First round of interviews	Apr. 2020-May 2020	Teams or Skype calls	Practitioners	15	Semi-structured online interviews
Second round of interviews	Nov. 2020 -Apr. 2021	Teams or Skype calls	Practitioners	9	Semi-structured online interviews
				8	Semi-structured online interviews and visual method
			Managers of ELC settings	2	Semi-structured online interviews
			Academics in childhood studies field	2	Semi-structured online interviews
			Staff working in a local council	2	Semi-structured online interviews
Documents	May 2020-May 2022	• Guidances published by the Scottish Government for ELC settings • The news, speech/statement and strategy/plan published on the Scottish Government website throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland			

3.3.1 Online interviews with adults

I used a semi-structured interview design with adults within the scope of online individual interviews. Some interviews with practitioners included a visual method as part of the online interview process. It is explained later in this chapter. Semi-structured interviews, which

include a set of prepared questions and probing questions such as “tell me more” (Silverman, 2020), allowed me to obtain a fuller and deeper understanding of participants’ experiences and views (Yeo et al., 2014) and to understand better the meanings those experiences hold (Mears, 2021). Brinkmann (2020, pp.439-440, original emphasis) offers a working definition for a semi-structured qualitative research interview:

> Such interviews are structured by the interviewer’s *purpose* of obtaining knowledge; they revolve around *descriptions* provided by the interviewee; such descriptions are commonly about *lifeworld phenomena* as experienced; and understanding the meaning of the descriptions involves some kind of *interpretation.*

In online synchronous interviews, the exchange between researcher and participant tends to involve a dynamic form of interaction with a high level of engagement and immediacy (James, 2009). Thus, I followed a number of stages from the beginning to the end of both phases of interviews, where some were similar to face-to-face interviews. Participants were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews over an online video platform of their choice, Teams or Skype. I used the first few minutes for social greetings and introductory talks to create a friendly and relaxed environment and check the connection’s voice and visual quality. In addition, I confirmed how much time the interviewee had and thanked them for their participation.

I then moved on to the stage of introducing the research topic, the aims and objectives and reminding participants of the aim of the interview. This helped to set a context for the interviews and helped participants think about the way into the topic (Rowley, 2012; Yeo et al., 2014). At this stage, informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the interview process, in addition to obtaining written consent from the participants during the arrangement of the interviews. It was important to remind the participants that participation is on a voluntary basis and about confidentiality regulations (Yeo et al., 2014). I reminded the participants that it was absolutely okay not to talk about certain topics or questions if they did not want to talk about them. Before asking the questions, I emphasised that I aimed to hear their experiences and views in their own words, and there were no right or wrong answers or examples in case the participants might feel uncertain (Brinkmann, 2020). Technologies such as Teams and Skype allowed me to have video and an audio connection. Still, I only had an audio record with the participants’ permission for ethical purposes. For the interviews conducted on online tools,

I recorded the audio by using a separate recording tool, QuickTime Player, to avoid cloud storage of communication tools. I also used a second recorder in case of any mishaps.

At the beginning of the interviews, I presented an opening question for contextual information about the participants' professional backgrounds, roles, and expertise. This conversation and follow-up questions, such as how long the participant had worked in the role and how the role had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, helped to illustrate the interview dynamic and to set the tone (Yeo et al., 2014). In this step, I asked open-ended questions and demonstrated my interest by actively listening and encouraging the participants to talk at a more focused and detailed level by posing probing and follow-up questions to achieve richness and in-depth understandings (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, Yeo et al., 2014).

As I approached the end of the interviews, I asked the participants for their final comments to allow them to talk about if they felt any important issues were left unexpressed or unmentioned (Yeo et al., 2014). Once the interview questions and final comments were completed, I thanked the participants and explained the next steps regarding the transcription and final thesis. I informed them that I wanted to check with them on the completeness and accuracy of the transcription. At this stage, I also answered the participants' questions and explained how to communicate further. I finalised the interview and communication with the participants' permission when they no longer seemed to be talking or chatting. After the interviews, digital copies of the interview transcriptions were provided to the participants to amend or clarify them if they were interested.

3.3.1.1 The first phase of online interviews

I carried out the first phase of online interviews with 15 practitioners in ELC settings between April 2020 and May 2020. The interviews were planned to last around 45 minutes. Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that online communication was new for all of us, I aimed to keep the interviews shorter for the participants. The interviews ranged from 25 to 65 minutes, depending on the participants' experiences and responses. Details can be seen in table 3 below. When the interviews were conducted, some ELC settings were open to ensure

childcare for only the most critical "key workers"[12] and the most "vulnerable" children[13]. Therefore, some of the practitioners who participated in the interviews were at home, maintaining online communication with children and colleagues, and some were working in ELC settings or schools, also called "hubs", which were open at that time.

Table 3 Participants for the first phase of online interviews

	Date	***Length***	***Pseudonym***	***Current role***	***Method***
1	May 2020	33 mins	**Lisa**	Practitioner	Online interview
2	May 2020	25 mins	**Deborah**	Practitioner	Online interview
3	May 2020	32 mins	**Madeline**	Practitioner	Online interview
4	May 2020	41 mins	**Jenna**	Practitioner	Online interview
5	May 2020	40 mins	**Lillian**	Practitioner	Online interview
6	Apr. 2020	35 mins	**Denise**	Practitioner	Online interview
7	May 2020	35 mins	**Arianna**	Practitioner	Online interview
8	May 2020	53 mins	**Rebecca**	Practitioner	Online interview
9	May 2020	42 mins	**Chloe***	Practitioner	Online interview
10	May 2020	36 mins	**Joyce***	Practitioner	Online interview
11	May 2020	40 mins	**Diego***	Practitioner	Online interview
12	Apr. 2020	52 mins	**Rena***	Practitioner	Online interview
13	May 2020	65 mins	**Dorothy***	Practitioner	Online interview
14	May 2020	40 mins	**Megan***	Practitioner	Online interview
15	May 2020	35 mins	**Shelby***	Practitioner	Online interview

**Those who participated in both the first and second rounds of interviews*

These interviews aimed to have an overview of the daily life, practices and routines of ELC settings, both before the COVID-19 pandemic and in relation to the current situation. In addition, practitioners were asked about the initial measures taken in ELC settings before closure, how these were understood and viewed by them and children, and their anticipations for reopening of the settings, as exemplified in table 4.

[12] "Key workers" were defined by the Scottish Government as parents whose work was critical to the COVID-19 pandemic response, including those who worked in social and health care and other critical sectors.
[13] "Vulnerable" children were defined by the Scottish Government as "those on the child protection register, those who are looked after, and those on the edge of care; children in receipt of free school meals; children and young people with have complex additional support needs; children and young people affected by poverty and deprivation" (Scottish Government, 2020c).

Table 4 Examples of questions asked in the first phase of online interviews

Interviewee	***Dimension***	***Question***
All practitioners	The daily life of ELC settings	Before the ELC settings were closed, what kinds of measures were taken in your setting?
	Children's play experiences	From your perspective, how have all these measures taken in ELC settings affected children's play?
	Children's knowledge	How do children understand or interpret the virus?

3.3.1.2 The second phase of online interviews

I carried out the second phase of online interviews with a total of 23 participants between November 2020 and April 2021. As can be seen in table 5 below, 17 online semi-structured interviews with practitioners were conducted. In addition, 2 managers of ELC settings, 2 academics in the childhood studies field and 2 staff working in a local council participated in the second phase of interviews. These interviews, involving people working at the policy and practice level, allowed me to explore different perspectives of ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the second phase, the interviews ranged from 24 to 72 minutes, depending on the participants' experiences and responses. As I was aware of the intense work schedule of the participants, I adapted my questions throughout the interviews. In the end, I was able to gather rich data.

As shown in table 5 below, seven practitioners participated in the first and second phases of interviews. While I did not intend to follow the experiences of the individual participants in this study, it allowed me to follow the practices and experiences in ELC settings, which sometimes shifted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviews except one were conducted in a single meeting. In one case, a participant named Layla emailed me a few weeks after the interview to talk more about her observations of the significant changes in children's behaviour and interests due to the reopening of ELC settings. As a result, I had a follow-up interview with her.

Table 5 Participants for the second phase of online interviews

	Date	*Length*	*Pseudonym*	*Current role*	*Method*
1	Jan. 2021	24 mins	**Serena**	Practitioner	Online interview
2	Feb. 2021	62 mins	**Morris**	Practitioner	Online interview
3	Feb. 2021	25 mins	**Tina**	Practitioner	Online interview
4	Mar. 2021	43 mins	**Erika**	Practitioner	Online interview
5	Mar. 2021	27 mins	**Rita**	Practitioner	Online interview
6	Feb. 2021	54 mins	**Sophia**	Practitioner	Online interview
7	Dec. 2020	32 mins	**Shelby***	Practitioner	Online interview
8	Mar. 2021	22 mins	**Chloe***	Practitioner	Online interview
9	Feb. 2021	50 mins	**Rena***	Practitioner	Online interview
10	Nov. 2020	37 mins	**Joyce***	Practitioner	Online interview and visual
11	Jan. 2021	40 mins	**Diego***	Practitioner	Online interview and visual
12	Dec. 2020	45 mins	**Megan***	Practitioner	Online interview and visual
13	Jan. 2021	58 mins	**Dorothy***	Practitioner	Online interview and visual
14	Feb. 2021	60 mins	**Ivan**	Practitioner	Online interview and visual
15	Feb. 2021	30 mins	**Linda**	Practitioner	Online interview and visual
16	Feb. 2021	72 mins	**Layla**	Practitioner	Online interview and visual
17	Jan. 2021	50 mins	**Haley**	Practitioner	Online interview and visual

**Those who participated in both the first and second phases of interviews*

	Date	*Length*	*Pseudonym*	*Current role*	*Method*
1	Dec. 2020	48 mins	**Lauren**	Manager of an ELC setting	Online interview
2	Mar. 2021	35 mins	**Mindy**	Manager of an ELC setting	Online interview
1	Apr. 2021	52 mins	**Louise**	Academic in childhood studies field	Online interview
2	Dec. 2020	56 mins	**Joseph**	Academic in childhood studies field	Online interview
1	Feb. 2021	50 mins	**Patricia**	Staff working in a local council	Online interview
2	Feb. 2021	45 mins	**Amanda**	Staff working in a local council	Online interview

The purpose of the interviews with practitioners was to gain more in-depth knowledge of the life, practices and routines of ELC settings in line with the COVID-19 pandemic measures; to learn how ELC settings responded to these, as well as the practitioners' views on the guidances imposed on them. The semi-structured interviews allowed the main and further follow-up questions to explore the experiences and views of practitioners and children from the adults' perspectives by uncovering the narratives and conversations that took place in ELC settings. Slightly different sets of semi-structured questions were used with managers, experts in the field and staff working in a local council. Interviews with them aimed to understand their views and reflections on policy responses at both the local and national levels and the key challenges posed during the COVID-19 pandemic, both at the policy and practice level and for the ELC sector in general. Table 6 below shows some examples of the questions asked.

Table 6 Examples of questions asked in the second phase of online interviews

Interviewee	***Dimension***	***Question***
Practitioner	Policy response	Where do you draw information about regulations?
	Daily life in ELC settings	What does daily life look like in your ELC setting after the first lockdown?
All stakeholders	Policy response	What are your views on the policy response in Scotland, both at the local authority and national level?
Managers of ELC settings	Challenges in practice	What have been the main challenges for people who work with children during the pandemic?
Staff working in a local council	Challenges in practice	What would you say the key challenges were for policymakers during this time?
Academic in childhood studies field	Challenges in practice	How do you feel about the implementations directly affecting children's lives in ELC settings?

In the second phase, some interviews with practitioners involved the visual method as part of the interview. The specific method "photo elicitation" and how it was used in this study are explained in the next section.

3.3.1.2.1 Photo elicitation as a part of online interviews

In the second phase of this study, the visual method was included as a part of the online interview process to enrich the data. "Photo elicitation" as a visual method is a way of using photos in an interview "to generate verbal discussion to create data and knowledge" (Glaw et al., 2017, p.1; Harper, 2002), and it adds value by bringing another dimension to existing methods (Mannay, 2010). The practitioners who were interested in participating in the photo elicitation part were asked to take a series of photos from their ELC settings to reflect the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on meaningful spaces, artefacts, activities, opportunities of play and their understandings of childhoods.

In the second phase, I offered to be a part of the visual method to all practitioners and clarified that this was optional, given the workload and stress they were handling. I explained that there should be no children and adults in the photos, and I asked the practitioners for additional approval to use these images in the thesis. Some practitioners did not want to attend the visual part of the interviews as they did not have extra time to take photos. Some determined that they could not get permission from their managers to share photos from their settings. Eight practitioners agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview followed by a participatory visual method, photo elicitation. These practitioners sent me the photos a few days before the interviews, and I put them into a slide show to use in their interviews. The number of photos sent by each practitioner ranged from 3 to 12. The photographs generally represented the changes in the space, e.g. barriers used to divide the space, and in resources, e.g. natural resources and loose parts, trips to nature, children's activities mostly outdoors, and strict cleaning regimes for practitioners. After asking the semi-structured questions, the same for all practitioners, I shared my screen, and we talked about each photo. Rather than giving my interpretations and assumptions about the photos, I asked participants to explain the visual images that they created.

To explain more fully, practitioners were asked to comment on why they took a particular photo, what it represented, and why it was particularly important for children's experiences in

ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, the photographs were treated as if they were created and constructed by the participants, not as if they were portraying simple truth (Holm, 2020). They also encouraged participants to take a more active role and have more control in the interview process (Holm, 2020). In the flow of semi-structured interviews, practitioners often referred to the photos they sent while describing the changes taking place in the practices and life of ELC settings. The photos enabled participants during the interview process to create symbolic representations of their stories and the rich narratives they wanted to share (Mannay, 2010). In addition to enriching the semi-structured interviews, some photos were used to support the analysed data while presenting the findings of this chapter.

3.3.2 Documents

Several documents, news, guidance and advice published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic were analysed as part of this research. The texts explored in the context of this research could be grouped as follows:

- Guidances published for ELC settings to support a safe reopening (between 21 May 2020 and 30 July 2020[14])
- Guidances published for reducing the risks from COVID-19 after ELC settings fully reopened (between 30 October 2020 and 31 May 2022[15])
- The news, speeches/statements and strategies/plans published on the Scottish Government website about the course of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland related to ELC and education[16]
- Scottish Government COVID-19 Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues publications[17]

All these texts were fully available and accessible online. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, I followed the news and published guidances from the Scottish Government website from May 2020 to May 2022. Those targeting ELC settings were selected for further analysis for this research. These documents were "naturally occurring" without requiring access

[14] The full list can be seen in Appendix 2.
[15] The full list can be seen in Appendix 2.
[16] Their references are in the reference list at the end of the appendices.
[17] They are available on the Scottish Government website. Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

permissions. In other words, they existed independently of the research (Lewis & Nicholls, 2014; Silverman, 2020; 2022). The texts or parts of the texts, mostly at the policy level in this research, were still selected and interpreted by me as a researcher to present them with other data from this research. As Silverman (2020) argues, “no data are ever untouched by human hands” (p.336); therefore, a reflexive engagement with the texts was adopted. By analysing the texts, I aimed to reveal meanings (Lewis & Nicholls, 2014) and to situate this research in the policy context. My aim was not only to explore how identified texts were imposed on or advised to ELC settings but also to explore how they were taken up, interpreted and activated or disregarded by the participants of this study in the life of ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic (as analysed in detail in chapters 4 and 5).

3.4 Data management, analysis and writing process

My data collection produced a large volume of qualitative data: two phases of online interviews, pictures sent by practitioners, and guidances and documents published by the Scottish Government that I had identified as relevant to my research. I found myself approaching a data set of about 210,000 words of interview transcripts. In addition, during the data collection, I kept a research diary where I could reflect on the research process and the challenges of communicating with participants, practical issues, and emotional doubts and worries as a researcher. This has been helpful to reflect on how the overall research and my thinking have been shaped throughout the fieldwork. In table 7 below, I specify the data management process for each type of raw data.

Table 7 Data management

Raw data	***Total duration/count***	***Data management***
Audio recording of interviews	26 hours of voice recordings	I turned the audio recordings into transcripts and stored the transcripts together with basic information collected during the interviews, i.e. when, how long, and by what means they were collected while preserving the anonymity of the participants.
Photos taken by practitioners	49	I stored the photos sent by practitioners in the order in which they were sent. I also kept them together with practitioners' comments on the photos.
Documents	more than 20 guidances	I collected the guidances and advice published by the Scottish Government and stored them by date.
Research diary	20 pages	I kept my reflection on the research and data collection processes in text format.

The analysis process of the qualitative data was not carried out at a single point after the data was collected; instead, the data was seen as a spiral, and it was necessary to go around more than once, touching on various aspects of the analysis before reaching the centre of the spiral (Cresswell, 2007). Similarly, the analysis in this research was not a linear process. Instead, it involved many stages such as organisation of data, writing and rewriting, revisiting the data and rethinking and reformulating the research questions at various stages of the research.

After the collected data, the analysis continued during the data management process. While transcribing the interviews, looking at the photos and linking them with practitioners' reflections and reading the documents and guidances, I wrote down my ideas as they came up and my initial reflections. Audio recordings from semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, paying attention to the moments of silence. The software program, Otter.ai, was used to do the initial transcription. Next, I listened to the recordings multiple times to correct words and sentences that the software program often misunderstood and to add punctuation marks such as commas, ellipses, or full stops where I thought pauses were necessary and where the meaning could be affected while reading the text. My aim was to clarify the meaning and structure of the written interview format and check the flow and tone of the interviews. I was

careful to use the actual words of the participants. I pointed out some features such as clarifications, non-verbal expressions, or hesitations when I thought they could help with the meaning. A systematic approach was followed to ensure that each interview and image-based data had a similar pattern of transcription and storage. The data was securely stored in the University network drives and OneDrive. This plan enabled me to review and analyse the data effectively.

I applied thematic analysis to systematically analyse qualitative data, in which the researcher identifies, interprets and reports patterns of meanings and themes according to the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Spencer et al., 2014). Thematic analysis can be used to find out patterns "within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspective" (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Clarke & Braun, 2017, p.217). I followed a sequence in line with some phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2012; 2021a; 2021b). First, I familiarised myself with the data. The process started with data management, as I explained above. I reread the transcripts, my research diary about the research process and the documents I selected to analyse further.

After getting more familiar with the data, I went through a coding process. I printed out the interview transcripts, began to read through the data, and added memos and notes on the side of a page to keep note of my ideas and thoughts. I read the documents selected for this research, identifying sections that target ELC settings, such as running ELC settings, and including changes applied to organisations and practices. In this stage, I highlighted and coded excerpts in interview transcripts and selected documents, and chose and coded the pictures. The photos were found to be linked to the text, and the practitioners' interpretations and how they translated the photos into text, were considered (Holm, 2020). For this coding, the codes were derived through the interaction between what emerges from the data and some pre-existing concepts by examining published literature in the related field, also discussed in the literature review section of this thesis (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I also used the emerging topics I identified in my research diary during the data collection.

After having the initial codes, I started to search for themes by identifying similarities, patterns and overlaps in the codes. Due to the amount of data and the complexity of it, I decided to organise and analyse my data further using the NVivo12 data analysis tool. I started the second coding process by using this data management tool. It helped me to organise a large amount of

data and structure some themes of the thesis by organising the codes and categories (Gibbs, 2021). At this stage, I paid particular attention to analysing whether the codes emerged similarly or differently. With these initial associations, I began to create groups of codes by finding and organising the connections and contradictions between them.

Next, I started looking for potential themes in relation to the coded data and all data. I checked the groups created in the NVivo12 data analysis tool to identify possible themes. I constantly checked the themes against the coded excerpts to see if the themes were working in relation to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In this stage, the data was messy, so the aim was to identify the core themes, determine the relationships between them, review and modify at various times, and put them together as overarching discussions. At one point, I printed out possible themes, categories and codes and relocated them as needed. At this stage, I considered whether the amount of data provided sufficient evidence for each theme, whether the data supported the themes in an ordinary or unusual way, and whether the themes and related codes were compatible with the existing literature. Keeping records of my analytical thinking through memos and annotations was valuable at this and later interpretive stages to reflect the inferences, nuances and meanings (Saldaña, 2020).

Later, I started to name and define the themes for this research. At this stage, I put together the description of each theme, their potential content and selected excerpts to support and further discuss the themes. I discussed the potential themes with my supervisors and had feedback to make sure the themes were related but not overlapping, adequately supported by arguments, and addressed research questions. As a result, I proposed the following framework in which to discuss the findings chapters of this research:

> **Chapter 5:** The life in ELC settings with the implementations of COVID-19 measures
> **Chapter 6:** Experiences of children in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic
> **Chapter 7:** Conceptualisations of childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) during the COVID-19 pandemic

The writing process included various drafts, following various lines of arguments, checking with the data again, experimenting with bringing together the various narratives and views of participants, myself, and the literature. Therefore, writing also meant continuing the data

generation process. Choosing the extracts which captured the essence of the points I wanted to demonstrate and presenting them embedded within an analytical narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006) required some difficult decisions. For instance, some data had to be left out because it went beyond the focus of the thesis or repeated the points previously made. Some data excerpts were found to fit in different sections. Therefore, I needed to decide where they were most appropriate to obtain thematic representations of the findings.

To sum up, the analysis process in this research was an ongoing and inherent part of the whole process of qualitative research. Therefore, it infused all aspects (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Spencer et al., 2014). I looked at the commonalities of the experiences and views of participants as well as the conflicting and contradictory instances between them. On the one hand, I highlighted the examples that seemed to deviate from my expectations and other examples in the literature reviewed regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and childhood studies. On the other hand, I also paid attention to what appeared to be silenced, shifted or missing with regard to the life of ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.5 Ethical considerations

This section addresses the ethical considerations in this research. They include access and voluntary informed consent, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, minimising harm, and relationships and power between participants and researcher. Hammersley (2021) broadly defines "research ethics" as "all of the values that ought to inform the work of researchers" (p.57). Social research's ethical considerations have many dimensions. Thus, ethical practice depends on thinking through what the research means to participants and deviating from prescribed rules to make the most relevant ethical decisions, if necessary (Webster et al., 2014). The governance of online research has been heavily influenced by well-established guidelines (Eynon et al., 2017), so in this research, resources by the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) and Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) (Graham et al., 2013) were followed. In addition, this research was approved by the Edinburgh University School of Education and Sport Ethics Sub-Committee. Following the City Council regulations, I also provided a Disclosure Scotland certificate. The ethics approval has been updated several times throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to reflect the changes in research method, as mentioned above. In addition to these procedural ethics, this research followed relational ethics. Ethical dilemmas and concerns are part of the everyday practice of conducting research.

Therefore, research ethics can be recognised as going beyond the regulations and formal review (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) to be present "in ways of being as well as acting, and in relationships and emotions" (Banks et al., 2013, p.266). This requires a researcher to act with heart and mind, accept interpersonal relations with others, and take responsibility for their actions (Ellis, 2007). This approach emphasises the importance of a reflexive dialogue between participants and researchers (Meloni et al., 2015). These ethical considerations were considered in this study while interacting with the participants.

3.5.1 Access and informed consent

Informed consent in research is a process rather than a single event (Silverman, 2020), and it should be "dynamic and responsive to the needs of participants throughout the research process" (Webster et al., 2014, p.88). It is defined by Alderson and Morrow (2011) as "the invisible activity of evaluating information and making a decision, and the visible act of signifying the decision" (p.101). Informed consent is vital to research ethics to ensure that participants understand the content and purpose of the study (Alderson, 2014). Gallagher (2009) offers four core criteria for informed consent: (1) consent involves explicit acts such as verbal and written agreement, (2) participants can only consent if they are well-informed and clearly understand the purpose and process of research, (3) consent must be given voluntarily without any coercion, and (4) it must be renegotiable so that participants can withdraw their consent at any stage.

Following the ethics approval and updates, I began formal negotiations with the gatekeepers, mainly managers or heads of ELC settings in this research context. They mediated access to practitioners in ELC settings by distributing the research invitation letter containing my research information and my contact details to the staff in their settings (Appendix 4). Practitioners who wanted to participate in the interview emailed me to express their interest. Then I sent a more detailed information letter, including the research purpose and the interview process (Appendix 5). I sent the same information letter to the stakeholders after they expressed their willingness to participate in this study.

It was important to ensure that participants were well informed about the research process, purpose, and me as a researcher by exchanging information leaflets and emails (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). Many emails were exchanged between the participants and me in order to find

a suitable time and means, as well as answer the questions of the participants. The informed consent form was emailed to the participants a few days before the interviews were conducted (Appendix 6 and 7). All participants were asked to return the signed form by inserting scanned signatures or adding their typed names. Participants were informed that they could ask any questions before approving their consent or at later stages by communicating directly via email. In the consent form, certain details were added to inform the participants, including their right to withdraw from the research at any stage of the data collection or further. Additional permission was sought for the image-based data and photos sent by some practitioners. In addition, the information regarding the recording of the interviews was clearly stated in the consent form. The informed consent of participants was verbally reconfirmed at the start of the interviews.

One issue about consent was that there might be doubts as to whether participants were free to decide to participate, especially if they worked in an organisation that had already made the decision (Hammersley, 2021). In this study, I reached out to the practitioners working in ELC settings through gatekeepers, who were the managers or head teachers of settings. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures and the intensified workload on staff, some gatekeepers were unwilling to share my research details with their staff team. In one case, to invite practitioners who participated in the first phase to the second phase of interviews, I contacted the manager of the ELC setting again. The manager refused my access to the practitioners, explaining that she did not want to put extra pressure on the practitioners at that time. As a result, I did not approach the practitioners in this particular ELC setting out of respect for their precious time and the stressful work they were doing at the time.

3.5.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

The main principle of anonymity is ensuring that individual participants cannot be identifiable in research outputs (Gallagher, 2013). Following this principle, the names of the city and local councils where this research took place and participants were anonymised. I selected pseudonyms for all participants in this research, choosing a random name. Removing real names alone is not sufficient to ensure anonymity. Thus, it is important to be mindful of the possible threats to anonymity and confidentiality that can emerge from writing and dissemination procedures (Hewson, 2020). The identities of some participants in this study, such as staff in the local council, were easily identifiable due to their specific roles and small

numbers, so there was a challenge regarding the element of anonymity. Therefore, in this thesis, I have avoided describing their roles in ways that would identify them. I also removed anything from quotes that would identify the participants. For the visual data, I either did not use images that would identify the ELC settings or edited the images to avoid easily recognising the settings. To eliminate the recognisability of ELC settings, images were edited by cutting off the edges or blurring parts of the background without changing the meanings of the images.

I used pseudonyms for the practitioners but avoided making distinctions between them based on their specific job descriptions in the methodology and findings chapters. For instance, some practitioners described their role as a "new" role created in ELC to help ensure closing the attainment gap. However, I did not identify them in the thesis but referred to them as practitioners. The approach to masking the practitioner's identity was primarily a measure to protect the identity of the participants, as some of the roles described were more recognisable.

Furthermore, the principle of confidentiality, which is usually achieved by restricting access to data (Gallagher, 2012), has been observed by storing and managing data in a secure place in accordance with the University of Edinburgh's data protection policies (The University of Edinburgh, 2019). The collected data was anonymised shortly after collection and stored separately from the list of names and pseudonyms that allowed them to be linked (Hammersley, 2021) in OneDrive. Data extracts were only shared when all identifiable information about participants and ELC settings were removed.

3.5.3 Minimising harm

Protecting participants from harm and minimising risk to participants form the basis of all ethical considerations (Silverman, 2021). This research can be considered low risk for the participants and does not include "sensitive" topics that are generally considered to be political opinions, ethnic origins or religious beliefs of people (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). However, social research can vary in what is considered "sensitive" (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). I did not ask participants to share sensitive information about themselves and children in this research. I also asked them not to share any photos containing any sensitive or confidential data about children and adults in their ELC settings. Sensitive information would have been if practitioners disclosed a case of neglect or abuse about a child. If this had happened during the data collection, I would have followed the child protection procedures of ELC settings.

In social research, however, sensitive subjects may come up during interviews, even if the research is not overtly about sensitive issues, so it is important to think ahead of time about the ways benign topics might connect with participants' difficult experiences (Webster et al., 2014). In this study, a few sad stories experienced by families and children, especially at the time of lockdown, were shared by participants when talking about children's home experiences. For instance, a practitioner shared the story of a single mother with two young children. The mother had to have emergency surgery at the time of lockdown. The practitioner shared that she did not receive any help from her extended family and had to look after her children alone when she was released from the hospital. She was not recognised as a "key worker" or "vulnerable" during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, she could not receive any other help or childcare during this difficult period. It was sad to hear that some families were really struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic. I did not interrupt when the practitioner talked about the story. She finally said the mother had recovered and the children were fine when we had the interview. Therefore, I did not take any action or step for follow-up.

It is argued that disaster situations can create challenging contexts for making interpersonal connections, e.g. interviews, especially during response time. Thus, participants might be exhausted after a heavy workload or facing considerable stress (Bennett et al., 2020). One of the challenges in my research was inviting participants during the COVID-19 pandemic when the overall workload and stress of practitioners increased. Therefore, I tried to clarify that practitioners should not feel any pressure to participate in the study and could withdraw from the study at any point. Another concern in my study was asking participants to give up their rest times, especially for practitioners working long hours in ELC settings when restrictions were more stringent. Therefore, I approached the participants flexibly to organise the most convenient time. In most cases, I left it up to the participants to decide the most appropriate interview day and time.

3.5.4 Relationships and power

While recognising this research was a short-term interaction with the participants, I have tried to build relationships between the participants and myself throughout the research process, including the initial communication, interview process and follow-up interactions. Throughout the interview process, I sought continuous reflexivity, fostering reciprocal knowledge

exchange. The dialogue between the participants and myself was important for "balanced and respectful relationships" (Collins et al., 2020, p.5). During the arrangement of the interviews, many emails were exchanged with participants, allowing the interaction to develop and strengthen the rapport (Seitz, 2015). I tried to make the participants feel comfortable at the opening by offering a level of rapport (King & Horrocks, 2010). Humour or small talk also helped create a positive interview environment (Yeo et al., 2014), so I chose to start with a general question like "how are you today?" or to have a conversation about the situation we were in, e.g. the COVID-19 pandemic, if the interviewee seemed comfortable with it.

The majority of participants in this study participated in online interviews from their homes, while a few did so from their ELC settings. The interviews were conducted in participants' comfortable and familiar environments (James, 2009; Lo Iacono et al., 2016; Seitz, 2016). They offered to share a little more about their surroundings, such as objects and artefacts around them. In this study, these sometimes opened up a new conversation and helped build a relationship between the participant and me. In other cases, their environment helped support the content of the interview and provided extra data. For instance, one participant was in her ELC setting and decided to show the pages hanging on the wall to illustrate some of the guidelines they followed in her ELC setting.

Furthermore, Rubin and Rubin (2012) mention the "responsive interviewing" that highlights "the importance of building a relationship of trust between the interviewer and interviewee that leads to more give-and-take in conversation" (p.36). Active listening involves hearing the meaning of what the participant is saying and hearing the nuances in the participants' narrative, and responding with relevant questions is essential in the interview interaction (Yeo et al., 2014). They also demonstrate that the researcher shows value, interest in what practitioners say, and a genuine desire to understand participants' perspectives. Accordingly, I always tried to ask the participants relevant follow-up questions for further clarification, detail, or examples. During the interviews, I maintained eye contact to express my attention and occasionally smiled and nodded in the context of online interviews.

Power in research is complicated, ever-changing and multidirectional, and participants can hold power during the research process (Mason, 2017). For example, practitioners' decisions to engage or not engage in research or engage partially (i.e. the optional visual method) held more power at times for research than my role as a researcher. Adopting a more dynamic and

relational understanding of power is important (Davidson, 2017) to see how it enacts itself in the research. For instance, in this study, participants had multiple power relations. Managers exerting power by limiting practitioners from sharing pictures from ELC settings had potentially negative consequences on practitioners fully sharing their experiences. It was, therefore, important to pay attention to the power imbalances between them. Due to the challenging situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was cautious when inviting participants before contacting the managers of ELC settings to avoid creating a conflicting situation for them.

3.6 Feedback and dissemination

Dissemination includes publicity and public discussion about the research (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). In terms of providing feedback to the participants in this research, I planned to make this thesis, a summary version of it, available to participants working in ELC settings, academia and local councils. When I was planning to submit the thesis, due to the time scale of the research, I had not yet felt ready to share the research findings and results. After submitting the thesis, a leaflet or briefing will be prepared for the participants, and the findings will be disseminated, at least by sharing them with the ELC settings.

In terms of knowledge exchange, I presented the findings and discussions from this study at a variety of international childhood studies conferences. Journal publications are planned to be written after the thesis is completed. Additionally, researchers are expected to become increasingly involved in more active information exchange activities targeting specific audiences (Tisdall, 2009). Related to this, I incorporated some of the emerging findings from my research into the teaching work on the BA Childhood Practice course at the University of Edinburgh, which included practitioners working in ELC settings.

3.7 Reflexivity

Reflexive research demands “a continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation, not just in relation to the research methods and the data but also to the researcher, participants, and the research context” (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p.275). As a researcher, I tried to be open and honest about the limitations and possibilities of reflexivity during this research. Also, I tried to keep my reflexive stance visible throughout this chapter, for instance, with a discussion

on establishing relationships with participants during the online interview process. In this section, I want to acknowledge some of my reflexive positionality and the changes in my perceptions during the overall research process by reflecting on emotional and contradictory experiences and interactions.

Being reflexive calls for presenting research findings as situated and subjective. As Hertz (1997) argues, it provides "insight on the working of the social world and insight on how that knowledge came into existence" (p.viii). Similarly, interviews provide access to "representations or accounts of how people present versions of reality" (Silverman, 2020, p.184), and both interviewer and interviewee actively participate in making sense of the process and constructions of knowledge during the interview (James, 2009; Yeo et al., 2014). In this study, I did not treat the interview data as "facts" but saw the meanings as mutually constructed between participants and me as a researcher. This positioning did not mean to deny the possibility of participants sharing their views and experiences beyond interaction, so interview data also held its value beyond the context of instant research interaction (Yeo et al., 2014). I considered these insights when planning, conducting, and analysing interviews.

Finlay (2002) suggests that reflexivity is an ongoing process and should be taken from the beginning of the research and followed in every step of the research. I engaged in reflexivity at various stages. For example, when conducting interviews, I considered my reactions to the interviews and my emotions and thoughts (Berger, 2015). During the interviews, I sometimes found myself thinking about analytical structures or analytical themes and how a particular point the participant mentioned might make sense with other data or possible themes. Since this may occasionally lead to questions arising from the researcher's overly hasty interpretations rather than questions that attempt to explore participants' interpretations (Yeo et al., 2014), at these times, I tried to move away from this thinking and focus on what the participants were talking about. When choosing data excerpts from the interviews to tell participants' stories, I considered the impact of my subject position and perceptions on my decisions. I was aware that my own perspectives impacted the decisions I made for the analysis and themes of this research. Therefore, when I was tired of engaging with data, I found it helpful to distance myself and rethink what I was doing, reflecting on my feelings and identifying emerging themes and topics. To enable reflexivity, I kept a research diary to constantly reflect on the research process, including the challenges I experienced, my emotions and doubts, as well as the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had meetings with my

supervisors that helped me discuss the procedures, my doubts, my emotions and identify emerging themes and topics. They can be an effective tool to facilitate reflexivity as it helps the researcher to recognise previous assumptions, beliefs and attitudes (Dowling, 2006).

A researcher cannot be viewed as "an objective, politically neutral observer who stands outside and above the study of the social world" (Denzin, 2001, p.3). Researchers bring a variety of selves into the research process, and they can be transformed through interactions with the research context and participants (Reinharz, 1997). Thus, I reflected on how the different social identities and aspects of identity I brought were co-constructed and transformed in this research. At the time of the fieldwork, I was in my late twenties. During the interviews, I positioned myself as learning from the participants by stressing that my aim was hearing their experiences and views in their own words. This was related to positioning myself as a university student and a nonexpert. In terms of my ethnic identity, I introduced myself as being a Turkish who had already lived in the UK for a few years. This role of a foreigner who was unfamiliar with the Scottish education system and its practices was particularly useful in this study. This helped me learn certain concepts and practices in ELC settings in detail, such as the "floorbook" or the "bubble", as the participants tended to explain them to me when they thought I did not know them. This was particularly important in the context of this research because the COVID-19 pandemic has changed many practices and the functioning of ELC settings. Despite being from a different country, I also shared my personal experiences of being a practitioner and working with children occasionally. I often felt closer to the participants and in richer conversation in these moments.

Reflexivity also refers to the process in which the researchers reflect on their personal, pragmatic, emotional and theoretical impact on the research process (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). As I explained earlier in this chapter, I had to make major changes to the research method. With the uncertainty during the COVID-19 pandemic, my most common feeling was worry and fear of being unable to conduct this research. Reflecting on my feelings made me rethink alternative data collection methods and potential contacts. The long-term closure of ELC settings and the restrictions on accessing settings as a researcher made me feel annoyed. I was not allowed to be physically present in ELC settings and interact with children and practitioners in person. After discussions with my supervisors and some colleagues, I found I was starting to accept the uncertainty of the situation and needed to be flexible about the way things were going. By reflecting on my frustration, I noticed that there was no other way to do

research than to look for alternatives. Listening to the experiences of practitioners and staff at the ELC during the challenging time helped me deal with my disappointment. How they dealt with the challenges in their professional and personal lives forced me to see the other side of the story rather than "being vulnerable" in front of the COVID-19 pandemic. This helped me to recognise them as individuals with agency and capacities, like myself, who were faced with something unexpected and unpredictable that affected the whole world. To sum up, dealing with my own uncertainties and frustration in my research, thinking about how these emotions could affect my research method, data collection and analysis (Graham et al., 2013), and reflecting on my own feelings and reactions contributed to my awareness of the dynamics in my interactions with the participants and data (Gaskell, 2008).

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter introduced this study's ontological and epistemological perspectives by situating it in relation to social constructionist ways of knowing and the childhood studies field. This chapter then accounts for the methodological approach taken for this research, namely the qualitative methodological approach based on online interviews and document analysis. The research context, participants and duration were explored. The chapter then presented a rationale for the choice of data collection methods and the details of how the data was collected. Further, the chapter highlighted data management, analysis and writing processes. The chapter then provided an overview of ethical considerations in this research, highlighting procedural and relational ethics. The discussion was followed by the reflexive account taken in this study. In the following chapter, I set out the research context of ELC by reviewing the main guidances and relevant legislations published by the Scottish Government over the COVID-19 pandemic before moving on to the key findings in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis.

CHAPTER 4: SETTING THE CONTEXT OF ELC SETTINGS IN SCOTLAND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This chapter aims to briefly summarise Scottish ELC policy, particularly play and outdoor learning. It then provides the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and sets out the policy context for ELC settings by presenting the main guidances and relevant legislations published by the Scottish Government over the COVID-19 pandemic. This contextual chapter focuses on policy to help set the scene for further critical analysis of the thesis findings.

Since 2013, the Scottish Government has determined to work towards realising the ambition for Scotland to be the best place for children to grow up, and it has been articulated in many government documents (Education Scotland, 2020; Scottish Government, 2013). After introducing early learning and childcare in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, the funded ELC entitlement of all children aged 3 to 5 and eligible 2-year-olds was increased from 475 hours to 600 hours per year (Education Scotland, 2022a). A further expansion of funded ELC to 1140 hours per year, initially intended for August 2020, had to be paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was resumed in August 2021 (Scottish Government, 2020l; 2022a).

The Early Years Framework, launched in 2008, sets out a vision for early learning and childcare services in Scotland to ensure that children get "the best start in life" (Scottish Government, 2008, p.3). The framework refers to children from pre-birth to 8 years old and recognises the right of all children to "highly quality relationships, environments and services which offer a holistic approach to meeting their needs" (p.3). The view that early childhood is a critical period is emphasised by the fact that children are seen as the "future of Scotland" (Scottish Government, 2008; p.1). Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is Scotland's curriculum for children and young people aged 3 to 18 and aims to place learners at the heart of education (Education Scotland, 2022b) by providing a coherent, more flexible and enriched curriculum (Warden & McNair, 2016). It is argued that the rights and entitlements of children and young people are at the heart of the curriculum; children are therefore seen as entitled to experience "well planned experiences and outcomes across all curriculum areas" (Education Scotland, 2022b).

Realising the Ambition: Being Me is an early years national practice guidance for Scotland that reflects the original principle of Building the Ambition and complements the more recent policy direction of ELC, e.g. expansion to 1140 hours (Education Scotland, 2020). It aims to support practitioners across Scotland by connecting practice, theory and policy and providing advice on achieving the highest quality of ELC in line with the Scottish Government's vision. Warden and McNair (2016) state that Scotland, in terms of education, has defined itself through the creation and implementation of a forward-thinking curriculum based on the "real sense of childhood and the image of a child as key to the future of the country" (p.155). Recent policy in Scotland has been informed by growing evidence that supporting children's learning and wellbeing at a very young age can be the foundation of lifelong learning (Siraj & Kingston, 2015).

Stephen (2018) notes three points central to Scotland's consensus on providing and implementing high-quality ELC. The first is to recognise the importance of nurturing relationships between children and practitioners. The second is child-centred practice, often characterised by following children's interests with greater recognition of children's rights to be consulted and listened to. For instance, the GIRFEC approach aims to have an individual child-centred approach, target the child's specific needs and provide the right support when the child needs it (Scottish Government, 2022). The third is the value of play as a key tool in promoting particular forms of learning (Stephen, 2018). In The Early Years Framework, play is recognised as both a right of children and a fundamental part of their lives (Scottish Government, 2008). Similarly, government initiatives have acknowledged the interconnections between "playing, learning, growing, developing, being healthy and being happy" (Scott-McKie & Casey, 2017, p.3).

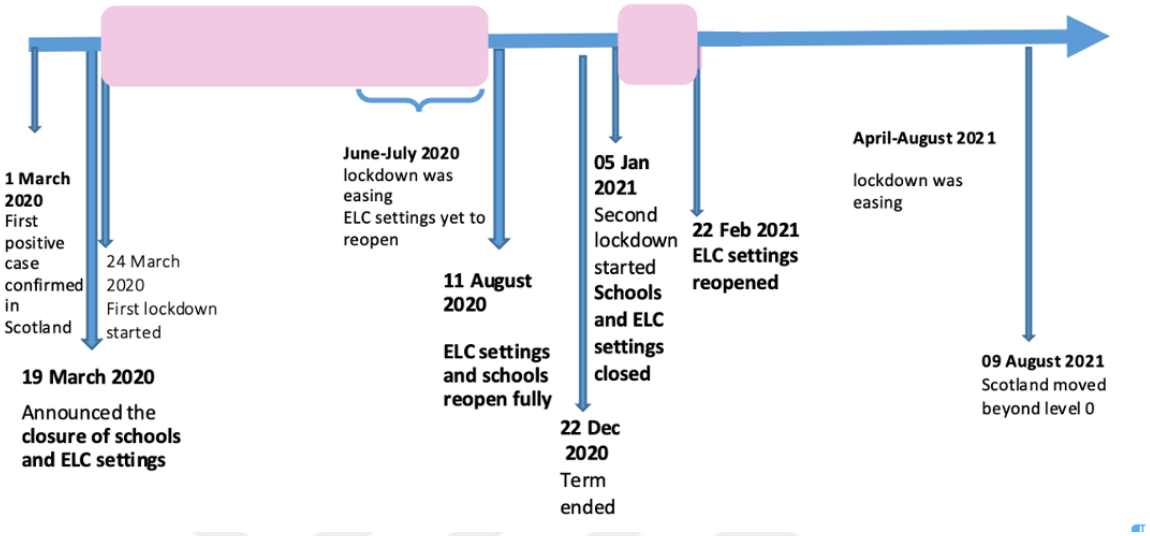
The child's right to play was articulated in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 and described in Scotland's National Strategy for play, i.e. The Play Strategy for Scotland (Scottish Government, 2013), that aims to provide some practical steps towards realising the vision that ensuring Scotland to be the best place to grow up for children and improving play experiences for all children in a range of settings, including homes, early learning and childcare settings, schools and communities. In this Strategy (Scottish Government, 2013), play is seen in many forms; it can happen indoors and outdoors, be creative, messy, structured or entirely facilitated by the imagination. Moreover, toolkits and guidances for ELC, schools and

education professionals have been published to highlight the range of types of play and the vital contribution of play to development and learning (e.g. Casey & Harbottle, 2018; Inspiring Scotland, 2015; Scott-McKie & Casey, 2017). The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 regulates legislation relating to children's play. It places a legal duty on local authorities to carry out Play Sufficiency Assessments (PSAs) as part of their strategic planning and to consult with children on local place plans (Play Scotland, 2023).

As part of the policy to expand the number of hours of free ELC services offered to parents, the emphasis on outdoor play and learning has increased (Howe et al., 2021; Perlman, 2020). The outdoor play movement in Scotland was claimed to have initially started as a grassroots effort but was embraced by the national government as a way to include more children in ELC (Perlman et al., 2020). The national vision for outdoor learning in natural environments and school playgrounds has been further articulated in the government documents, e.g. Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2008) and Curriculum for Excellence Through Outdoor Play (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). According to the documents, it is the responsibility of everyone involved in education to recognise the place of outdoor learning in the curriculum and to plan to ensure that all children and young people in Scotland receive outdoor learning opportunities as part of their learning journey. In recent years, the Care Inspectorate (2016) reported that the number of outdoor-based nurseries in Scotland has increased significantly in recognition of the benefits of children playing and learning, such as enhancing physical health, wellbeing, development and social skills (Care Inspectorate, 2018; 2019; Inspiring Scotland 2018; 2019; Perlman et al., 2020; Scottish Futures Trust, 2017).

After briefly reviewing the Scottish ELC policy context, the chapter now focuses on the policy context during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, it was announced that schools and ELC settings were closed for most children and young people in Scotland and the United Kingdom, as has similarly happened in more than 190 countries around the world in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic (Grosvenor & Priem, 2022; Scottish Government, 2020a; 2020d; United Nations, 2020a). The main milestones of closures and reopenings of ELC settings in Scotland are visualised in figure 2 below. In this early stage of the pandemic, in March 2020, the Scottish Government had been clear that protecting public health was the central and most important point to reduce the impact of the virus and save lives (Scottish Government, 2020d).

Figure 2 A timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic showing closures and reopenings of ELC settings in Scotland[18]



**The pink lines indicate the closures of ELC settings.*

After the schools and ELC settings closed in Scotland, local authorities and the Scottish Government worked together to ensure providing childcare for "the most critical key workers[19]" and "the most vulnerable children[20]" (see Appendix 1 for a more detailed timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland). The published documents, for instance, the guidance published in May 2020, emphasised caution over the impact of lockdown on the "most" vulnerable children and advised local authorities to increase the number of children attending critical childcare provision, including hubs (Scottish Government, 2020a, p.3). Children and young people were seen in government documents in the initial period of lockdown as:

[18] A strategic approach to outbreak management based on five graduated levels (0-4) of restrictions in Scotland was introduced. Each level had a different set of rules to suppress the virus to low levels. The levels were designed to be applied locally, regionally or nationally, depending on the course of the pandemic. In level 0 and level 1, the low incidence of the virus was expected. In levels 2 and 3, an increased incidence of the virus was expected; therefore, a graduated series of protective measures to tackle the virus was applied. In level 4, high or rapidly increasing incidence and widespread community transmission were expected. It was likely that this level would see the introduction of measures close to a return to full lockdown.

[19] "Key workers" were defined by the Scottish Government as parents whose work was critical to the COVID-19 pandemic response, including those who worked in social and health care and other critical sectors.

[20] "Vulnerable" children were defined by the Scottish Government as "those on the child protection register, those who are looked after, and those on the edge of care; children in receipt of free school meals; children and young people with have complex additional support needs; children and young people affected by poverty and deprivation" (Scottish Government, 2020e).

> to be impacted most, and for longer, by the unintended consequences and other factors attributable to actions taken to control the pandemic.
>
> Scottish Government, 2020a, p.8

The negative impacts of school and ELC closures "in all aspects of children's progress and development including their wellbeing" since March 2020 were recognised by the Scottish Government, including impacts on children's cognitive, emotional and behavioural needs (Scottish Government, 2020a, p.3). Furthermore, in a document published by the Scottish Government on 26 May 2020 about children's role in the transmission of COVID-19, children were seen:

> not as a single, homogeneous group but should be differentiated by age (as a minimum). The behaviour of children under the age of 5 will differ significantly from that of young adults, as will their experienced impacts of interventions and clinical response to COVID-19.
>
> Scottish Government, 2020f, no pagination

In the excerpt above, children's various experiences throughout the pandemic were recognised, and strong differentiation based on age was made about the impact of COVID-19 and related limitations on children. Although not extensively, the importance of making sure young people's experiences and opinions about the impacts of COVID-19 could be heard in Scotland was mentioned (Scottish Government, 2020g), and some initiatives and reports were prepared, e.g. The Education Recovery Youth Panel, delivered by Youth Scot; "LockdownLowdown" delivered by partners Young Scot, Scottish Youth Parliament and Youth Link Scotland. However, no initiatives have so far been made at the policy level during the time of writing this thesis in Scotland to recognise young children's ability to contribute to the discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic or to make meaningful decisions about their lives (McNair et al., 2022).

During the lockdown period, there was an expectation from practitioners and teachers to support home learning for children and young people (McNair et al., 2022). The guidance

published on April 2020 recognised that learning should have continued from home as it was impossible to predict when schools and ELC settings could open. It has been noted that learning at home should be without any expectation that:

> the kind of learning approaches and experiences provided in schools [would] be replicated at home… The primary focus of our education system… remain[ed] to ensure that pupils, teachers, practitioners, parents and carers [were] supported to cope with the challenging circumstances in which we all [found] ourselves in.
>
> Scottish Government, 2020h, p.2

The above excerpt clearly highlights the importance of children's learning at home, distinguishing between home and school learning, and the desire to support children, parents/caregivers, and practitioners in challenging times. Although the distinction has been made, how it corresponded in practice is discussed in the findings chapters of this thesis, particularly in Chapter 7. Furthermore, the Scottish Government's ambition had been set to enable "as many children and young people as possible to return [to] education and care settings at the earliest date on which it [was] safe to do so" from August 2020 (p.3) and returning back was considered to be "the best possible outcome given the impact that school closure has on children and young people across Scotland, particularly those from a disadvantaged background" (Scottish Government, 2020g, p.9). On 10 May 2020, the Scottish Government signalled that the first lockdown could end soon (Sturgeon, 2020a). Followed by in the announcement made on 21 May 2020, the planned school reopening in August and ELC settings reopening over the summer period was emphasised, with a priority of:

> ensuring the health and wellbeing of pupils and staff and giving parents the confidence schools [were] safe… We [could] safeguard our children's future and [got] them learning alongside their classmates again. This plan [would] do that and [got] our young people safely back to school.
>
> Scottish Government, 2020i, p.ng

Following the announcement, the strategic framework for reopening schools and ELC provision was published on 21 May 2020 (Scottish Government, 2020a), putting "age-

appropriate, rights-based and child-centred" pedagogy at the centre for high-quality childcare experiences (p.20). In order to keep children and staff safe, it was stated that some measures such as physical distance, improved cleaning regimes, and increased hand hygiene should be taken, without going into any detail about how they could be implemented in practice (Scottish Government, 2020a).

Before ELC settings were fully reopened, two pieces of guidance were published for a safe reopening of the ELC services that aimed to provide principles to help the services make decisions and operate in a changed context (Scottish Government, 2020b; Scottish Government, 2020c). These guidances gave detailed measures and limitations towards the general operation of the settings and practices. The staggered statements showed the expected measures to be taken in ELC services. These were "must" when there was an expectation that something had to be done, "should" when something was strongly advised and "may" when something was optional. For example, it was stated that adults must wear face coverings whenever they cannot maintain a 2m distance from other adults, and it was advised that coverings should be worn by staff when not working directly with children. A detailed review of guidances published during the COVID-19 pandemic on a range of measures such as singing, cleaning, and grouping of children can be found in Appendix 3.

After ELC settings reopened, the guidance was updated on a regular basis by the Scottish Government to identify protective measures to ensure the continued safety of children and practitioners in line with scientific evidence and advice from The Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues, which was established to support learning, childcare and children's services (Scottish Government, 2020j). The full list of published guidance throughout the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen in Appendix 2.

National practice guidance, "Realising the Ambition", was often referred to specify the focus for ELC settings to provide high-quality provision in the guidance published throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Scottish Government, 2020a; Scottish Government, 2020b). Further, in the guidance published on 15 June 2020, children's right "to play, to learn and to access experiences that meet their physical, social, emotional and cultural needs" and "to associate with their peers" was recognised, and this has been continued over time in other revised guidance as rationales behind the measures. In line with this, ensuring children's 'best interests' has been argued as a top priority (Scottish Government, 2020b). The extent to which ambitions

and commitments at this policy level have been translated into practice will be discussed later in this thesis.

In these guidances published by the Scottish Government, children's and practitioners' wellbeing and mental health were largely emphasised during and after the reopening. For instance, in June 2020, the need for more support for wellbeing and mental health (Scottish Government, 2020b), especially for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who might have faced multiple barriers to learning over the period schools and ELC settings were closed (Scottish Government, 2020k), was emphasised. In June and July 2020, mental health and wellbeing support advice was placed for practitioners in the guidance (Scottish Government, 2020b; Scottish Government, 2020c). Thus, it can be argued at the policy level that the Scottish Government had placed protecting the interest of children with a focus on "health, wellbeing, and intensified support for reducing inequity and enabling the highest quality of learning and teaching" (Scottish Government, 2020g, p.12).

Similar to the above, the period before the reopening of ELC settings was referred to as a "recovery period", and some principles for high-quality provision were proposed. These included "put[ting] the best interests of the child at the heart of decision-making", "tak[ing] a holistic approach to the wellbeing of a child", and "believ[ing]… work together in the best interests of the child" (Scottish Government, 2020b, no pagination). At the policy level, it was considered that children would require more time to reintegrate into the changed settings as they experienced sudden interruptions in their relationships and learning when they returned. Thus, "nurturing and attached relationships were argued to be essential to create the conditions for children to flourish" in ELC settings (Scottish Government, 2020b, no pagination). The main focus was advised as supporting children when they returned to "form a secure and emotionally resilient attachment base which [would] stand them in good stead as they grow and develop", in line with Realising the Ambition (Scottish Government, 2020b, no pagination).

All children and young people in Scotland could fully participate in ELC settings and schools from 11 August 2020 to 4 January 2021, when Scotland went into a second lockdown, and schools and ELC settings were closed one more time (Scottish Government, 2021a). Schools and ELC settings were advised to use remote learning until the end of January, except in the case of vulnerable children and those of key workers (Scottish Government, 2021a). For the

returning back, young children (in ELC and P1-3) were prioritised and planned to return full-time from 22 February while other primary and secondary schools pupils continued with remote learning until at least mid-March (Scottish Government, 2021a; Scottish Government, 2021b; Scottish Government, 2021c) (see Appendix 1 for a timeline of COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland). The guidances for ELC settings were kept updated in line with Scotland's Strategic Framework, which assessed the course of the COVID-19 pandemic and set out a strategic approach to managing it effectively (the changes implemented on guidances can be seen in Appendix 3). From April 2021, the restrictions were starting to be gradually eased in Scotland. Finally, it was announced that Scotland moved beyond level 0 on 9 August 2021, in which physical distancing and limits on gathering were removed (Scottish Government, 2021d). These changes were reflected in the guidances published for ELC settings and the measures such as physical distancing between adults, wearing face coverings and limits on children groupings being relieved.

In October 2021, the document *"Education recovery: key actions and next steps"*, primarily on schools and ELC settings, was published, summarising the ongoing response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in Scotland. Two focuses were highlighted for the Scottish education system while recovering from the pandemic:

- **Excellence** through raising attainment: ensuring that every child achieves the highest standards in literacy and numeracy, as well as the knowledge and skills necessary to shape their future as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens, and effective contributors;

- Achieving **equity**: ensuring every child has the same opportunity to succeed, with a particular focus on closing the poverty related attainment gap.

Scottish Government, 2021e, p.5, original emphasis

Once the strictest restrictions and measures of the COVID-19 pandemic were over, these could mean a slightly different focus from the above that emphasises recovery and the importance of wellbeing. From 17 March 2022, with the success of the vaccination programme and natural immunity to the infection in Scotland, a few protective measures remained for ELC settings. They tended to be more like general recommendations for

practitioners and ELC settings. They included some procedures in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak while keeping the emphasis on the importance of supporting children and the childcare workforce throughout the pandemic (Scottish Government, 2022b). The last guidance and updates for ELC settings were published in August 2022, and there were "no measures set out in regulations" and "a small number of routine protective measures" such as hand hygiene and routine cleaning practices remained. It was also recommended that measures be constantly reviewed in the event of future public health and clinical advice. At the point of submission of this thesis, COVID-19 inquiry is underway, which is expected to shed further light on the pandemic and its impact by listening to the experiences of people and identifying the lessons that need to be learned to be better prepared for the future (Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry, 2023).

This chapter has drawn on policy documents published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide the background that forms the basis for the following findings chapters. I now move on to critically discuss the findings of this research in the following chapters. The next chapter begins with exploring daily lives and practices in ELC settings and implementing the COVID-19 pandemic measures outlined in the guidances.

CHAPTER 5: THE LIFE IN ELC SETTINGS WITH THE IMPLEMENTATIONS OF COVID-19 MEASURES AND LIMITATIONS

This chapter begins to explore how childhoods and early learning and childcare have been conceptualised and experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the early learning and childcare settings in Scotland. As highlighted in the literature review, there have been many changes in the practices and pedagogies of ELC settings globally as a result of the measures taken both at the policy and practice levels during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bigras et al., 2021; Cortes Morales et al., 2021; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Lafave et al., 2021; Romero, 2021; Zecca, 2021). These changes were reported in studies from various country contexts. However, an in-depth analysis of how drastic policy changes were implemented, their impacts on the daily lives of ELC settings, and the experiences of children and practitioners was lacking. This chapter aims to present an analysis of the impact of guidances and measures in ELC settings situated within the context of Scottish policy and the ways in which they were implemented, enforced, enabled or silenced in daily life, practices and experiences.

Following the previous chapter presenting the timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland, as well as main guidances and relevant legislations, in this chapter, I begin to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic has been experienced in ELC settings in Scotland by exploring how key guidances were interpreted and implemented. As daily life and routines in ELC settings were largely reorganised around these guidelines at the time, a comprehensive review of the guidances focused on early learning and childcare entered the scope of this research. More specifically, this section discusses how practitioners and managers have taken up and implemented them in ELC settings. The section then explores how these were lived and practiced in the daily lives of settings, on particular routines and practices.

After discussing the main guidances and their implementation, the chapter adopts relational approaches to understand children's and practitioners' experiences in ELC settings in light of negotiated changes. The chapter focuses in separate sections on rearrangements of spaces and resources and reshaping relationships, exploring the relationships between children, practitioners and nonhuman actors such as guidances, spaces and materials, and the experiences of children within them.

5.1 Guidances on site: implementation of guidances in ELC settings

Following the previous contextual chapter, in this section, I explore the implementation of the guidances published by the Scottish Government for ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic by analysing the interviews with participants.

In the interviews, the participants working in various ELC settings pointed out the guidances published by the Scottish Government as the main source for management to get the latest information. The local councils were also referred to as another main source as they interpreted the legislation and adapted the policies, sometimes following a case-by-case approach. It was then stated that the management teams filtered the guidance to define the protocols and measures that should be enforced in their settings. Similarly, in the guidances published for a safe reopening of the ELC settings, managers were expected to undertake risk assessments on a setting-by-setting basis and consider all identified risks associated with COVID-19 and relevant guidance from Health Protection Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020b). Staff in ELC settings, including practitioners, were also expected to be involved in developing risk assessment processes and communication between staff and parents.

Looking at the main information gathering way of practitioners and the statements of the majority of practitioners, the way of conveying information to the practical level during the COVID-19 pandemic was “very hierarchical” and a “top-down” approach. However, this has been justified in some respects, especially in relation to the increasing workload of practitioners who worked directly with children. The majority of practitioners in this study emphasised the importance of receiving clear guidance either in a bulleted or summarised form and stated that they expected relevant information to be passed on to them from the upper management.

Another top-down approach was identified for reallocating staff teams, especially when ELC settings were reopened after the first lockdown. For a short period of time, it was reported that staff had to move to different settings to support other teams, such as when large numbers of staff isolated or shielded. Some participants criticised these top-down approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic. The head of an ELC setting, Lauren, argued that decisions on staff mobility, for instance, were senseless and lacked practicality. She shared:

> I was getting emails on a Friday night at nine o'clock, saying I want you to send two staff on Monday. I mean, there wasn't even any consideration as to how that would happen. You know, unless I contacted the staff over the weekend. I mean, it was just ridiculous. So, I think there were a lot of things that were not really thought out.
>
> Lauren, manager of an ELC setting, interview excerpt, December 2020

As Lauren pointed out in the excerpt above, the higher authority's decisions about staffing for individual settings appeared to be top-down. In this way, decisions could be made and implemented very quickly, especially during the crisis time. Crises situations accompanied by a higher degree of uncertainty, like the COVID-19 pandemic, can pose a threat to the functioning of systems, and responses cannot be a routine that institutions apply to a well-known situation but rather express quick solutions to ambiguous and complex problems (Saurugger, 2016). Therefore, as Lauren expressed above, the decisions and responses seemed to have been made without consulting ELC settings that have up-to-date information about their organisation and staffing teams, so it resulted in challenges for ELC environments and staff working there, especially during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic when uncertainty and inconsistency were at the highest.

These "hierarchical" or "top-down" processes were nothing new in the early learning and childcare field. But they "consist of distinct layers, where the professional body of knowledge is *produced* (academic research, scholarly debate), *transferred* (professional preparation, pre- and in-service training) and *applied* (practice)" (Urban, 2008, p.141, original emphasis). Similarly, this implies a powerful top-down flow of information about measures and implementations in ELC settings and a similar flow of expectations and advice on what to do at the practice levels of the hierarchy, especially during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The intensified top-down and hierarchical flow during the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced a dichotomy between where the knowledge was produced and applied (Urban, 2008). This hierarchical layout in ELC can be argued to have, on the one hand, increased the pressure on practitioners who found themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy and met the rising expectations during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, it can be argued that top-down decisions reduced the workload on practitioners when decisions needed to be taken and implemented very quickly.

During the interview, an expert in the childhood studies field, Joseph, acknowledged that the Scottish Government was "very good at recognising the problem and creating policies" but that the problem for him was "putting them into practice" during the COVID-19 pandemic. He further expressed that practitioners were quite uncertain about what they should do, especially at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and they searched online for how other countries implemented certain measures, such as cleaning and physical distancing in ELC settings. One of the participants, Patricia, a staff member in the local council, spoke of varying degrees of "direct and dynamic engagement" with legislation and "the need for quick responses due to the COVID-19 pandemic", which normally takes quite a long time at the policy level. She also mentioned "the lack of practical experiences of some people working at the policy level", thus implying that, similar to the arguments above, it was "difficult for them to interpret the precise consequences of ongoing changes in practice" of ELC settings.

The interviews highlighted the challenges in ELC settings on a practical level due to the implementation of measures published by the Scottish Government. Firstly, the guidance published by the Scottish Government and the implications of the guidance in practice were the subject of constant review and change over time. These have presented an overwhelming task and frustrating experience for heads, management teams and practitioners in ELC settings. The head of an ELC setting, Mindy, spoke about her work during this time as interpreting the guidance and disseminating relevant information:

> There's loads of emails, and every Monday, we have a weekly health and safety briefing. Every Monday, there is new information, and potentially new guidance or new ways, or updated risk assessment. So, everything is more intense.
>
> Mindy, manager of an ELC setting, interview excerpt, March 2021

The above excerpt illustrated how the constant changes have created quite unsettling contexts and challenges for staff working in ELC settings by introducing new information or new guidance in a very "intense" way.

Secondly, practitioners have often found parts of the guidances inconsistent with previous versions. Thus, guidances have not always been comfortably agreed upon and implemented in

ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some contexts, they have resulted in frustrating experiences for heads and practitioners. For instance, in the guidance published in May 2020, before the reopening, it was advised to care for children in small groups and minimise contact between the groups (Scottish Government, 2020a). In the later guidance, published in June 2020, "small cohort working", meaning up to 8 children working with the same staff members as much as possible, was advised (Scottish Government, 2020b). The heads and practitioners in this study stated that they made certain preparations according to this guidance. However, about a month later, in late July, the "consistent cohorts of 8" decision was withdrawn, and the general approach to "minimise the size of groups where possible" was adopted, allowing the group to be up to 25 to 30 children (Scottish Government, 2020c). As in this example, the rapid change in the guidances with serious consequences for the operation of settings posed many challenges to managers and practitioners in practice just a few weeks before the reopening. The practitioner Rita talked about this:

> We [the staff team] went back a week early, preparing the bubbles[21], preparing the children into groups... And two days before we went to reopen, the guidance was changed, and everything we did, we had to dismiss and start again.
>
> Rita, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

Rita's excerpt above exemplified the impact of the rapid change in guidances on the practice level in ELC settings by "dismissing" the certain change and "starting" over with another change in a very short time. Despite the difficulties, practitioners were flexible, dynamic and responsive in crisis situations. The adaptability and flexibility of practitioners to respond to multiple shifts and rapid changes were stated in various studies (Bussey et al., 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Negrette et al., 2022). Also, many practitioners in this study expressed that although they were not always satisfied with the implications of guidances in their settings, they felt compelled to follow them, especially at the beginning of the pandemic when the measures were stricter.

[21] Dividing children into smaller groups, as imposed by Scottish Government guidances prior to the first reopening in order to limit contact between children, was often referred to as creating "bubbles" by the participants of this study. Therefore, I have often used the term "bubble" to refer to smaller groups of children in the rest of the thesis.

Thirdly, the practitioners interpreted parts of guidances as "grey" areas as they contained "ambiguous" statements and were open to interpretations. The practitioners also mentioned that the implications of guidances in ELC settings seemed to differ depending on the local authorities' and management teams' interpretations and the physical properties of each setting. For instance, practitioner Ivan provided an example regarding "cleaning". In the guidance, it was required to wash soft furnishings every day. However, he claimed plenty of cases, such as rugs on the floor, curtains or the soft parts of the sofas which could not be washed. Thus, Ivan stated:

> It seems that there [was] no hard and fast rule about that. …there [was] no clear line about what [was] a soft furnishing and what could be done to wash it every day.
>
> Ivan, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

Ivan's quote noted that the measures were not "hard rules" for the settings and were somewhat adaptable. On the one hand, this implies the agency of practitioners to decide how to apply the "rules" imposed by the guidances by disregarding some and activating others depending on the applicability of their environment. It is argued in the literature that practitioners' agency is framed by structures that include physical or embodied ones, such as physical spaces or resources and generalisable procedures, such as curriculum or guidelines (Wagner et al., 2019). As exemplified above, practitioners' agency interacted with the individual, such as their own interpretations and beliefs, and the structural and social conditions, mainly guidances, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, openness to interpretation created further difficulties for heads and administrators in ensuring that clear information was communicated to practitioners and implementing the measures in the most "accurate" and "precise" way possible. It is important to note that the guidances did not approach measures as an all-or-nothing approach. Instead, they contained statements that may benefit public health even if used partially (e.g. Scottish Government, 2020j). While some flexibility and autonomy were possible for practitioners in ELC settings to implement the guidances, such as implementing pragmatic and proportionate control measures to mitigate risks, managers and practitioners seemed to need more concrete and precise statements in guidances that could reduce the uncertainty during the challenging time.

5.2 Guidances as (re)shaping daily life in ELC settings: "we have to do our days slightly differently."

The everyday practices and routines in ELC settings unfold in interactions between children and adults, staff working in the sector, families, communities, regulations, measures and guidances as well as physical environment. The relations between all these have constantly shifted and were rearranged in unpredictable ways and patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic. All might pursue complex and contradictory interests. Over time, the guidances published by the Scottish Government have been one of the main structures that regulate, organise and shape daily life in ELC settings to overcome the crisis situation. Therefore, in this section, I discuss the implications of guidances on the aspects of everyday practices and routines in ELC settings. These include what guidances were imposed on the settings, how the measures were implemented by practitioners and how practitioners and children responded to them. Looking at the guidances updated over time, many changes were brought to the functioning of the settings, from daily practices to the use of materials and interactions between people. All the advice that guidances suggested and implementations in ELC settings can be found in detail in Appendix 3, including the changes made over time.

The reviewed literature in this thesis showed that ELC services had to dramatically change their ways of operating all over the world with the impact of socio-political factors, including government policies, public health measures, the spreading of COVID-19 and the strategies adopted to manage it (Bigras et al., 2021; Gomes et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021). The impacts have been suggested depending on context; some have implemented minor changes (e.g. having handwashing routines) while others have introduced stricter measures that have a significant impact on life in ELC settings (e.g. staggered attendance), due to the unstructured and uncertain nature of lockdowns and additional measures (Cortes Morales et al., 2021; Romero, 2021; Zecca, 2021).

In this study, participants expressed radical changes in ELC settings following reopening after the first lockdown, so daily practices and routines were not the same for children and adults when they returned. The implementations of the COVID-19 pandemic measures were described as "a lot of change, a lot of upheaval, and a lot of movement" by practitioner Layla,

from the physical layouts of the settings to the pedagogical practices. The practitioners stated the initial measures taken in the first weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic as keeping disinfecting all areas, surfaces and resources; not accepting any visitors; encouraging parents to keep their children at home if they did not feel well or had any symptoms. Following these, certain materials and toys were removed following the guidances. Table 8 (a summarised version of Appendix 3) describes how life in ELC settings was (re)shaped through the implementation of guidances and what changes occurred in the practices most cited by practitioners during the interviews. The table can be read as the summary of what the guidances suggested, how the measures had been implemented, what concerns had arisen, and what opportunities had emerged. In the rest of this section, I discuss in detail these practices that are important for further discussions in this thesis.

Table 8 Summary of the measures and limitations in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland

	main advice by guidances	implications for ELC settings	concerns around practice	opportunities appeared	compromises
The practices appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic in ELC settings (in order to limit contacts)					
creating 'bubbles'	A general approach to minimise the size of groups where possible' was introduced in June 2020. Cohorts of children should not be in close contact with other cohorts, and they should not mix freely.	Most ELC settings need to divide children into groups and adapt their environments (space and resources)	challenges for some ELC settings regarding arranging the space, resources and also staffing	working with small numbers of children (closer and stronger relationships)	having barriers to separate children's groups and space indoors and outdoors
face coverings	Face coverings for practitioners were not required when they were working directly with the children. Adults who were not working directly with children were advised to wear face coverings.	-Parents/carers were required to wear face coverings during the drop-off and pick-up times -Staff working with different groups of children had to wear face coverings	-limit communications with children -a barrier for facial expressions	became shared experiences between staff and parents/carers	-practitioners needed to wear a face covering, preferred to wear 'funny' ones -playful acts with masks
physical distancing	Adults were required to follow physical distancing rules, including parents and carers, while they were interacting with the other adults in the ELC settings. No requirement for children.	-maintaining a distance from other adults (for some staff) - maintaining a distance from children (few staff) (especially at the beginning)	-confusion related to interactions with children -working with children at a close distance had caused concern	-adults might be less involved in children's space -less intervention in children's play	most staff did not keep their distance from the children
The practices strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic in ELC settings (to ensure hygiene measures)					
hand washing	All staff and children were required to wash their hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds at certain times.	Children were encouraged and supported to do this at regular intervals throughout the day	interruption for children's daily flow	-serve as a reassuring point -serve as an indicator for transition	using songs while hand washing (in the beginning)
cleaning practices	Enhanced cleaning practices were introduced. There should be routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched objects and hard surfaces. Toys and equipment that children access should be cleaned each day, between sessions and at the end of the day.	-limiting the range of toys and materials -excessive workload for practitioners -implied timetabled structure for practitioners	-created disruptive moments throughout the day -shortage of materials and toys	-more recognising outdoor play opportunities -maximising the time spent outdoors	resting bundles of resources rather than washing them
uses of outdoors	Maximising use of outdoor spaces. Where ELC services have access to an outdoor area or garden, they should try to use this space as much as possible across the day	-spending longer time outside -adapting daily routines -having regular trips to beaches, forests	concerns around children's free movement and choices (being inside or outside)	rich learning opportunities	starting the day outside
The practices changed during the COVID-19 pandemic in ELC settings (to limit transmission risks)					
food practices	Having set snack times for cohorts; whether it would be beneficial for children to stay in play spaces to eat; maximising the use of the outdoor environment for dining	-having more designated approaches to snack and lunch time -food became prepared and served by adults -some practices, e.g. baking was limited	-concerns about children's involvement in daily life -concerns about children missing out on experiential learning opportunities		children could bake individually
transition time	The arrangements for parents to drop off and collect children require careful consideration to ensure that large gatherings of people can be avoided and physical distancing maintained.	-limitations on the practices of transitions from home to ELC settings -staggered transition periods for drop-off and pick-up times -parents were not allowed inside	-communications between practitioners and parents/carers were interrupted -children lost opportunities to spend time with their parents/carers inside the building	starting the day outside, encouraging children to spend more time outside	-practitioners prepared videos to welcome children -having brief meetings with parents/carers with physical distancing
The practices limited during the COVID-19 pandemic in ELC settings (to limit transmission risks)					
singing	-Singing should not happen indoors as an organised, large group activity (October 2020) -Four levels system introduced in May 2021. At level 4, it was advised that singing should not happen indoors as an organised large group activity. Singing was allowed indoors and outdoors for children at levels 3, 2 and 1. -Singing outdoors and indoors is permitted for children and adults (July 2021)	in the beginning, it was used with other practices, e.g. practising handwashing then became a controversial issue: if children initiated it, adults did not stop	-some children stopped themselves while singing -concerns around children's loss of learning experiences -concerns around children's communication skills due to limitations		-creating videos and sharing them with children and families (especially during the lockdowns) -using recorded songs, music
sand, water, playdough play	-It is recommended that children access toys and equipment that are easy to clean. Resources such as sand, water and playdough should be used only by one cohort of children (June 2020). -Water and playdough should be replaced on a daily/sessional basis when groups change. (July 2020)	resources such as water, sand and playdough were removed for a certain period	some children started to avoid touching certain resources	introducing more natural resources for some settings	alternative practices, e.g. replacing playdough daily; preparing individual ones

New constructions within the practices and language(s) emerged from the changing practices and routines in the early years. As an example, participants admitted that they were "COVID-centred", similar to their use of being "child-centred" when describing the pedagogy of their settings, due to a greater focus on changing practices and health and safety measures and their impact on children and life in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some practices, such as "creating bubbles", were imposed on ELC settings and perpetuated in the daily life of settings. Thus, managers and practitioners had to find ways to implement and operate them in ways they had not used before. Instead of the term "bubble", the terms "small groups" and "cohorts" were used to describe dividing groups of children in official government guidances until the publication of the guidance in May 2021 (version 8). However, as the interviews showed, the term "bubble" was widely used in the everyday language of practitioners.

The "bubble" practice brought significant changes, e.g. dividing children into groups and adapting the environment and resources, which were especially pronounced for larger settings that hosted large numbers of children and staff to minimise contact between people. The practitioners reported their experiences and shared moments of worry, surprise and hope during major changes. Practitioner Dorothy interpreted these changes as:

> sort of mini nurseries within the building… It's an experiment. I guess we would never have been able to do that [creating bubbles] in real life.
>
> Dorothy, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

As Dorothy noted above, this practice was not common to most ELC settings prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and "bubbles" were one of the changes that would not have been possible otherwise. Therefore, what happened for Dorothy was "unrealistic" and could not occur in "real life". The use of this phrase implies the sharp distinction between life in ELC settings before and during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of major shifts. Within these, practitioners and managers in this study expressed their surprise and the benefits that came with the "bubbles" and their frustration with the organisation and allocation of the staff team. These are explored in discussions in the following sections.

In the interviews, practitioners mentioned the importance of routines in children's daily lives and the changes that have occurred in the routines of ELC settings with the implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations. In literature, routines are defined as "recurrent" and "predictable" activities which are embedded in the social life of the settings (Corsaro, 1990; Corsaro & Rizzo, 1988) and providing a sense of "security" and "shared understanding of belonging" within a group (Corsaro, 1990, p.12). Similarly, routines were seen in this study as a "bit of an anchor", which provided children and practitioners with a safe space to share and act. For instance, practitioner Ivan talked about how a handwashing routine helped some children regulate their daily lives when the settings were fully reopened:

> I have seen some children who usually require additional support. Now [they] looked upon handwashing as their go to ritual that brings them relief, predictability, and confidence and things like that… So, it has become a tactile, reassuring thing for some children. So, in some ways, it's good to have some routines that are left to us.
>
> Ivan, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

Ivan spoke about the positive aspects of having a solid and concrete routine, especially for children needing additional support. In this case, it was a handwashing routine. That included certain spaces such as a bathroom or handwashing facilities and certain repeated acts. The instructions were clear, and children and adults were given visual instructions on how to carry out the action in accordance with the COVID-19 precautions. Thus, as Ivan noted, the routine could be very predictable and be a reassuring point in a time of uncertainty in some children's lives. Other practitioners have frequently cited the benefits of having some routines as helping children adapt to changing life, especially for children who felt anxious when they returned to settings where many changes had occurred. Here, Madeline explained how valuable it was to have routines in the setting at the time of reopening:

> We'll have to think about the environment and looking at routines and maybe having some more routines initially because I think it will be reassuring for children that are anxious. Maybe having a song, gather time extra on the day…
>
> Madeline, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

Looking at both excerpts above, Ivan's and Madeline's, I suggest that routines can provide a sense of control and some degree of stability to prevent daily life from becoming confusing and sometimes chaotic (Hansen et al., 2017) and to aid in coping in times of uncertainty, like the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Madeline mentioned gathering times as a reassuring point of the day, providing a kind of predictability and stability to children by providing a space to make connections and opening conversations on feelings and emotions.

The literature argues that having consistent and predictable routines in children's lives is beneficial for children's wellbeing and helps them manage the challenges (Wildenger et al., 2008). Considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns on children's lives, uncertainties and substantial changes were clearly presented in the literature review chapter. Within this, ELC settings and routines can be seen as spaces where children find a sense of normality with familiarity after major changes in their lives, such as prolonged lockdowns (Capurso et al., 2020). Aslanian's (2017) study stated that the strength of the established routines in early years settings made children more robust in the face of changes. Therefore, it made sense for practitioners to emphasise the importance of maintaining or reinforcing certain routines in their settings during challenging times. Similarly, the importance of having certain routines in the daily life of ELC settings has heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As well as emphasising the importance of routines and strengthening certain practices, i.e. handwashing, it was noted that some practices in ELC settings were significantly interrupted by implementing the guidances during the COVID-19 pandemic. Singing was stated as a key practice embedded in the daily life of settings and emerged in many forms during children's daily activities and play by practitioners. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, it could be performed within designated sessions where children and adults could gather and sing together, could be accompanied by instruments and movement, or children could initiate it and then followed by adults at any time during the day. With the COVID-19 measures, singing practices, especially for adults, were hugely limited by the guidances, and it became one of the controversial practices in ELC settings.

Initially, until 30 August 2020, there were no regulations about singing, and it was even recommended to accompany the handwashing practice at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Ivan explained how specific songs were used with handwashing to

make sure that children washed their hands for 20 seconds just before the first lockdown:

> We taught children songs before the first lockdown. So, we did make two weeks of really, really solid, song-based handwashing training just before the lockdown. And that was really good. That was really worth doing.
>
> Ivan, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

In October 2020, it was advised that "singing should not happen indoors as an organised, large group activity", but it was also recognised that "children sing naturally in the course of activities and play, and should not be discouraged from doing so, and that singing can also be used to comfort young children when necessary" (Scottish Government, 2020j, no pagination). Updates to the guidance released in May 2021 introduced more detailed regulations on singing, depending on where it was performed, indoors or outdoors; who performed it, children or adults; and what the protection level[22] allowed (see Appendix 3 for more details). In this way, this particular practice, and indeed life in ELC settings, has become more restricted and regulated by the guidances.

The importance and value of singing in ELC settings and the beneficial impact on children are clearly articulated in the literature, underpinned by Froebel's principles and work (Powell & Goouch, 2019). The participants of this study also acknowledged the value of singing; therefore, the limitations were often interpreted as "tricky" and "trivial", and they spoke of the "no singing policy" being inconsistent with their own beliefs, practices and pedagogies. They also expressed that they had to make changes to many ways of doing things because they could not use singing in the flow of the day as they were used to doing. It was clear that some of the usual practices in ELC settings, children's daily experiences and practitioners' pedagogical beliefs were hampered by the COVID-19 measures. Another implication of the limitations on singing was identified as its indirect impacts on children, as adults were not allowed to sing. Although there were no limitations on children regarding singing, they were soon found to stop

[22] The strategic approach to outbreak management based on the five levels (0-4) of restrictions in Scotland has also impacted the measures taken in ELC settings. The rules applied to singing at each level differed. For example, at level 4, singing was recommended not to be done indoors as an organised, large group activity, while at level 0 outdoor and indoor singing for children was allowed.

themselves from singing. This implied that the restrictions for adults in ELC soon became restrictions for children. The implication of the adult's lack of participation on children's participation could be argued. Adults have an active role in arranging learning contexts and steering the experiences to enhance the possibility for children to reach "greater autonomy in their own capabilities" and support them "in actualising their idea" in the context of ELC (Ghirotto & Mazzoni, 2013, p.304). As Wyness (2009) points out, institutional priorities could restrain the adults' involvement in children's participation experiences. In this context, the restriction on singing for adults, practitioners' own constraints have affected the opportunities they could provide in ELC settings. The policy and restrictions that children were not a part of has further restricted children and their experiences, as seen here.

Some practices and routines have already been discussed in this section to show the complexity of and (re)shaped daily lives in ELC settings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and published guidances. The complexities are taken further to explore messy relations in ELC settings in the rest of this chapter, focusing firstly on relations with space and resources and secondly on human relationships in ELC settings.

5.3 (Re)shaping relations with space and resources in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

It is suggested that historical notions, knowledge and conceptualisations about childhoods have created special places for children, for instance, early learning and childcare settings with particular spatial organisations (Millei, 2018). Kraftl (2006) argues, "idea(l)s of childhood are literally and materially constructed, in, through and as part of practices" (p.488). Similarly, Millei (2018) suggests that the construction of childhoods, symbolic meanings, are translated into creating practices, spaces and material arrangements of children's everyday life, and they are constantly changing. The emphasis on the relations between space, materials and children can open a different temporal dimension for both children and adults (Clark, 2020). It is based on the assumption that there is a mutual state of interdependence and coexistence, both in relation to other human beings and the material world (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

In the previous sections, I explored the impact of guidances on the routines, practices and daily life of ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic, also presenting them on a table. In this

section, the particular focus is placed on (re)arrangements of "spaces[23]" and "resources" as a result of the implementation of COVID-19 pandemic measures and regulations. The aim is to uncover the experiences of children and practitioners by analysing practitioners' narratives that demonstrate complexities in these arrangements. These explorations also aim to provide the foundations for the discussions in the following chapters, specifically, how these have become important in the construction of childhoods and early learning and childcare during COVID-19.

5.3.1 Space and resource arrangements in ELC settings

The importance of the physical environment has often been mentioned in the early childhood education literature (Ellis, 2004a), and it has been defined as the "third teacher" (Dowling, 2010), predominantly in the Reggio Emilia approach (Robson & Mastrangelo, 2017; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Makin (2003) defines the term environment in ELC settings as "an aggregate of conditions and influences on learning, including both the physical environment (layout, range of resources, access and use) and the psychosocial environment (interactions between staff and children, among peers)" (p.327). In this part, I explore the adjustments made in ELC environments after the reopening in response to the COVID-19 pandemic measures, focusing on materials and space.

As mentioned above, creating "bubbles" brought all sorts of (re)arrangements in the overall space and resources of ELC settings, depending on their physical properties in line with the Scottish Government's guidances. For instance, practitioner Rita commented on what space looked like after the necessary changes applied in her setting:

> We have 1, 2, 3 bubbles... We have had to open up a small room which is attached to the main nursery. So, we've had to separate the toilets, separate the entrances, and also divide up the staff. So, some operate within smaller rooms, and some operate in the larger room... The planning has become quite problematic.

[23]As discussed in the literature review chapter, the term space is understood as the physically and symbolically complex site of children and practitioners, rather than a location (de St Croix and Doherty, 2023). Children and practitioners actively shape it in relationships with others and under ongoing constructions (Horton & Kraftl, 2006).

Rita, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

As Rita noted above, creating "bubbles" came with dividing the overall space, sometimes creating "new" divided spaces for the bubbles, and separating the common areas such as bathrooms and entrances. In this study, space is understood as socially produced in daily interactions and intertwines the physical environment with resources and personal interpretations of the physical environment (Vuorisalo et al., 2015). The interpretation of space is not independent of the planned or organised environment. However, the conceptualisation and configuration of spaces can facilitate, invite or hinder the interactions (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007) in ELC settings. It can be argued that necessary changes in physical spaces and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic affected children's experiences and practitioners by shaping the possibilities for their actions. As some children were reported to settle into more compact spaces and others had a chance to use larger spaces, some limitations were noted in using resources during the interviews. These are explored in the following subsections.

5.3.1.1 Creating "home-like" spaces

The measures and changes implemented have prompted practitioners to create "mini nurseries" within the confined space dedicated to a particular group of children. These changes created some challenges for some settings in this study. For instance, practitioner Shelby expressed her feelings as:

> My classroom feels so cramped at the moment, trying to fit in like a very small water area, a very small book corner, and a very small block area. Whereas, you know, if we have the … [whole space, we] will have double the space.

Shelby, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

Above, Shelby noted that the space allocated for her bubble felt "so cramped" due to the division, with smaller spaces for each corner. Some practitioners found these "new" imposed spaces unfavourable and spoke of their efforts to create a "safe" space in ELC settings. A safe space in ELC often encompasses various aspects that contribute to a nurturing and supportive atmosphere and foster children's sense of security, physical safety and emotional wellbeing (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2017). Practitioners noted that since so many changes had taken place

in the lives of the children, it was particularly important to establish a safe atmosphere for them. Practitioners' efforts thereby could be explained by adults' desire to protect children from the "corrupt" surrounding world, where the dangers of the COVID-19 pandemic were, by constructing a form of environment in which children could be offered protection, security and continuity (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Practitioner Haley talked about how they created space for her "bubble" in a large setting that accommodated five bubbles. Due to limited designated space for each "bubble", the gym hall was allocated for the children and staff team in Haley's "bubble" when they returned fully after the first lockdown. She described their experiences with this particular space:

> We found over two months it wasn't really working because we felt this [gym hall] was quite big, and we don't really get those sorts of small spaces that we wanted to create. People were passing through all the time, which was interrupting play, and this presented lots of barriers. We wanted to have a space where it was nurturing. So, we moved to the room that we are in now. I really wanted to create a welcoming and inviting space... I was able to create little pockets of play experiences for children, you know, if they wanted to come in for a rest or some quiet time…We felt in our previous space, we never really managed that.
>
> Haley, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

Figure 3 The picture shared by Haley to show their "new" constructed "welcoming and inviting" space*



**I obtained permission from the practitioners to use the images they shared. I also edited the images to prevent them from being easily recognised when needed.*

As seen in the excerpt above, Haley shared her strong desire to create a "nurturing" and "welcoming" space where both children and practitioners could feel part of the space and have a quiet and calm atmosphere when needed. As a staff team, they felt that it was not possible to achieve this with the space allocated to them in the first place. This place was described as too large, so they could not get a nurturing feel, and too busy, so they would often be interrupted by others. These were interpreted as posing challenges in having a "home-like" space. Kampmann and Nielsen (2004) argue that "home-like, cosy places characterised by close child/adult relations and where conversation is prioritised alongside children's play and self-activity" (p.677). For Hansen et al. (2017), cosiness is "characterised by a relaxed atmosphere with conversations between the participants" (p.244), and these places relate to ways of being together that emphasise conversations and play. Places can be identified as dynamic and fluid and open networks of social relations within these changes (Ellis, 2004b). It can be argued that appreciating the space in ELC settings, with the creation of small groups, can open opportunities for more "intense" relationships in this research, discussed in section 5.4.2.

5.3.1.2 Creating "restrictive" spaces

In addition to practitioners' efforts to create safe, nurturing and welcoming environments for children, implementing the COVID-19 pandemic measures also meant a space of various physical barriers for children and practitioners to experience in ELC settings. It is worth noting that ELC settings, which were previously reported to have operated an open flow policy, have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. With COVID-19 pandemic measures, while some settings used closed doors between rooms to maintain separation, in others, materials such as curtains, preferred for indoor spaces, and nets or fences for outside spaces, were used to divide overall space. For instance, the divided outdoor space in Linda's setting can be seen in figure 4 below, aiming to keep two bubbles separate outside, which were also kept separate inside.

Figure 4 The photo sent by Linda representing the divided outdoor space



The division between spaces and children's groups meant limiting children's mobility and freedom to use space all over ELC settings. Space is a socially produced context consisting of physical boundaries and symbolic markers to make possible or prevent certain types of interactions and behaviours (Ellis, 2004b; Shilling, 1991). While these divided spaces limit interactions between groups of children and interactions with the space, they reproduce certain social principles like surveillance practices and teacher hierarchy (Gallagher, 2004; Millei, 2018; Shilling, 1991). For instance, more confined spaces as a result of the separation were

highlighted by some practitioners as children were more subject to the gaze of adults. Linda exemplified that in her bubble:

> a lot of children… [didn't] have an opportunity to find a quiet space out of adult gaze because the space [was] smaller.
>
> Linda, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

The everyday space of children could facilitate "the control and regulation of the child's body and mind through regimes of discipline, learning, development, maturation and skill" (James et al., 1998, p.38). In the above quote, smaller spaces subject to the adult gaze increased the likelihood that children's bodies and behaviours were under adult control. Considering the barriers in ELC settings, some aspects of practitioners' surveillance practices were strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic. The divided spaces can be understood more hierarchically, with clear boundaries, rules and routines. However, this does not mean that children cannot assert some control over them and negotiate their own ways of using spaces (Gallacher, 2005). Some of the children's negotiations are discussed in chapter 7.

The interviews also revealed efforts by some practitioners to "soften" the appearance of physical barriers and the symbolic meanings the barriers may have had, which enabled or prevented certain interactions. For instance, Morris highlighted the features of the smallness and softness of the barriers in his setting. He stated that:

> We made a small barrier… there's not a wall, you know, there is, we made like kind of barriers, kind of as soft as possible.
>
> Morris, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

Morris' desire to have as "soft" barrier as possible can be associated with practitioners' concerns about having such separation in their settings regarding children's interactions with peers in other groups. The "soft" and small barriers could allow children to see and interact with each other to some degree, but they were still limited. Also, these "soft" materials could imply the temporality of physical barriers, unlike a wall that could not be removed easily and did not allow seeing to the other side. In interviews, many practitioners reflected on their

discomfort regarding implementing these barriers in their settings. Their reflections are further analysed by the fact that barriers and divisions are also seen as disrupting children's experiences, specifically their participation in daily life, in chapter 6.

5.3.1.3 Use of resources within limitations

Dividing children into "bubbles" also meant allocating materials and resources into "bubbles" and resulted in an unequal distribution of resources, smaller amounts for each bubble in some settings. Practitioner Diego described the splitting of the outdoor space in his setting as follows:

> There is the big willow cottage, the wooden one. Next, there is a big sandpit. The sandpit is in the middle at the end, next to the willow cottage. We don't have it on our end [bubble]... But we have the tree, which they don't. And that is also important for them to have because of the balance, control, independence, confidence and everything.
>
> Diego, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

In Diego's setting, the physical division of the garden created different layouts on both sides in terms of the children's interactions with the resources on their sides of the space. As a result, it could potentially be argued that the daily experiences of children and adults in these spaces differed. For Diego and many other practitioners in this study, the diversity of opportunities provided for children's experiences emerged as a concern for practitioners as they could not support children's exploration and learning to the same level due to the lack of specific resources or space limitations. Similarly, another practitioner, Leanne, found the division of resources and differentiation of children's experiences "tricky" because "[children] 've not got the wealth of resources or the richness that can extend opportunities for learning".

Besides the above, almost all settings in this study displayed only a minimum amount of resources. Due to the cleaning requirements, practitioners replaced them with natural or construction materials in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, the use of certain resources such as sand, water and playdough was limited for a certain time in ELC settings to limit the risk of transmission, in line with the published guidances. The practitioner Megan described the resources they had in her setting as:

> absolute bare minimum. There might be blocks, there might be some pens, but there isn't the spectrum of resources that they had inside previously.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

Some practitioners criticised the compulsory changes, i.e. removing certain materials, brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic for making spaces "unstimulating", "uninteresting", and "unresponsive". For instance, Layla described changes in one specific area in her setting:

> Suddenly there is this water tray with no water in it. And very, for me personally, unstimulating, like general, even if it had water in, and I was just like, really boring. There's nothing around, everything's in a basket, they [children] can't see… So that was the photo for me that wasn't inviting play, that wasn't invited for children… I think I am being mindful that we are under COVID-19 as well, but these plastic resources that can be washed… That was very much my COVID-19 picture of this is how it shouldn't be, but this is what we're dealing with as practitioners.
>
> Layla, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

Figure 5 Photos taken by Layla from the "messy" corner of the setting to exemplify the "restricted" and "unresponsive" environment during the COVID-19 pandemic



The picture showed the "messy" corner, which was far from messy for Layla. It lacked the usual resources for children to engage with, so the corner was not inviting. Although she acknowledged that some measures should be implemented along with the COVID-19 pandemic, she disagreed with how they were implemented, as in this example.

In the absence of certain resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some practitioners reflected on themselves as a part of the stimulating environment. For instance, practitioner Tina stated that:

> …I consider myself a part of the environment. I am a resource and the room for the children.
>
> Tina, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

The above reflection of Tina is in line with how Dahlberg et al. (2013) explain the role of practitioners in early childhood education as they "[mobilise] children's meaning-making competencies, offering themselves as a resource to whom children can and want to turn, organising space, materials and situations to provide new opportunities and choices for

learning… listening and watching children" (p.87). As in the above excerpts by Layla and Tina, these practitioners reflected their belief in their role in preparing responsive environments to children's needs and wants, especially in constrained situations such as limited space and materials.

Some practitioners reflected limitations in the use of certain resources as concerns about children's learning opportunities during the interviews, while others focused more on children's changing experiences as a result of shifts in space and resources of ELC settings. For instance, having minimal resources in settings was interpreted by some practitioners as "beneficial" in some respects because they stated that they observed positive changes in children's play as they kept "removing more things from the space" (Joyce, practitioner). The interpretation behind this viewpoint was that, as discussed in chapter 6, practitioners expressed that removing more resources and enabling opportunities for outdoor spaces, loose parts and open-ended materials led children to engage in more imaginative and creative play (Smedley & Hoskins, 2020). For instance, Tovey (2017) states that in Froebelian settings, the range of commercial, plastic and replica play resources, often described as 'educational', are avoided. Thus, the simpler the resources, the more complex the play and the more diverse play themes and interactions, as children need to negotiate their ideas together (Tovey, 2017). It is also important to note that conceptions and values regarding play and childhoods differ across geographies and cultures (Gaskins, 2015; Gosso et al., 2015). For instance, in small-scale societies where fewer restrictions are placed on children's lives, play themes are linked to everyday life, and children can creatively adjust to available local resources, rather than structured toys, in the development of play activities (Gosso et al., 2015).

Another example from practitioner Erika illustrates children's changing play experiences regarding the division of space, comparing it to pre-pandemic times:

> A lot of children who were making those big constructions [in pre-pandemic times] are at the other end of the building, and they're using a smaller space now. It may have changed the type of structures being built, or perhaps in an interesting way. Some of the smaller blocks are being used. The same kind of construction but with smaller unit blocks rather than hollow blocks. The hollow ones are really big, and you can make something very big quickly. And the unit blocks, maybe more intricate, more detailed. And there are arches and different shapes.

Erika, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

In Erika's observation above, resources, namely the blocks, can be understood as creating possibilities for play in close relation to the space, as the physical environment can have a structural power on children's play experiences (Børve & Børve, 2017). In the above excerpt, materials and space seemed to play a determining role in the way the children used available resources and, indeed, in their play experiences, as it was observed that when the children had larger areas, they built larger buildings with "hollow blocks". They started to build smaller structures with "unit blocks", focusing on fine details in a tighter space. Thus, entanglements between children and the worlds in which they are situated can offer understandings of how spaces shape children's experiences and frame their ways of navigating their lives (Hackett et al., 2015).

5.3.2 Maximising the use of outdoor spaces and natural resources

The significance and benefits of children's opportunity to interact and connect with various outdoor spaces were highlighted, both in this study and in the literature (Abbott & Flynn, 2022; Engdahl & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Lafave et al., 2021; Wistoft et al., 2021), especially after the lockdown period, when not every child had a chance to access outdoors (Atiles et al., 2021; Bao et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021; Veraksa et al., 2021a). Outdoor play and learning were on the rise in Scotland before the COVID-19 pandemic, and as mentioned in chapter 4 they have become more prominent in Scottish Government documents in recent years (Care Inspectorate, 2018; 2019; Inspiring Scotland, 2018; 2019; Scottish Government, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic propelled it even further and increased recognition of its value. Nature and outdoor learning have been vital during the COVID-19 pandemic, both in the global and the Scottish context, and this has led ELC settings to rethink their pedagogical approaches (Abbott & Flynn, 2022).

In recognition of the low transmission risks outdoors and Scottish Government guidance (Scottish Government, 2020a; 2020b) to maximise the use of outdoor spaces, some practitioners stated that they reviewed their outdoor spaces during the first lockdown and had the urge to use outdoors more after the reopening. This view was crystallised in practitioner

Morris' comment that "there's been quite a drive to recognise the importance of outdoor play". The drive seemed like an opportunity for ELC settings in this study to appreciate the outdoor environments, thus reconsidering outdoor practices and alternating opportunities where the children could engage with natural resources and open-ended materials within their environments. The practitioner Megan explained changes they made to the outside areas in her setting by connecting nature and their own outdoor space, including the risk-taking elements and challenges to provide rich experiences for children in all spaces they were in. Megan also added that they mostly got positive feedback from the parents and children regarding these changes. The settings which did not have a separate outdoor space for each bubble reported that they found alternative spaces to visit, such as community gardens, forests and beaches, as much as they could. These spaces were seen as exploration sides with full sensory experiences for children (Inspiring Scotland, 2018; Scottish Government, 2013).

The freedom, flexibility and independent mobility that outdoor spaces can offer (Tovey, 2017; Wake & Birdsall, 2016) has been highlighted by most practitioners in this study as a degree of freedom children could have with fewer rules and regulations, which children were expected to follow in outdoor spaces. Thus, children were thought of as freer to run, scream or yell, which they could not display inside. Ellis (2004a) suggests that children have more control over space and time to follow their own ideas outdoors "unbound by adult rules of order, neatness and propriety" (p.85). Thus, they have a greater agency over their learning and play environment (Tonge et al., 2019). In this way, children have control over the choice of what they want to engage with and the length of time they engage with their particular ideas or the project they are working on (Clark, 2020). Children's agency could be located in social relations and interdependency (Esser et al., 2016) by reconstructing agency outside the dualisms of child and adult and actions and structure (Esser, 2016). In this way, children's agency could be understood as orchestration within the narrative structure produced by dynamic networks of actors (Oswell, 2013).

In the rest of this section, children's and practitioners' engagement with outdoor spaces and natural resources during the COVID-19 pandemic are explored. Across the interviews, it seemed outdoors created space for children to stand out with various actions, feelings and thoughts. At the same time, adults were active subjects by sharing knowledge, facilitating the space and having playful acts occasionally. It can also be argued that practitioners tended to position children as active agents in outdoor spaces, which provides a more flexible approach

to children's learning, starting from the idea that "adults and children should feel self-empowered to approach their learning as thoughtful, caring and intuitive human beings" (McNair et al., 2021, p.3). During the interviews, some practitioners often highlighted children's engagement with learning activities while playing outside, such as sorting the natural resources by size, colour or length and counting them. Demonstrating children's learning has always been important in ELC settings, not just during the COVID-19 pandemic. Figure 6 and the excerpt shared by practitioner Dorothy exemplify how important this is in ELC settings:

Figure 6 The picture sent by Dorothy to show learning opportunities outdoors



> I just thought it was really nice to have that image, you know, how there are still opportunities for numeracy and literacy outdoors and how we're using that with children. You know, nature provides that, you know, this activity, then we extended it, um, what the little girl said, and what she noticed about the size...
>
> Dorothy, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

As in Dorothy's excerpt, the interviews emphasised the importance of children's learning by exploring and engaging with natural resources outside and associating them with specific learning areas such as literacy and numeracy. These emphases can be thought of as strengthening the shift to greater participation in outdoor play experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as associating play as a tool for learning and learning activities (Dockett, 2011; Gol-Guven, 2017; Pramling-Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Rogers, 2011). This shows

that the outdoors can be used not only to play and have a good time in nature but also to achieve learning goals through pedagogical practices as above (Ärlemalm-Hagsér & Sandberg, 2017).

Following the arguments above, the narratives of some practitioners revealed that outdoor spaces such as forests and beaches were thought of as exciting, lively, and unknown spaces that offer children the freedom to explore and make discoveries. They were also treated as "secret" and "private" spaces by children because they were used by only one "bubble" at a time. Megan exemplified this by talking about one of their regular trips to a beach after a storm:

> After the big storm, children were commenting and they were like, "Is this our beach?" And I was like, "Yeah." And they're like, "It's different here today." And I was like, "What do you mean?" They noticed that some of the sand had like obviously been washed away. And there had been really big rivers of water coming out of the trees down onto the beach. And it cut huge channels in the sand as well. And they were commenting on all these things.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

As Megan described above, the children easily noticed the changes as they became familiar through regular visits. Megan described the children as they wondered what had happened to their "own" space. The space became a source of curiosity and inquiry in which children could be drawn to discuss possible changes. Outdoors provides meaningful learning opportunities which might not be replicated indoors. Children can explore the environment's ever-changing elements while the landscape remains decidedly familiar (McNair, 2019). They experience the seasons and are free to engage with natural resources during their play (Abbott & Flynn, 2022). All these can lead to various forms of interactions between children, peers, practitioners and the environment. The space was thus produced jointly by children and practitioners as well as nature in their everyday, complex social interactions and actions (Vuorisalo et al., 2015). Megan continued to talk about children's meaning-making within these interactions:

> They were really engaged and talking about all the different stuff that happened. Their answers were that the channels were caused by dinosaur tails. And no matter how many times we tried to talk about the weather, the weather had caused it. It still came back to dinosaurs. So, they found all these different things buried in the sand that were

> obviously being covered over again. It was always taken back to dinosaurs. "The dinosaurs put it here." Yeah, it was a brilliant place for them.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

The excerpts above could exemplify exploration through collaborative interactions between children, their peers, practitioners and the space and resources around them. It could be argued that the practitioners in this example facilitated meaningful conversations and were a part of them. However, Megan's scientific explanation for the changes could be interpreted as adults' desire to foreground children's knowledge by creating a space for knowledge sharing and teaching moments. It could also be interpreted as an attempt by practitioners to replace children's knowledge with correct terminology and could result in silencing children through the "teachable moment" (Blaisdell, 2016). In the narrative above, as Megan explained, children seemed to prefer creating and following their own stories and explanations in line with their deep interest in "dinosaurs" rather than what the practitioner offered. These might refer to the questions of "who decides what" or "whose knowledge or understanding" which are prioritised or promoted in the early years' field (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p.18) as adult competence is viewed as a desirable endpoint for the development of children (James, 2009; Kehily, 2009; Qvortrup, 2009; Woodhead, 2008). These will be discussed in the later findings of this study.

Interviews with practitioners revealed that the importance of "loose parts" in children's play had been recognised in many settings, with increased time spent outdoors in ELC settings and the reorganisation of playgrounds and materials. For instance, practitioner Haley stated in her setting:

> [they] place loose parts as a very high value because they're open-ended. Children can have lots of different experiences with them; they're open to endless possibilities.
>
> Haley, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

It is stated that loose parts materials provide "a constantly varying source of stimulation for children" compared to the fixed play materials designed for a particular use (Freeman & Tranter, 2011, p.69). Like Haley, many other practitioners in other settings have found that children's interest in loose parts has increased, and they have become key in children's play.

For example, practitioner Dorothy sent a photo of children transporting water from one area to another using loose part materials, figure 7 below. Looking at the picture, the loose parts had no single or obvious purpose in play; thus, children had to use their imagination while turning them into play objects. In addition, cooperation between children while engaging with loose parts was highlighted as children could not move the pieces on their own, so the benefits for children, such as the ability to work together and solve a problem, were also emphasised by some practitioners in this study.

Figure 7 The photo taken by Dorothy, showing the loose part play



Furthermore, the natural resources children engaged within forests and beaches were often seen as opportunities for children to have fun, explore, and learn. These natural resources, such as trees, seashells and stones, were expressed as things the children loved to collect, organise and categorise, as exemplified in figure 8 below. They were further expressed as a part of the children's play and referred to as "special treasures" that children brought to ELC settings and homes. It is suggested in the literature that children's access to complex, challenging and novel resources can lead to opportunities for challenging and creative play (Freeman &Tranter, 2011). These are discussed in chapter 6.

Figure 8 The photo taken by Megan, showing the "special" resources on the beach



This study argues that as children interacted more with the outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic, except the lockdown period, they were seen as having more freedom, space and flexibility to progress and overcome challenges (McNair, 2019). Constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic have opened new possibilities and territories in ELC settings. Space heavily influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic measures has been interpreted by children and practitioners and thus redefined in actions and interactions. The relationships between children and practitioners and between children are discussed in the next section.

5.4 (Re)shaping relationships in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

In the understanding of childhood studies, the social construction of childhood and adulthood includes a relational process that includes the agency of both children and adults (Punch & Vanderbeck, 2020), and they can be constrained in various ways by structural forces (Spyrou, 2018). Similarly, generational categories of children and adults "stand in relations of connection and interaction, of interdependence" (Alanen, 2001a, p.21).

In this section, I discuss how relationships, mainly between adults and children, in ELC settings have been (re)shaped as a result of shifted routines and practices, focusing on the constraints and opportunities on the relationships under the COVID-19 pandemic measures. As discussed in the previous sections, COVID-19 measures have shifted daily practices and life in ELC settings and impacted children and practitioners' experiences. On the one hand, some measures

have been described as having devastating effects on relationships, for example, the separation of children and space. On the other hand, measures such as creating smaller groups have facilitated different forms of relationships in ELC settings. These are discussed separately in this section. Finally, the relations of care in early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed, mainly focusing on the challenges the guidances and safety and health measures pose.

5.4.1 Disrupted relationships in ELC settings

One disruptive impact on the relationships in ELC settings has appeared with the implications of separating children into "bubbles" after all the children had returned fully. Several practitioners in this study mentioned that they had tried to keep as many friendship groups in the same bubble as possible. However, some friendship groups were separated. Practitioner Erika exemplified this period:

> When children first returned last August [2020], there was the possibility of seeing each other through windows, you know, seeing their friends who they had played with in March, before closing. Just that, like not having the opportunity to play with everybody. I think maybe those relationships have changed a bit, or they've become less strong, because over time, without seeing each other in the centre.
>
> Erika, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

Erika stated the possibility of changes in relationships among children, like "[becoming] less strong" over time when ELC settings stayed closed. The literature has reported that the interruption in friendship interactions continued after the lockdown period (Carter, 2023). When all the children were fully back, as Erika mentioned above, possible disruptions in children's relationships with their peers were emphasised, as children in a "bubble" could not interact closely with all their friends and could not mingle freely with children in other groups. The lack of opportunities to interact with familiar peers during the lockdowns and the interruption of maintaining stable friendships after returning negatively impacted children's relationships with their peers. Furthermore, some practitioners interpreted these separations as children had to create "new" relationships within their bubbles, and they "had to learn to be

friends" with each other. As a result, intragenerational relationships in bubbles and ELC settings have been reshaped as structural constraints, like the COVID-19 pandemic measures, have had a major impact on children's diverse positions. It can be argued that these positionings offer a number of opportunities and constraints for children to act, indeed, exercise their agency (James, 2009). While the relations between peers were limited on the one hand, "new" relationships were established on the other.

The shifts in ELC settings have disrupted not only "established" relationships between children but also between children and practitioners. First, previous sections showed that the requirements to follow the COVID-19 measures have imposed additional workload and burden for practitioners. Thus, the majority of practitioners in this study expressed that they did not have enough time to interact with children or had to prioritise some practices, such as cleaning over interacting with children, especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioner Serena's reflection exemplified this:

> My job role changed a lot because of COVID-19. You know, before, you had a lot more time to get really involved with children. But now you have to stop when you're in the middle of doing something because the whole place has got to get cleaned every hour, deep cleaned. So, you could be in the middle of doing something, and then you look at the clock, and you say to the child, "Okay, I'll come back to you in two minutes," and then you need to go in and clean everything.
>
> Serena, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

As in Serena's experience above, the requirement of deep cleaning resulted in many disruptive moments during the day regarding engagement between children and adults. The "scheduled" cleaning routines at specific times had been implemented for a certain period when the regulations were stricter. This resulted in practitioners spending more time "organising" the environment and enforcing COVID-19 measures than engaging with children. The literature has reported that practitioners' physical and emotional presence and supportive and enriching participation in children's experiences, such as constructing and maintaining play encounters, positively affect children's experiences in ELC settings (Pursi, 2022). Therefore, the practitioner's physical distance and organiser role during the COVID-19 pandemic, as in the

above excerpt, can be interpreted as an obstacle to warm, sensitive and playful interactions between children and adults (Katsiada et al., 2018).

Second, the measures like wearing face coverings and maintaining physical distancing for adults were found to have a devastating effect on relationships between children and adults during the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioner Sophia talked about her experiences in the setting as a new member of staff. Because she was mostly in an office role during the COVID-19 pandemic and was not assigned to a specific group of children, she was required to wear a mask and keep a physical distance from the children and other adults. She expressed that:

> I'm new. I'm really anxious about that. I've got a mask pretty much like this one *[showing her mask].* So, I spend all day in it because I'm in an office. When I go into where children are, I kind of keep it on because I'm encountering other adults. …obviously, children are kind of used to this idea. Now, they're mostly okay with it. But occasionally, I sometimes do this *[pretending to take off her mask to illustrate what she was doing with children]*. You know, I want to say, "I'm here," because you suddenly think they can't see any facial expressions… I need to reassure them that "I'm nice."
>
> Sophia, practitioner, emphasis added, interview excerpt, February 2021

As Sophia shared in this excerpt, the mask created a barrier to communication between children and practitioners by potentially causing difficulty in identifying emotional expressions. Other participants in this study also found this COVID-19 pandemic measure damaging relationships between children and adults. Crimon et al. (2022) stated that mask wearing affected both children's and practitioners' communicative behaviour. For instance, practitioners' belief that it masks communication and prevents non-verbal cues received by children might impact the way and frequency of practitioners communicating with children. In addition to these, for Sophia in the excerpt, being a "stranger" to the children felt like an additional barrier. Thus, she mentioned that she preferred to occasionally remove her mask to allow children to see her face for a short time in order to make up for the "break" in her relationship with the children.

5.4.2 Strengthened relationships in "bubbles"

As discussed in the previous section, although the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations have altered relationships between children and adults, there have been other possibilities for reconnection in ELC settings, even under constrained conditions. The majority of practitioners expressed that "bubbles", which required fewer children and consistent interactions with the same group of children and adults, made a big difference in positive relationships and interactions between children and adults. Rita reflected on this:

> I would think that's one of the main benefits we have that we are working with fewer children. So, our interactions are of better quality. We were able to spend more time with them because we couldn't get around more children. And I think it's also better for the children. The setting is calm. I mean, there's a difference between having 50 children in the setting and 25. That's just clear.
>
> Rita, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

Practitioners mentioned that interacting with fewer children benefited both the children and the practitioners themselves. As Rita pointed out, interacting with fewer children resulted in having "better quality" interactions as a result of "[spending] more time" with children. Many practitioners in this study talked about the benefits of having smaller groups for keeping track of children's individual needs and interests and for having a holistic view of an individual child. In addition, most practitioners stated that in their bubbles, children and adults were closer to each other, they knew each other better, and their relationships were stronger. It was also mentioned that some children who might need more support benefited more from "closer" relationships within their settings. These "closer" relationships were described as helping these children to "thrive", "build their confidence", and feel "more secure". Practitioner Serena commented on that:

> You recognise quiet children more, and you can kinda like go over with them and find out what their interests are because they're more visible in a smaller establishment rather than a large one.
>
> Serena, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

As Serena pointed out above, practitioners seemed to have more time and opportunity to interact with "invisible" children within the small groups by "[finding] out" an individual child's interests. The literature suggests that practitioners can find it harder to observe and document children who are shy and quiet (Cowan & Flewitt, 2020). Therefore, it turned out that the bubble practices were especially beneficial for children struggling in large and busy settings. Other participants often expressed in this research that the use of large settings, with more than 60 children using the same large space, did not work well for many children due to the spaces without calm and quiet areas and the amount of movement around the space. Hence, they reported the lack of opportunities for children's 'close' relationships with adults.

A specific example of establishing "closer" and "stronger" relationships within small groups is discussed here. With special emphasis on reconnecting after a full return to ELC settings after the first lockdown, many practitioners described peer relationships as "stronger" within the same bubbles, including the benefits of children "being part of a group", strengthening "group identity" and "feeling of belonging". In the following excerpt, practitioner Dorothy explained how they, as a "bubble", united and created a group identity and symbolic meanings:

> ...we called ourselves the "tigers". So, it's been a real, give them [children] a real sense of identity as this new little group. And we call, like, we called the community garden, the "tiger" garden. And when we cook things on the fire, that's like "tiger" soup, ...when we go to the beach, we call it "tiger" beach. Children just love this sense of identity. We have a "tiger" song. The children just really enjoy that feeling of community within their new little group, and they all really, really enjoyed that. They still refer to themselves as "tigers".
>
> Dorothy, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

In Dorothy's excerpt, it seemed like children and practitioners, as a part of the "tiger" community, formed a "unique" group identity and united around it. The relational and dynamic processes moved between children in the group, practitioners and the wider space. The group identity permeated the everyday practices and life of children, such as preparing "'tiger' soup", visiting "'tiger' garden", and "'tiger' beach". Children seemed to appreciate the "feeling of community", as Dorothy explained and continued to stick with it for a long time. These

collaborative, relational elements within the "bubble" could mean building a shared culture in ELC settings (Clark, 2023) and children's feelings of belonging to peer culture in their bubbles (Kernan, 2010). This can be particularly important for children during the COVID-19 pandemic when many relationships and routines were interrupted or drastically changed. Overall, the measures taken to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and related shifts in the life of ELC settings have resulted in a stronger sense of belonging in the "bubble", including "closer" and "intense" relationships, both within peer groups and between children and practitioners.

5.4.3 Barriers to the relations of care

Care and care work are an integral part of the daily life of children and practitioners in ELC settings, as discussed in the literature review (Langford & Richardson, 2020; McCormick, 2018). Within this, "the concept of love" can be argued as another integral part (Aslanian, 2015; Page, 2017) of the complex lives, experiences, feelings and histories of everyone who participates in an early years setting (Page, 2018). Nevertheless, the topic of "love" in the early years field has tended to remain unspoken and undefined (Aslanian, 2015; Cousins, 2016), and research investigating love in early childhood education, therefore, tends to be concerned with establishing certainty about love as a safe and healthy practice (Aslanian, 2018).

This already complicated construction in ELC appeared in the interviews with some practitioners when they spoke about their concerns about establishing relationships with children after the lockdowns. Almost all the practitioners in this study shared their frustration, sadness and sense of loss with the measures that prevented them from comforting the children. Touch as an important way of demonstrating love to children (Cousins, 2016) was problematic. The COVID-19 measures and limitations, specifically around physical distancing, face coverings, and general fear of transmission, have resulted in confusion about what sort of physical contact with children was acceptable. Almost all practitioners expressed their concerns about the applicability of these measures with young children, and it was described as an "almost impossible" work as it went against the way practitioners work with children, as well as children's age and developmental stages. In the case of physical distancing practice, practitioners clearly expressed their disagreement as they believed there were adverse effects

on their relationships with children and their ways of practice, which required "caring" and "loving". Practitioner Joyce expressed that very well:

> There are enclosed bonds and close friendships. And they don't understand, don't touch, don't hug, don't do this. And they need that form of attachment and comfort from adults. For us, too, having to say "no" to them, and it's gonna completely impact our way of practice as well because we really like loving and caring towards children. And if they need comfort, we will provide them with comfort.
>
> Joyce, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

As Joyce shared above, most practitioners in this study mentioned the importance of loving and caring for children in their work. This contributed to the children's dealing with the changes and uncertainties and helped them adapt to life in the settings, especially after they fully returned. The advised measures, i.e. physical distancing in settings, created ambiguous space for practitioners. Participants talked about their uncertainty about maintaining close contact with children, such as touching, cuddling, and hugging them, to show love and sometimes comfort them. For instance, practitioner Sophia expressed how she felt being physically distant from their colleagues and children:

> I was a bit like, I'll stay away from my colleagues …, but children can climb on me. I was very much like. I am not going to be distant from them. I felt that I just have to be normal with them and just wash my hands a lot and just accept that this is how it is. And I didn't feel any anxiety about that. I think I just felt like, okay, the research[24] I've read suggests that children don't transmit it.
>
> Sophia, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

[24] The Scottish Government published a summary of scientific evidence about the coronavirus relating to opening schools and ELC settings, *"Coronavirus (COVID-19): Scientific evidence on schools and ELC settings*", on 26 May 2020. It was stated that: "younger children may be less susceptible to infection from COVID-19 than adults" and "there is a growing amount of evidence that the susceptibility to clinical disease of younger children is lower than for adults" (Scottish Government, 2020a, no pagination).

Most practitioners in this study, like Sophia, noticed the difficulty of being physically distant from children and mentioned they did not hesitate to get close to children. Sophia emphasised that while she preferred to "stay away" from her colleagues, she allowed children to "climb" on her without hesitation. However, there were some conflicting situations in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic for both children and adults, as described below by Layla. She talked about the difficulties children experienced during the drop off time and how she felt confused regarding her role as "caring" and "comforting" children and accompanying the COVID-19 pandemic measures:

> It was just tricky to manage because children were so used to saying goodbye to mum and giving them a kiss in the room, or asking mom and dad to [help them] settle… You can't do any of that now. I think, at the beginning, what struck me was I was having to take screaming children off like I'd look at mum and dad and say if I could take them or not. …I take them, and it can take like 15 minutes for that child to just reregulate and be in a good place… The impact on the children, I would say, was hugely significant. And it put a lot of pressure on staff because you're then getting really close to the parent, and I'm scooping the child off. But the child's really distressed as well, and they're crying, and they've got snot all over their face. And, you're then thinking, okay, this is a high transmission risk. I don't have my mask on because I don't want to scare the child off. So now I've got to try and put the child down and wash my hands. But I can't do that until the child settles. So possibly 20 minutes before you're getting your own hand wash.
>
> Layla, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

Layla's caring experience as a complex and relational process can be analysed here with how Tronto (2013, p.22) analyses the care processes. It started with "caring about" another's needs. In this example, the child was distressed due to the changes in the setting; thus, the child needed to be settled with the practitioner's help. The "caring" practitioner then entered a caring interaction by noticing the child's needs and taking responsibility to ensure that the needs were met. As Layla expressed, she hugged the child, made close contact, and waited as long as the child needed. Here the "caregiving" work was done, according to Tronto's analysis (2013). Practitioner Layla seemed competent to act by carefully listening and observing the child's needs and concerns. The meaning of the child's needs seemed to be constructed between the

child and Layla herself (Langford & Richardson, 2020). The final phase of care for Tronto involves a response from the person (or thing, animal or environment) that has been cared for. In the excerpt, Layla appeared to observe the child, concerned with the child's body, emotions, and facial expressions and maybe talked with the child. As Layla talked, when she was sure that the child settled down, she "put the child down" and went to wash her hands as an end of the interaction.

Care practices should be central in ELC settings as they are significant components of children's everyday lives (Ailwood & Lee, 2020; McCormick, 2018). To act with care involves critical reflection on the caring action and the evaluation of the processes of care, which are contextual, dynamic, nuanced and complex (Langford & Richardson, 2020). The practitioner Layla had to consider the complex and contextual messiness of the situation above. On the one hand, she needed to consider the suggested regulations and the risk assessment. On the other hand, she was worried about the care work she felt responsible for as a practitioner. In the guidances published by the Scottish Government, it was often suggested that ELC settings keep a holistic approach to maintain "caring" for children as essential after the reopening. However, practices were found to be inconsistent with the advice and explanations given to practitioners.

Overall, this part has discussed caring and love, particularly the physical aspects of these, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the intention being to act in a caring way in response to the needs of children while recognising the broader context in which the practices were regulated and limited by guidances and measures. As in the excerpts above, the COVID-19 measures have created conflicting situations for practitioners' expressions of care in ELC settings, further opening the debate discussed in Chapter 7 regarding the role and value placed on early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented daily life in ELC settings with the implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations in light of the Scottish Government's guidelines. I have provided insights into the experiences of children and practitioners at different times and in different measures of the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting examples of changes in the daily practices and routines of ELC settings.

In section 5.1, I started by exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic guidances published by the Scottish Government were implemented in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The changes in the practices and pedagogies of ELC settings have been reported globally, as presented in the literature review chapter. This study provided an in-depth analysis of how the drastic policy changes in the Scottish policy context enabled or challenged the daily lives of ELC settings and the experiences of children and practitioners. In demonstrating how these guidelines were implemented by staff in ELC settings, the existence of hierarchical and top-down processes that lack consultation with staff emerged. The published guidances and particular ways of applying them presented some challenges for ELC settings due to the constant changes in measures, inconsistencies with previous versions and ambiguous statements. While the statements in the guidances were not seen as "hard rules" by the Scottish Government and were in some ways presented as a space for flexibility, this study revealed that practitioners needed more concrete and solid information at a challenging time.

In addition to ways of implementing the COVID-19 pandemic guidances, in section 5.2, the implications for the daily life of ELC settings were discussed with a focus on changes in daily practices and routines. The implications, indeed, guidances, were found to be factors that shifted and rearranged everyday life and practices and also changed the functioning of ELC settings. Some "legally" imposed changes, i.e. bubbles that were otherwise impossible, had brought significant alterations, surprise, and unexpected impacts on the experiences of children and practitioners. Following the reopening of ELC settings, while some daily practices, such as cleaning regimens and hand washing, were strengthened, others, such as singing and water and sand play, were quite restrained. Among the significant alterations in the daily life of ELC settings, the importance of routines in providing a sense of predictability and control in children's lives was strongly emphasised in this study. Therefore, routines and their associated benefits gained importance in some settings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In showing how the COVID-19 guidances were implemented in ELC settings and how they impacted daily practices and routines, section 5.3 has shown the complex connections within the (re)arrangements of "spaces" and "resources". The section has also begun exploring the constructions of childhoods in ELC settings during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic by discussing the changes in space and resources and their impacts on children's experiences in terms of the way children interacted with them. This showed that some of the measures imposed

have created “restrictive spaces” that prevented certain interactions and experiences, with clear boundaries, physical barriers, and limitations on the uses of certain materials. In this context, practitioners have also created “nurturing” spaces by emphasising “warm” and “safe” atmospheres for children with space and material arrangements within the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic guidances. So, spaces in ELC settings were negotiated and continuously reconstructed under the COVID-19 pandemic measures. The greater emphasis on the outdoors has been noted both in this study and in the global literature during the COVID-19 pandemic, with low risks of contamination being acknowledged (Scottish Government, 2020a; 2020b), resulting in more time spent outdoors. The outdoors was associated with rich opportunities for learning and exploration for children through various interactions with peers, practitioners, natural spaces and resources. This could be considered a good thing coming out of a crisis situation. Overall, daily life in ELC settings emerged as consistently shaping and being shaped by the changes in space and resources, imposed COVID-19 pandemic rules and measures, and responsive engagements among children, practitioners, materials and organisation of space.

Section 5.4 discussed how relationships in ELC settings have been (re)shaped in light of changes in the daily life of ELC settings. I have shown how some measures, e.g. face coverings or the creation of bubbles, played a restrictive role in relationships between children and adults due to limited interactions. On the other hand, I have also shown that the same measure, the creation of bubbles, deepened interactions due to reduced numbers within the group, resulting in “closer” and “stronger” relationships within the bubbles. This section also addressed the challenges to care relationships in ELC settings by implementing health and safety measures to prevent close physical contact with children. Even though these measures created conflicting spaces for practitioners, this study showed that, in line with their pedagogical beliefs about children, practitioners strived to maintain relationships of care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The participants’ excerpts discussed throughout this chapter have indicated complex constructions of daily life in ELC settings through the engagements between the COVID-19 pandemic guidances and measures, children, practitioners, materials and spaces. In the ELC settings as “a complex and dense web or network connecting people, environments and activities” (Dahlberg et al., 2013, p.87), the experiences of children and practitioners have emerged as being continuously reconstructed and negotiated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the following chapter, I will discuss the experiences of play and participation in ELC

settings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER 6: EXPERIENCES OF PLAY AND PARTICIPATION IN ELC SETTINGS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Following the previous chapter, which discussed the main changes in the daily life of ELC settings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic guidances, as well as the experiences of children and practitioners in ELC settings, this chapter continues to explore experiences with a particular focus on play and participation in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. The concepts of children's play and participation emerged as the main discussions in the interviews with participants regarding the daily experiences of children and practitioners. Therefore, how they are conceptualised and experienced is discussed in this chapter by drawing on practitioners' narratives about children's experiences in ELC settings.

This chapter starts with a discussion of some of the daily practices in ELC settings that were found as challenges to reveal how they are embedded in early learning and childcare pedagogy and practices beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This section provides criticism from the literature as some of the discussions have been stated as ongoing challenges in the field of ELC. Then the discussion moves to children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic. As highlighted in the literature review, children's lack or limited access to play as a result of closures of playgrounds and ELC settings and consequently limited contact with their peers had been found as a serious concern in both the UK and globally (Graber et al., 2020; Rogers, 2022). On the other hand, the importance of play and its role in children's lives, especially during the challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic, were well argued in the literature (Russell & Stenning, 2020). The literature review showed that the studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the changes in children's play and the experiences of children in ELC settings. This chapter introduces the changes in the "nature" of children's play emphasised by the participants under the COVID-19 pandemic measures. I then explore the role of play in crisis situations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The literature review chapter highlighted that children's views and perspectives were generally ignored during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children largely have been rendered invisible in government strategies both in terms of the direct impacts of the disease on them and the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for their everyday present and future lives (Bessell, 2021; Cortes-Morales et al., 2021; Cortes-Morales & Morales, 2021; Jiménez et al., 2023);

therefore, their participation was largely disregarded (Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Morrison & Houghton, 2022; Tisdall & Morrison, 2022). In this chapter, I discuss how children's participation was approached by the participants of this study, with a separate focus on decision-making processes and the daily life of ELC settings. The floorbook, as a process of documenting children's learning and experiences in ELC settings (Warden, 2006; 2013), was presented by the participants as an example of children's participation. Therefore, it is further analysed in this chapter. The existing understandings of children and childhoods are also discussed as they have resulted in underestimating children's competencies and agency to be a part of the processes.

6.1 Ongoing challenges in early learning and childcare

This section provides a comprehensive discussion of the implementation-level challenges of ELC settings identified by the participants in this study. These challenges have traditionally been found to be embedded in early learning and childcare pedagogy or practice, regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has not hit within a vacuum. It has entered this complex landscape with ongoing debates. This section presents the particular debates in the Scottish context over the last few years, including adult structuring of children's daily flow and activities, the practical implementation of children's participation, and applying child-centred pedagogy. I present them here first, then discuss how the pandemic has shaped them, focusing on play and participation experiences in the following sections.

Firstly, in discussions of daily life in ELC settings, some practitioners questioned how adults structure daily life and flow. For instance, practitioner Sophia talked about her observation about her previous workplace, where she worked temporarily during the COVID-19 pandemic. She described daily life in this ELC setting and critically discussed the setting's practices and routines:

> So, that setting was kind of, you come in, you find a little activity on a tabletop. Then we [practitioners] decide you [children] can go outside, then midmorning, we bring you back in to do a learning activity in a group. Then you're allowed to go back out again, then you have to come again for lunch. And then you know, they had a sort of set routine. What I experienced was more like where you come in, and if you want to go

> straight outside, you should be able to do so, and that's the practice that my colleague and I would work in. And they [practitioners] would come out and say, "Everybody in that group, work." You know, I'd be thinking, oh my goodness, that child was just like in the middle of doing something with a sandpit… So yeah, that was an interruption to play. So, they interrupted the play in order to give them learning activities.
>
> Sophia, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

As Sophia depicted the daily flow and routine of the setting, it seemed that it was the practitioners who "decided" what children would do and where to go and who prepared learning activities for children. Additionally, practitioners appeared responsible for scheduling the day by a "sort of set routine" such as lunch, outside, and "work time". Sophia interpreted these rigid routines as adults "interrupting the play" while children were deeply engaged in something. She further shared her disapproval of this practice, emphasising her belief that children should "go straight outside" if they wanted to, adding that she and her colleague had worked this way before. Comparing this practice with pre-COVID-19 pandemic times, Sophia continued her words as follows:

> But that's a practice that they've been doing previously [before COVID-19], that hadn't been challenged. And that's part of a complicated history… that kind of traditional school approach. They had older practitioners who'd been doing it for years, who had certain ways of doing things, but that was very much like, we'll sit around nicely, we'll do our listening skills. Let's do patterns today… and I'll watch you do your pattern.
>
> Sophia, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

Regardless of the COVID-19 measures and limitations, certain practices in ELC settings, e.g. structured learning activities designed for children or having strict timetabled routines, were interpreted by Sophia as "a part of a complicated history" in early learning and childcare. She associated these approaches with a "traditional school approach", emphasising that mostly experienced practitioners who have been working for years tended to have "certain ways of doing things", such as working on "listening skills" or practising to "do patterns". In line with the practice in this particular setting, De Sousa et al. (2019) refer to current education policies and practices not focusing on "authentic elements of the worlds" of children and practitioners

but on the "external such as testing, standardisation, accreditation, best single practice, one truth, etc." (p.299). As Sophia noted above, these practices have been heavily implicated in structuring some ELC environments regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, as part of the ongoing challenges at the ELC, some practitioners mentioned challenges they experienced in practice regarding children's participation. As noted in the literature, although the participation of children and young people has gained recognition in policy and practice in many contexts, making it a reality has led to practical dilemmas and challenges (Tisdall, 2015a). Some common challenges have been found in the literature expressed by the participants of this study, such as approaching the participation of children in a top-down and tokenistic way (Blaisdell, 2017; Tisdall, 2015a; 2015b). These are discussed here with the excerpts from interviews.

Tokenism can be identified when children's experiences and views are sought by adults but not taken seriously or when their views do not have an impact on decisions (Tisdall, 2015a; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). In ELC settings, children's participation was often found to be "tokenistic" in some contexts by the practitioners in this study. For instance, practitioner Serena talked about the "tokenistic" approach to participation in her setting while differentiating herself from other practitioners:

> Children's participation is often tokenistic. It is not in my bubble because I'm doing my degree. And I realise the importance of children having true participation. But in a lot of other bubbles, you know, the children aren't really involved in what they're doing. The experiences are provided by the adult, and adults' interests and what adult thinks. Many staff don't ask the children what they actually want.
>
> Serena, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

As a common challenge in children's participation, children might be consulted, but their views have no discernible influence on decisions (Tisdall, 2015a). In the excerpt above, Serena acknowledged that some practices in her setting did "not really involve" children, rather that experiences were "provided by adults" according to adults' "interest[s]" and thinking. Thus, excluding her own approach, she noted that children's participation in other bubbles was often "tokenistic". Practitioner Layla provided another example to illustrate how some of her

setting's practices during the COVID-19 pandemic were "tokenistic" from her perspective:

> We done lots of activities with glitter and dirty hands and pretended they were bugs. And so, lots of play to support the changes. And it was the same with feelings and emotions. We done lots of storybooks. So, obviously, coming back [returning to ELC settings after the lockdown] was difficult, and lots of children were feeling a bit angry, a bit upset... So, we've done lots on "colour monster", "my heart", the story on that. Just took that almost as one thing and just made it… We got them to paint their hands, and then we had to wash them. So again, it was that repetition… I think lots of people say, "Oh, we've already done this." it's like, "We need to revisit". But it's quite tokenistic. They're not understanding the value or the importance of, or we need to ensure that they do it...
>
> Layla, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

In the excerpt above, Layla gave examples of specific activities they did to support children's understanding of COVID-19, such as "bugs" and the importance of handwashing, and to help children regulate and identify their emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Layla, a practitioner who valued children's participation, seemed to find it problematic to implement these practices "as one thing" for the sake of "just making it" through "repetition". According to Layla, these practices seemed like symbolic efforts, for example, without a deep understanding of children's interests and curiosities. For other practitioners, the important thing was to get children to repeat the practice and "just make it" without really understanding its importance. It is worth noting that these quotes from Sophia, Serena and Layla above contained a certain element of "othering", emphasising that they did not engage in the described practices but observed them in other settings or among colleagues.

Another practitioner, Rena, commented on some of the practices she found superficial, lacking in a meaningful understanding of children's views and wishes:

> …you know, it's like repeating things by rote or, you know, it's like a ticky boxy exercise. It's like, OK, we're going to do a children's participation. You know, "Do you like such and such?" And then the kid goes: "Yes, I like such and such."

> You know it's a bit like… you just told them to say that. Do they actually understand?
>
> Rena, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

According to Rena, the practice aimed at achieving children's participation lacked any real understanding from children, so she called these practices a "ticky boxy exercise". This practice is argued in the literature as a didactic way of formal assessment, in which pedagogy is supported by "a desire to tame, predict, prepare, supervise and evaluate learning" (McNair et al., 2021, p.479). Blaisdell (2017) warns of the danger of children's participation becoming a tick-box exercise "with little reflection on the deeper structures and relationships of participation" (no pagination). The practitioners above, Layla and Rena, seemed to be aware of this "danger" and emphasised that the practices lacked a deep understanding of value and meaning, so they argued that these practices had little or no effect on children's participation.

Thirdly, in light of many changes taking place in the daily life of ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic, "child-centredness" was often emphasised by the participants of this study as something they would like to pursue despite the challenges. Child-centredness in early learning and childcare has long been promoted and advocated (Tzuo, 2007) and can be understood as a pedagogy, an ideology, and a powerful form of professional practice (Jorgensen & Wyness, 2021). In times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic situation in this study, practitioners can revert the understanding around being child-centred and the associated practices. For instance, an ambiguous practice around handwashing during the COVID-19 pandemic was shared by practitioner Ivan who visited many ELC settings around the city and worked with different staff teams. Therefore, he had a chance to engage with different practices in different settings. He shared his observation as follows:

> There are quite a lot of settings handwashing has become really, really big, and they're available to children to play with. Play and washing as well. And you do see disagreement amongst different practitioners about whether or not the children can just play with them or whether they're serious items that need to be respected and protected and you're not just a player and washing, you really wash your hands. This is interesting because you would think that if people were committed to play-based learning, then they would [have] the opinion that playing [around] handwashing will make handwashing better.

Ivan, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

In the above excerpt, two main discourses around handwashing as a practice or routine of settings can be argued: it can be "playful" or should be performed "seriously". As Ivan exemplified, some settings seemed to construct their handwashing routines around playful practices, such as letting children play while washing their hands. On the other hand, in some settings, handwashing was treated seriously and seen as something to be "protected" and "respected". Thus, children were expected to not "waste" their time or not perform playful acts while fulfilling the routine. Instead, they were expected to perform the act only within the limits set by adults. As Ivan noted, such understandings did not conform to the pedagogical principles of child-centredness or play-based pedagogy. Perhaps, both discourses could coexist for those adopting play-based learning approaches or child-centredness. Such play could be a "tool" to support children engaging in the "serious" practice of handwashing. It is important to embrace this so that children participate in the daily routines of their space and make sense of the practice imposed on them without falling into the trap of thinking too little about experiences and relationships in ELC settings.

While most participants in this study acknowledged child-centredness, play-based pedagogies and children's participation as an essential part of the daily life of ELC settings, these continued to be contested and challenged in practice. As noted in the literature review chapter, these were part of the ongoing debates in early learning and childcare. This study argues that the COVID-19 pandemic measures and regulations placed "new" or "additional" demands on practitioners' existing challenges, as argued in the previous chapter. The following sections of this chapter take the discussions further, focusing on play and participation, respectively, in ELC settings, and also question how the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped these ongoing debates in the field.

6.2 Children's play in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

Play can be threatened in crisis times, the barriers to everyday play can be exacerbated, and the enablers of play, such as access to space and time, can be endangered (Casey & McKendrick, 2022). Neale (2020) states that the sentiment like "now is not time for play" is often expressed in the context of a serious situation where the risks are high, and in these situations, play tends

to rank lower than more basic needs such as health, safety and nutrition (p.1). This continued to be seen in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic as well. On the other hand, the literature suggests that in times of crisis and uncertainties, the importance of play can be heightened, and play can be seen as a remedy to crisis (Casey & McKendrick, 2022). For instance, some initiatives at the policy level have been reported to advocate play during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Scottish context (Play Scotland, 2020) and many other contexts emphasised in the literature review.

In this section, I first discuss how play was understood and experienced in ELC settings from practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the changes mentioned in children's play. The next section explores the critical role of play in the crisis situation and highlights the importance of play in children's lives as it enables them to make sense of their experiences and cope with the difficult situation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.2.1 Changes in the "nature" of children's play in ELC settings

In this study, children's play and their experiences around it were greatly influenced by the major changes in the daily life of ELC settings, for example, as discussed in chapter 5, creating bubbles, the arrangements of space and resources, and the COVID-19 pandemic measures. The particular importance and value of play in the cognitive, social and physical development of children and the development of relationships with others have been more emphasised in the literature in recent years (Colucci & Wright, 2015; Fearn & Howard, 2012; Lester, 2013; Leibowitz, 2020) and has been emphasised by many practitioners in this study.

The majority of practitioners mentioned that they found changes in the "nature" of children's play after children fully returned to ELC settings. Children's play was found in this study to be "thriving" under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions, more specifically defined as richer, more imaginative, and often individual and small groups by the participants. Further below, I explore these by presenting excerpts from interviews with different practitioners to illustrate how play was seen and experienced when ELC settings were fully reopened for all children and how practitioners interpreted the changes and shifts in children's play.

Firstly, as highlighted in the previous chapter, the importance of the outdoors and the uses of outdoor spaces and natural materials have greatly been recognised during the COVID-19 pandemic. In connection with these, outdoor play gained more recognition and emphasis during this time, and children's play had been described by some practitioners as "richer" compared to the pre-COVID-19 times. In the excerpt below, Dorothy spoke of children's "richer" play outdoors:

> …play obviously is about everything that we do. I think play has changed hugely. We are outdoors more, and I think the value of outdoor play has always been really important to us, but it really has become too central. You know, outdoor play, there's so much value in it… so yeah, I think there has been more value added to the value of their play. It was always something that was really important. I think we thought maybe the pandemic would affect their play, but there's been so many more benefits to their play. It's made it richer, as well, which has been a surprise.
>
> Dorothy, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

Dorothy repeatedly emphasised "the value of outdoor play" in this excerpt. She stated that it had become "centralised" with "more value added" to its existing value during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children's interactions with nature and natural resources were often seen as opportunities for "rich" experiences by many practitioners in this research, like Dorothy. These rich experiences have been associated with playful learning in the literature as children learn and play in rich environments by developing ideas and concepts (Miller & Almon, 2009). At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, children's play and experiences were expressed as "richer" as a result of these changes.

Secondly, in addition to children's play being seen as "richer" outdoors, it has been found to be more "creative" and "imaginative" during the COVID-19 pandemic by many practitioners, like Megan below, with spending more time outside and interacting with a variety of natural resources such as leaves, sticks and mud. Megan states that:

> I've noticed a massive change in how they play. So, before, like, their play was super object-directed… but, when you're outside, and there's only leaves and sticks and mud and puddles, well, there are enough sticks and stones to go around… And then those

> things have really made their imaginative play come on, and we're seeing imaginative play in children who we didn't see it in before.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

Practitioner Megan illustrated how children's play had changed from being "object-directed" to more "imaginative" when natural spaces and resources outdoors surrounded them. Literature suggests that children can develop their critical thinking skills through play and produce their own ideas while exercising their imaginations (Colucci & Wright, 2015; Duncan & Lockwood, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2009). It is claimed that children's control and ownership of their own play enhance their creativity (Robson, 2017). Similarly, Megan continued to explain children's "imaginative" and "creative" relations with play, expressing that children were "very engaged" and "very absorbed" in play situations in their environment:

> They were goodies and baddies… and have a sword fight with the sticks. Other times, children pretend that their stick is a horse. Sometimes they'll use them, you know, hit things out of the trees or sort of swish around in the puddles with or sometimes they just use them as like a walking stick… um, so it has been quite a magical change. COVID-19 has obviously presented a lot of negatives, but some of the positives for us are very important.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

Megan emphasised many different forms of using the natural resource, the stick in the example above, and the way children interacted with it. The stick seemed to be involved in many different children's play, being used as a "horse" as well as a tool to "swish" around puddles or aid walking. This implies that the meaning of the object can be easily transformed by children outdoors. The natural environment and materials lack defined meanings and thus need to be interpreted, meaning that children have opportunities to negotiate how to interpret the various objects they use in play (Änggård, 2017). Megan described the uses of the object as "quite a magical change" and "positive" during the COVID-19 pandemic when many negative effects on children were observed.

Thirdly, looking at participants' reflections on children's play, it can be said that the arguments presented constitute a statement against some discourses and concerns, especially in the media, about children forgetting how to play and having social interactions during the lockdown periods due to social isolation. Rather, some participants in this study highlighted that when all children were fully returned to the ELC settings, there were few changes in children's preferred way of playing, such as playing alone or in a group. The manager of an ELC setting, Lauren, explains this as follows:

> The other thing what was really nice that we've seen some children were always playing in groups, play on their own, and much more solitary play, enjoying their own company in a way. And we've spoken to parents about that. It turns out that there's, you know, sometimes parents had to do a piece of work, so they encourage their children to play on their own. And then we've also seen that some children are now selecting to play with children, the other children, but also to find little spaces to be on their own.
>
> Lauren, manager of an ELC setting, interview excerpt, December 2020

As highlighted in the quote above, it was noted that some children in this study tended to play independently or in smaller groups when fully reverted to their ELC settings. As Lauren explained, the shifts in children's play and "enjoying their own company" were not interpreted negatively but rather as the richness of children's experiences of playing both individually and with their peers. For Lauren, the children's home experiences while they were away from ELC settings during the lockdowns were decisive for their play preferences when they fully returned. Some studies in the literature argue that time and space for play at home were strengthened during the lockdowns due to increased opportunities for family time at home and greater emphasis on relationships with family members and peers (Balenzano et al., 2020; Cohen & Bamberger, 2021; Egan et al., 2021; Gray, 2021; Rogers, 2022; Romero, 2021).

As the above excerpts illustrate, most changes associated with children's play experiences in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic were often interpreted as beneficial and positive by the majority of practitioners in this study, like Dorothy, Megan and Lauren. After all children returned to ELC settings, play was conceptualised as more imaginative, creative, and richer as a result of greater interaction with outdoor spaces and natural resources, stronger relationships in ELC settings, and changes in children's play preferences. Other studies found

similar findings regarding positive changes in play in ELC settings after the lockdowns. In Dýrfjörð and Hreiðarsdóttir's (2020; 2022) study, children's play was found as developed and flourished in the preschool context as a result of the measures taken, such as fewer children and unhurried pedagogy in some ways. Further, in the study of Pascal and Bertram (2021), the practitioners reported more spontaneous, extended and deeply reflective play on children's own experiences related to COVID-19. In line with what was suggested in the literature regarding the role of play in crisis situations, in a few studies, children's play was interpreted by practitioners as a form of coping strategy and a way of negotiation when they were subjected to restrictions in their contexts (Cowan et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). Adaptive use of play was stated as reconstructing experiences and meaning-making of negative experiences through control and repetition by changing "the passive victim role into an active one" (Cohen & Bamberger, 2021, p.433).

Most practitioners expressed that they viewed play as a way of supporting children, especially when all children returned to ELC settings after the lockdowns. The role of play in supporting children's learning and development amid the COVID-19 pandemic was widely suggested by researchers. In the research of O'Keeffe and McNally (2021), play was seen as a valuable tool in observing and assessing children's learning in order to "make up for the closures" (p.9) and further support children's transitional, social and emotional wellbeing by providing a sense of security and familiarity. Regarding children's experiences, practitioners in this study talked about their roles in play during the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioners tended to view their roles as preparing or making possible the space and resources for children to facilitate play. By doing that, they stated that they also became more "imaginative" and "creative" to facilitate children's play to eliminate the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hereby, intergenerational understanding of play, recognition and appreciation of play experiences across practitioners and children can be stated. It can be argued that children could learn through the context enabled for play and that practitioners could learn by observing and participating in children's play (Davis et al., 2002). In the following quote, the practitioner Haley set out how she interpreted her role in the light of restrictions:

> Myself as the practitioner, if I'm facilitating and building on their play, then actually, that's going to be more effective and rich. So, it really made me think in that way... But I think it [limitations taking place] really stretched my thinking in terms of extending

> the play and taking the play further and being more imaginative about how that would be done.
>
> Haley, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

Like Haley, some other practitioners also stated they "stretched" their thinking in terms of how children's play would be extended and went further in a creative way within the COVID-19 measures, in line with the changes in the "nature" of children's play. In the way that Chatterjee (2017) puts forward by looking at previous crisis situations, it can be said that the presence of supportive adults, areas with rich environmental affordance and fewer restrictions on children's time are facilitating play. Therefore, practitioners' initiatives in this study can be considered very valuable during the crisis time by enabling opportunities for rich play experiences and actively engaging with children to support their experiences. Similarly, Cohen and Bamberger (2021) state that the benefits of play, such as helping to heal and cope, especially in crisis situations, are intensified with the participation or support of an adult. Within these conditions, play can be understood as a "living resource and not a commodified product, a resource that allowed children to regain and retain normality under the most difficult and challenging living conditions" (p.8) with the help of practitioners. The next section explores these roles and the potential benefits of children's play in the crisis situation.

6.2.2 The role of play during crisis situations

The benefits of play for children in crisis situations are described mainly in the literature as a way of coping with uncertainties in a changing world, helping children to process potentially overwhelming events and expressing their feelings and thoughts about them (McKinty & Hazleton, 2022; Rogers, 2022). Fearn and Howard's (2012) analysis of play in extremely adverse conditions suggests that "opportunities for play support development, empower children to meet the challenge, help them recover from adversity and enable them to come to terms with life experiences" (p.462). Therefore, it is important to discuss play itself and the agency it affords for children facing greater uncertainty (Rogers, 2022) in order to explore the specific function of play in children's lives in the context of this research.

Many of the practitioners in this study viewed play as a way for children to express their knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. related measures and limitations in their lives, in order to make sense of their own experiences and cope with the situation. The practitioners shared their conversations with children and observations on children's play relating to COVID-19 themes. Practitioner Sophia talked about the conversation she had with children while they were eating outside before the first lockdown:

> I remember sitting around with children. We're eating our lunch outside on benches. One of them coughed and said, "I've got the cough," and then, "I've got the cough." And they honestly were hilarious. They were basically doing a comedy routine of, "I've got the cough," or, "Oh, you've got the cough." And it was just really funny.
>
> Sophia, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

Sophia's excerpt above covered an uncertain time when the COVID-19 pandemic began. In this example, children seemed to have fun with the act of "coughing", and the act quickly spread to the whole group and became a shared experience for children and adults. The action implied the playful subversion of their shared knowledge of COVID-19 and the "new" significance in their lives and perhaps a stigma attached to the act of coughing that was the sign of contracting COVID-19 at the time. As argued in the literature, play has great importance in times of crisis and uncertainty to provide a safe space for the expression of emotions, fears and anxiety (Graber et al., 2020; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021). Similarly, as in the example above, play allowed children to translate the difficulties in their lives, such as the spread of the virus, into a form they could engage with, such as the act of coughing. Thus, play helped children process and make sense of the overall COVID-19 crisis situation by reimagining or reenacting it sometimes in a funny way, for example, with a laugh. It could be said that all these processes in play enabled children to cope with the challenging situation (Rogers, 2022), reintegrate into their environment and face challenges in their environments (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2022; Neale, 2020) while promoting children's social, cognitive and physical skills (Fearn & Howard, 2012; Lester, 2013), enhancing self-esteem, confidence and feelings of wellbeing and fostering hope and optimism (Colucci & Wright, 2015).

Another example, shared by practitioner Morris, illustrated how the COVID-19 pandemic and related experiences, such as being sick and going to the hospital, came to life in children's play

in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> There were about six children, all lying in kind of pretend beds in the house area. They were all coughing and coughing very loudly. And I said, "Oh my goodness, what's happening?" And they said, "It's the coronavirus. We've all got the coronavirus." And then there were some other children who were being doctors, and they had their pens. They were walking around and looking inside their mouths. You know, they were being the doctor. It was the hospital… they were all acting out this big story… it seems to have been the only topic for months and months and months, really. So, children certainly were aware of it.
>
> Morris, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

By looking at Morris' excerpt, it has been argued that play usually involves an attempt to place the world, what matters in children's lives, into much narrower situations in which children can exercise some measure of control (Wood, 2014). As in the excerpt above, children created imaginary situations, roles and internal logic, and they transformed the overall COVID-19 experience, which they lived through, into ways they could comprehend and control in a way that would enable them to exercise their agency. As Morris mentioned, children's "big story" that they were "acting out" for months included being "doctors" with equipment to treat "patients" suffering from "coronavirus". In this way, children gained some control over the situation by curing the "virus" that would otherwise create an unknowable and chaotic situation (Neale, 2020).

Furthermore, as in the above example, play allowed the establishment of social connections between children, the creation of rules, such as being doctors and patients, and modifying behaviours, like examining each other and pretending to be sick. Within these, the "agentic nature of play" and "the possibility of greater autonomy" it offers gain importance (Rogers, 2022, p.4). Children's play, then, can be seen as a way in which children position themselves and others and thus form social relations (Rosen, 2017).

Other examples practitioners gave further reflected how children's daily play experiences were deeply embedded in their context. For example, many participants in this study noted that children were playing a chasing game in which they tagged each other and said, "Ohh, you

have got the virus," and ran away. This showed that children easily adapted their familiar or common games in response to the changes or the current issues both in their lives and wider society. The typical chasing game is emphasised with its own history, and it is reflected in a variety of versions (Roud, 2010). Examples of this type of game have been observed in previous pandemics. One example from history was the children's rhyme and game called "Ring o' Roses" or "Ring Around the Rosie" in England in 1500 (Cantor, 2002). The rhyme has often been associated with the Great Plague. Opie and Opie (1997, p.433) interpret the rhyme in modern English versions as:

> a rosy rash, they allege, was a symptom of the plague, and posies of herbs were carried as protection, sneezing was a final fatal symptom, and "all fall down" was exactly what happened.

As seen above, children's singing play included "sneezing" and "falling" during the plague. Similarly, play involving interactions based on a series of symbolic actions, such as "coughing" in the COVID-19 pandemic and tagging each other and transmitting the coronavirus, was also conveyed by the participants in this study. It can be argued that these types of children's play have their roots in the traumatic collective experiences of dealing with pandemics or epidemics (Matić & Krel, 2022). Children's play can also be considered a space to reflect and process the pandemic through their experiences. It is a means of children's participation in the production of contemporary culture (Saltmarsh, 2014) and a playful meaning-making of the stigma attached to having coronavirus, being ill and contagious.

Among other children's play, themes such as children making magic potions to cure the virus and having laser weapons called "Loch Ness" to protect their families and themselves were emphasised. Considering these examples, children were not passive subjects in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather they became empowered by exploring, experimenting and discovering the limits of their own capabilities through the play they adapted (Koller et al., 2022). Therefore, play can be understood as a "negotiated terrain" (Ryan, 2005, p.112) and "children's way of participating in their everyday environments to appropriate moments of time/space" (Lester, 2011, p.1). In these alternative views of play, play cannot be seen as provided by adults or other agents. However, the conditions created by them have a profound impact on children's experiences, as was evident in their play experience in the limited context of the COVID-19 pandemic. From Klocker's (2007) understanding of children's agency, the

structures, contexts and relationships can constrain or expand children's "range of viable choice" (p.85). While children's play was limited in many ways due to the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, it also offered children opportunities to exercise their agency in many ways. Therefore, children's agency was "relative, negotiated by social actors in a given context and mediated by societal norms, social relationships, materials and interactions" (Rogers, 2022, p.3), as it was seen in children's play experiences by negotiating play themes and resources during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, the excerpts about children's play during the COVID-19 pandemic presented in this section revealed the significant place of play in children's lives in terms of making sense of their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, coping with the challenging situation, developing and maintaining relationships with others, engaging in materials and environments and familiarising themselves with the context they were in (Pastore & Salvi, 2023; Rogers, 2022). The values of play mentioned in the literature were highly recognised and emphasised by the participants of this study during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many changes and interruptions were experienced in the context of children and themselves. Based on the data, the impact of the overall COVID-19 pandemic on children's play in ELC settings, excluding the lockdown periods, appeared mostly positive in this study. This was in line with the studies reporting positive changes as children's play developed and flourished (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; 2022) and a more extended and deeply reflective use of play on children's own experiences (Pascal & Bertram, 2021) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Looking at the analysis of the quotations shared by the participants, it was clear that through play or in play experiences, children could make sense of the world, construct knowledge with other children and adults (Dahlberg et al., 2013) and exercise their agency embedded in whole networks such as institutions, materials, documents and regulations (Esser et al., 2016). Although the participants of this study did not explicitly acknowledge the active participation of children, children were involved in many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of ELC settings, for example, constructing knowledge, making meaning and embracing changes through play experiences. The experiences of children's participation from the practitioners' perspectives are discussed in the next section.

6.3 Children's participation in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

Another particular area of discussion in the data on the experiences of children and practitioners in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic concerns how children's participation was understood and experienced in this study. Participation has been argued in the literature as providing a sense of control and a coping mechanism that might help children to deal with stress around them, especially in crisis contexts (Gal & Duramy, 2015), just as the role of "play" in children's lives emphasised in the previous section. In addition, participation as a universal human right of children is well presented in the literature (Gal & Duramy, 2015; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022).

In this section, I discuss how children's participation was understood by the participants of this study, both in terms of their participation in decision-making processes at the policy and the setting level and their participation in daily life, in the light of shifts brought about by COVID-19 measures proposed in the previous chapter. I aim to take a critical stance on conceptualisations in ELC settings regarding participation and discuss the challenges of realising participation in practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. The last part explores the floorbook as an example questioning whether it enables opportunities for children's participation in ELC settings.

6.3.1 Children's participation in decision-making processes

Within the various definitions of participation, it can be defined as "taking part in an activity, or specifically taking part in decision-making" (Thomas, 2007, p.199). Participation can also refer to a process of decision-making involving individual and collective decision-making (Thomas, 2007) and becomes part of policy rhetoric (Tisdall et al., 2014). This section discusses children's participation in decision-making, both at the policy level and at the level of ELC settings. Most participants of this study have recognised that the decisions taken and practices applied during the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to lack consultation with children. In the following excerpt, Laura, a manager of an ELC setting, mentioned her disappointment at the lack of centralisation of children in the measures agreed upon by higher authorities for ELC settings and then her strong belief in children's capabilities for decision-making:

> Certainly, there's no way in the world, they [policymakers] can say they put children first.
>
> …I think children should have been involved from the outset. I see this as something is done to them not with them… And so, I absolutely believe that children could have made decisions, the right decisions. Right from the outset. I think there could have been negotiations. I think children come up with creative solutions that adults have sometimes not thought of.
>
> Lauren, manager of an ELC setting, interview excerpt, December 2020

Laura's opening sentence above emphasised the place of children at the policy level regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic limitations and said that children were never prioritised in any situation. In line with the existing literature (Campbell et al., 2021; Cuevas-Parra, 2021; McNair et al., 2022), this study provided evidence that children's views and experiences were neglected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, their consistent and meaningful participation in pandemic planning and decision-making processes about decisions directly affecting their lives have not been adequately considered.

Furthermore, Laura's excerpt above exemplified her strong belief in the importance of children's views and perspectives in decision-making processes, emphasising that children would make "the right decisions". Therefore, she strongly advocated the need for "negotiations" with children "right from the outset", believing in children's competencies to "come up with creative solutions". Laura's views and beliefs here can be linked with her image of the child, which is "rich in potential, strong, powerful" (Dahlberg et al., 2013), which recognises children's competencies and abilities to participate in society (James & James, 2012). Laura's views are in line with the UNCRC (2009) definition, which conceptualises participation as "ongoing processes that include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults" (p.3).

Like Laura, many other participants of this study interpreted it as a "mistake" not to listen to children's views and perspectives and made particularly clear the need to involve children in decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. The literature argues that children's participation in decision-making is often approached in a top-down way and exists if "it is

named and operated by adults" (Malone & Hartung, 2010, p.33). Therefore, the initiatives are found to lack impact (Tisdall, 2012). The involvement of children and young people in disaster or conflict situations is expressed as societal opportunities that contribute to "children's recovery efforts, overcome painful experiences, and develop their sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, identity and belonging" (Cuevas-Parra, 2021, p.87). Lundy (2007) notes that one of the prerequisites for the meaningful engagement of children in decision-making is the creation of an opportunity for involvement in which children are encouraged to express their views (Lundy, 2007). Since these opportunities were very limited during the COVID-19 pandemic and children were not included in the decision-making processes or their participation was not recognised, opportunities that some children could potentially benefit from, such as having a sense of control and a coping mechanism through participation (Gal & Duramy, 2015) were largely missed.

Furthermore, discussions on children's "best interests" over participation can be opened here. As argued in the literature review, adults likely remain key decision-makers in determining the best interests of children (Tisdall & Konstantoni, 2023). Thus, adults' views can easily undermine children's participation in daily life and exclude them from being involved in decision-making (Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019). The literature warns against the paternalistic implementation of the best interest principle as it may create a space for manipulation by professionals in determining the best interests of children (Vandenhole & Türkelli, 2020) and against the shift of focus on adult actions, prevention and protection rather than children's participation in determining their own concerns and solutions (Tisdall, 2017). As can be seen in the excerpts in this section, the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in ELC settings have been the recent examples of how children's participation was often marginalised and their opportunities to participate in decision-making were closed off. At the same time, the protections, health measures and "best interests" decided by practitioners were prioritised during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While emphasising the place of children in the decisions taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, expressions such as "listening to children", "asking children", and "children's voices" were frequently used by the participants of this research. For instance, Amanda, a staff member working in a local council, recognised the importance of "asking children" and provided potential explanations on why the decisions related to children were taken without any consideration to them:

> There should always be space for children's voices. They are the ones that are actually having to deal with all these changes and rules and regulations and legislation. And they are the ones that often get forgotten. We don't seem to think, well, let's ask children what you think about this. I mean, even bringing it right down to a nursery, you know, they don't often think about how that might affect. That's a fault I think of our society as a whole not recognising that children have a voice. And, therefore, and maybe people think, ohh, it's just too much effort to ask children because, you know, they don't understand what's going on? Well, I think we underestimate the children's ability to understand what's going on.
>
> Amanda, staff working in a local council, interview excerpt, February 2021

As Amanda puts it, while children were the ones "having to deal with all changes and rules", they also "often get forgotten" at the same time. Besides not asking children's views and experiences about the changes or implementations, Amanda also stressed that while "bringing" the changes "right down to a nursery", the potential impact of the changes on children was not considered. This can be expressed as a problem independent of the COVID-19 pandemic, but it can be claimed that the problems increased even more at that time. Other studies carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that there has not been any consultation or shared decision-making with children (Lundy et al., 2021; McNair et al., 2022; Peleg et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022). Furthermore, an independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) that was undertaken to analyse the impacts of the COVID-19 policies on children's human rights in Scotland revealed that information related to the COVID-19 pandemic for children and young people was inadequate, and their involvement in decision-making processes often ignored (Adamson, 2021).

When Amanda's quote above is examined in more detail, it appears that the broad assumptions about children and their capabilities presented some challenges to children's participation in decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an explanation, Amanda said that children's ability to understand and contribute to what was happening around them tended to be underestimated. As Moran-Ellis and Tisdall (2019) argue, children's competence is often treated as a subject position or status "granted" to children by adults. Thus, children have the risk of being incompetent in most of the situations they are dealing with, and the status of

children in society marginalises children from public decisions (Cuevas-Parra, 2021). More specifically, the dominance of the mainstream model, which views young children as "too innocent and/or immature to participate meaningfully", could prevent children from participating in discussions and decisions that affect them (Mac Naughton et al., 2007, p.164), as it has found in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in this study.

Other related barriers to children's participation becoming real stem from conceptualisations of early childhood (Alderson, 2008; Blaisdell & Bolger, 2020). For example, childhood can often be framed as a fundamental preparatory stage of life rather than a rich period in its own right, therefore easily leading to widespread deficit views (Blaisdell & Bolger, 2020). Another barrier stems from hierarchical beliefs such as "confidence in adults' superior knowledge" and "a sense that young children cannot understand much or give reliable accounts" (Alderson, 2008, p.141). Therefore, adult-centric views towards children resulted in ignoring children's voices, their ability to contribute to solutions, and their rights to participate (Jalongo, 2021). Another underlying difficulty for the participation of children in decision-making could be explained by having "doubt about consulting children, feeling that it will not work, wastes time" (Alderson, 2008, p.142), especially during crisis times. Amanda has mentioned this above, highlighting the possibility of "putting too much effort to ask children" during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, some participants in this study noted that the Scottish Government and relevant authorities needed to respond quickly in times of crisis. Therefore, the decisions were made without considering children's views and experiences or creating opportunities for children to participate in decision-making processes. This finding aligns with the literature suggesting that time constraints may be exclusionary for including young children (Tisdall, 2015a). This section argues that the social position of children, i.e. limited views on children's capabilities and being a part of the solution, and the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic brought, jeopardize children's participation in decision-making in a crisis, exacerbating an already challenging situation.

6.3.2 Children's participation in the life of ELC settings

Following on from the previous section that addressed children's participation in decision-making and the challenges of achieving it during the COVID-19 pandemic, this section begins by describing how children's participation in the life of ELC settings has been understood by

some of the participants in this study, highlighting the children's voices and some participatory practices. Children's participation literature indicates the tension between participatory rhetoric and the reality of children's lives and experiences (Blaisdell, 2016). Therefore, some of the discussions highlighted by the participants regarding children's participation in the life of ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed in this section.

Patricia, a staff member working in a local council, acknowledged that there have been "many ways of participation" in ELC settings, emphasising that the child was "at the centre" of policies and guiding principles. She spoke about the general approach of practitioners in Scotland to children's participation:

> Children can express themselves and have real participation in the life of the setting, and make real choices about the things that they do and how they learn and what they learn and what they're interested in. It is very much high on the agenda across the whole of Scotland, Realising the Ambition has supported that. Practitioners are very attuned, and I think they're becoming more "mind-minded". You know, they're asking why the child is acting that way. What do I need to do or support in order for them to engage?
>
> Patricia, staff working in a local council, interview excerpt, February 2021

For Patricia, practitioners in Scotland have been becoming "very attuned" and more "mind-minded" in terms of the realisation of children's participation in ELC settings, striving to understand what children want, need and say. Emphasising the importance of children's "real participation" in everyday life, it can be said to make a distinction between participation and more top-down approaches to participation, such as "consulting" children. Patricia also emphasised her belief in children's capabilities to make "real" choices about their learning based on their own interests. Therefore, she referred to the dialogue and dynamic processes between children and practitioners as an underpinning condition for children's participation. Patricia further questioned the idea of "children's voice":

> …because I think the phrase "children's voice" is problematic in that we always think that voice means it's something that's been articulated when actually is not always about that. And some practitioners think we can't do it because the child doesn't have

> a voice, non-verbal. But I think that observation and relationships help them to see what the child is trying to communicate. And we need to let them lead.
>
> Patricia, staff working in a local council, interview excerpt, February 2021

Patricia underlined that the expression "children's voice" has been problematic as some practitioners assumed that "non-verbal" children did not have a "voice". The term "voice" has been critiqued in the literature due to the privileging of comprehensible verbal communication, which might exclude children who communicate through non-verbal ways (Blaisdell, 2016; Spyrou, 2016). Rather, Patricia highlighted the importance of observations, communications and relationships within ELC settings to articulate children's participation and listening to them. Like Patricia, some other participants of this study emphasised that listening to children does not mean just hearing their opinions and ideas. It should also entail connecting their views to decision-making and considering their social structures and contexts (Cuevas-Parra, 2021). Following Patricia's reflection, the utilisation of Lundy's model of participation (Lundy, 2014; 2022), which has been used to inform the understanding of children's participation in policy and practice, can provide valuable insights within this context. In this model, four interrelated concepts, space, voice, audience and influence, are important for meaningful participation. Also, children's various expressions of voice are acknowledged and valued (Lundy 2014; 2022). As Clark (2020) states, listening to the "voice of the child" should start at birth and be adapted to children's developing capacities for participation in the social world. These views are also closely associated with acknowledging children as active and valuable contributors to decisions that impact their lives (Murray, 2019).

Scholars make a distinction between the terms "listening to children" and "children's participation" in the literature. While participation is seen as more closely linked to children's rights, listening is seen as the "ethic of relating to others" (Moss et al., 2005, p.9). Moreover, the literature points out controversial uses of participation in the early years literature and uses of "listening" or involving children instead (Tisdall, 2016), which were also used by some participants in this study. Konstantoni (2013) argues the restrictions towards "the act of listening" as practitioners who "would not really 'listen' to or effectively act upon views expressed by children" (p.371). Similarly, Blaisdell (2017) suggests "a commitment to listening to children does not always translate into the meaningful practice of hearing and acting upon children's voices and contributions" (no pagination). Rather, meaningful

participation should be embedded into daily life and routines (Blaisdell, 2017; Tisdall 2015b) and should be "relational, enacted and created with others, rather than reifying the individual person with agency" (Tisdall, 2015b, p.196). They argue for "the multidimensional nature of participation, the diversity of contexts within which participation takes place; and its embedded and relational nature" (Wyness, 2018, p.60).

After highlighting children's participation along with the criticisms from the literature, the section now continues with a discussion of some of the pedagogical practices greatly favoured in ELC settings in this study and how these were limiting or enabling children's participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that the majority of the ELC settings in this study, particularly those discussed in this section, were identified by practitioners working there as adopting an ethos of children's participation and "free flow" pedagogy and practices prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it could be said that these settings were particularly impacted by the measures and limitations taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants identified the restrictions on children's free movement and free flow play as a result of implemented COVID-19 pandemic measures such as physical distancing and creating "bubbles". These were expressed as "additional" challenges to children's participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, practitioner Erika illustrated how spatial arrangements in her setting with the COVID-19 pandemic measures disrupted children's presence in and movement between the spaces:

> Our space has been free flowing for a number of years, with all the doors open for all children of all age groups to be able to share the space inside and outside of each other. So, the children were divided into two groups, and doors were closed for the first time really and with access to the garden, but then also the garden was divided became a divided space. So yeah, that has been quite a challenge.
>
> Erika, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

Like many other practitioners in this study, Erika voiced the negative effects of dividing space in ELC settings on children's experiences and relationships, as discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, the negative effects on the free movement of children, which have occurred without any restrictions for "a number of years", have been particularly emphasised above.

Many participants also expressed that this was a central element of the life of their settings in pre-COVID-19 pandemic times. The frequency of using the word "divided" made it very evident in Erika's statement that the "free flow" element disappeared with the closing of the doors and keeping the children's groups in separate spaces, negatively influencing the overall pedagogical practices of the setting.

In addition to the divisions in ELC settings, the measures taken to limit contact between the groups required the "bubbles" to stay and move together as much as possible throughout the day. This meant that children in a particular bubble needed to follow the activity or trip, which was decided by practitioners for the group, based on the logistics of the settings, e.g. where the "bubble" was allocated for the day. Practitioner Megan put this well below, also emphasising the "free choice" of children in her setting:

> Before, they [children] were able to be inside or outside, whatever their choice was. They don't have that choice any longer. They're now just outside. Or if they are inside, they're inside for short periods of time. So, they might come in for an hour, um, but they aren't spending their time in the same way as before. Some children, before lockdown, wouldn't have gone outside at all, generally, they would have spent their entire time inside. And whereas, that just isn't the case now. They aren't really being given this option. And there is still free flow outside. And there's still the ability to have, you know, stories read and books, but it's not the same as it was before. It's very different.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

Many practitioners in different settings, like Megan above, explicitly valued children's free flow in ELC settings. Thus, they expressed a strong desire to keep it to the extent permitted by the physical properties of settings, e.g. keeping the doors open between inside and outside to allow movement of children. The quotation above indicated that being able to keep free flow, to some degree, did not mean that children have the freedom to choose during the day. As Megan exemplified above, children spent most of their time outside in line with the COVID-19 pandemic measures without "being given this option" to choose how they wished to plan their days. Therefore, Megan has often highlighted that children's experiences were different and "not the same as it was before". It could be argued that the measures taken and changed

practices to protect children during the COVID-19 pandemic have restricted children's daily experiences, the way they exercise their agency, and, indeed, their participation in the daily life of ELC settings.

Furthermore, the above practices imply that children were considered and treated as a group to control their movements within settings and were no longer seen as individuals with choices and preferences that enabled them to move between indoor and outdoor spaces throughout the day as they were used to. Hereby, the spatial arrangements and the need to comply with safety precautions have constrained the opportunities for children and practitioners to participate in the daily life of ELC settings. An example from Lauren, manager of an ELC setting, exemplified further limitations on children's participation in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> But, you know, we've limited the children. We can still bake the bread in the morning, although the bread is baked for them. They're not able to participate in the experience. The other thing is, at lunchtime, food is spooned out to children. So normally, children would be able to select what they would like to eat. That's not happening either. They have to have lunch at a specific time. So yes, choice has definitely been limited, and the rights have been infringed. There's no doubt about that.
>
> Lauren, manager of an ELC setting, interview excerpt, December 2020

In the excerpt above, Lauren, similar to other participants in this study, summed up well how children's choices, free flow and freedom of movement in the setting have been impacted and heavily disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic, saying there was "no doubt about that". Lauren also noted that children's participation in experiences in their settings, such as baking, had disappeared during this time. The experiences of free flow play and children's choices in ELC settings are always controlled by many variables such as curriculum arrangements, documents and guidances and practitioners' pedagogical values and beliefs (Wood, 2014). Therefore, it can be said that the ways in which daily life and practices were organised in line with the COVID-19 pandemic measures in ELC settings actively limited the opportunities for children's participation. As discussed in the literature review chapter, agency is located and shaped by the context of relations (Esser et al., 2016; Oswell, 2013), children's opportunities to enact agency were similarly constrained. Lauren further emphasised that these limitations

"infringed" on children's rights. This finding provided evidence that children's rights were easily sidelined during the COVID-19 pandemic, both at the practice level in ELC settings and at the policy level, as suggested in the literature (Couper-Kenney & Riddell, 2021; Lundy et al., 2021; McNair et al., 2022; Themelis & Tuck, 2022).

Along with the restrictions on children's participation in the ELC settings discussed above, some participants expressed the opposite: that some of the restrictions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic were creating new opportunities for participation in ways that would not otherwise be possible. The next excerpt exemplifies the views of some practitioners regarding the interruption of the free flow of the setting and the fact that children no longer have a say in whether or not to participate in trips provided some benefits for some children:

> One conversation I had with a colleague was that I think in the past, they had quite a free-flowing setting where there were a lot of children, and it was kind of noisy and no kind of quiet spaces. They would go into the woods, but they would see who wants to come and then take them. I think what's really interesting is that it actually kind of works if we say, this group, you will have to come because then we will all go and children who might not have chosen to go, get to see what it is... And the other lot [bubble] has much more space… I've had to be more dictatorial, so dictating what groups of children do what, and I'm more at ease with that. I think the benefits from that can be there.
>
> Sophia, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

While children having to move as a group during the COVID-19 pandemic was argued against above, some participants favoured this practice. As Sophia pointed out, limited practices and daily life have produced favourable results. These were emphasised as having "much more space" or "quiet spaces" for the groups that stayed in the setting when others went on trips. Sophia seemed to feel that it would be acceptable and reasonable to make a decision for children as it would be "beneficial" for them. While expressing that she was "at ease with" doing this because she believed that the children benefited from it, she emphasised that she became "dictatorial" and "dictating" to children what they needed to do. Other practitioners also expressed similar thoughts about the drop-off and pick-up sessions outdoors, as they encouraged more children to spend more time outside. These thoughts are in line with what

Wood (2014, p.5) argues:

> Paradoxically, where free choice and free play are privileged as the main ways in which children learn, this may reduce opportunities for children to choose activities alongside adults, in which they can share interests and intentions, through flexible and responsive engagement.

In line with the literature (Wood, 2014), this section provided the argument that free flow and free choices were accepted and expressed as well embedded in the pedagogy of some ELC settings, resulting in the assumption that children take advantage of the unique opportunities they offer by participating in activities in ELC settings. In the literature, it has been suggested that child-centredness and children's freedom to choose in ELC settings may advantage some children but disadvantage others (Langford, 2010; Wood, 2014). This does not mean that children's choices or movement in settings should be restricted or more under the control of adults, but it argues the need to engage more critically with established discourses in practice as well.

Here, the literature on "pockets of participation" can be mentioned, which is used to describe the importance of creating pockets of participation where children are active and have a sense of ownership of certain parts of the research, as it might not be possible to enable their participation in all the stages (Franks, 2011; Wright, 2021). Similarly, it can be argued that children might have a greater level of meaningful decision-making or participation in certain contexts than others, as illustrated above. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many opportunities for meaningful experiences and participation of children have been missed. However, some pockets of participation have been created by practitioners and children. The next section critically discusses a particular example that practitioners gave to support children's participation in their settings while dealing with the many constraints and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.3.3 "Floorbook": a way of enabling children's participation?

After discussing children's participation in decision-making at the policy and ELC settings level and in the daily life of ELC settings, this section critically analyses the "floorbook" to enable children's participation. Many practitioners in this study stressed the importance of

working together on children's interests and ideas. Some cited the floorbook as one of their practices at that time to create a space for children to participate in the life of ELC settings under COVID-19 constraints. Floorbook is stated as a child-centred methodology for profiling children's learning journey and as a part of a coherent approach to learning, teaching and assessment (Warden & McNair, 2016). It is also conceptualised as a participatory tool for a pedagogical purpose (Warden, 2006) and a process of documentation (Warden, 2013). Although there are different versions of the floorbook in different ELC settings, a version shared by practitioners Dorothy and Haley, who worked in the same ELC setting, is analysed here. The floorbook was reported as a large piece of paper to document and extend children's play interests and learning while encouraging children to engage with their own ideas and interests. The floorbook included quotes, photos, children's drawings and practitioners' observation notes to help follow children's interests, learning and play. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the floorbooks were available for parents/carers to look up and review. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this feature was lost due to the restriction on parents/carers being inside of the ELC settings. Therefore, in this particular setting, practitioners used the floorbook as a way to communicate with parents by sharing pictures from it online.

The floorbook was seen by the participants of this study as one of the ways to document, plan and evaluate early learning and childcare. Documentation, assessment and evaluation are areas of tension and optimism, and the practices can vary (Blaisdell et al., 2022). Some approaches are described as rich and process-based, while others are standardised and aim to monitor children's progress in specific areas. In this study, Dorothy exemplified how floorbooks were used in her setting during the COVID-19 pandemic by referring to figure 9 below:

Figure 9 The floorbook photo sent by Dorothy to exemplify children's participation in her setting



> This is our floorbook. Children are working on… some of their thoughts and ideas that day. We're always trying to encourage them to get as much of their work in the floorbook as possible. We'll ask them questions, ask them to draw their ideas, what they think. So, we use this on a daily basis. We obviously, as practitioners, then fill it with also all of our learning and evaluation.
>
> Dorothy, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

Dorothy explained how they used the floorbook as an example of enabling opportunities for children's participation in their setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. She mentioned that practitioners encouraged the children to put their "thoughts and ideas" on paper by working with them, asking them questions and adding their notes on "learning and evaluation" over a day. Dorothy then went on to describe how they encouraged children's participation in her setting, emphasising it was the children's choice:

> Sometimes we'll just invite children, maybe over to a table, and suggest if they would like to come and give us their thoughts and ideas on a particular thing. You know, whatever we've been working on, whatever their interests have been. And so, they're

> invited to do it. So, some children do, some children don't… So really, it is still their choice. We do try to encourage children to get involved.
>
> Dorothy, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

As in the quote above, Dorothy emphasised that as long as they followed and worked on children's interests, ideas and thoughts by "inviting" children to participate, she believed it was "still their choice". Even though Dorothy expressed that the floorbook was child-centred, both the image and her expressions exemplified that it was very adult directed. The process itself can bring about the learning process by enabling children to contribute to what can be recorded. However, it should be asked what power the children have within the process (Schulz, 2015), as centring children's development and interests does not mean that children can hugely dominate the agenda within their space (Jorgensen & Wyness, 2021). From Dorothy's account, it seemed that children's interaction with floorbooks was encouraged by practitioners at certain times of the day rather than being part of the flow of the day. This could lead to recording moments constrained by the practitioner's choice when they observed something about children's learning and considered it "valuable" to engage it with the floorbook. Therefore, the contribution of children to the process cannot be separated from the relations between children and adults, and questions arise about "power over what is recorded and how, and who interprets/represents what children are thinking and experiencing" (Blaisdell et al., 2022, p.575).

In addition to Dorothy, Haley strongly emphasised that floorbooks were used to make a "child-centred and child-friendly" planning in the setting. She exemplified it by stating:

> If they say they are interested in, like, mini beasts, perhaps a page on that. If there are quotes that children said about mini beasts or if they drew a picture of a mini beast and about play etc., we include them. It's very, like, child-centred, and all their work would be in it. We would go back into the evaluation and planning part to extend that interest, not to take over. …We just take up that balance and make sure that you know that it is right for the children.
>
> Haley, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

Haley's practice seemed to allow children to define, narrate and interpret their interests and open up an area where both she and the children can expand these interests. This seems to align with what Ryan (2005) suggests that "the curriculum begins with the needs and interests of the child", and practitioners "use their knowledge of how children develop to structure learning experiences that facilitate children's learning" (p.99). Haley carefully stressed that as an adult, she intended to have "balance" rather than "take over" the process. However, this use of floorbooks as a participation tool seemed to prioritise the written over the verbal or interactional forms, so for some children this practice may be exclusionary. Despite Haley mentioning their practices as "very… child-centred", and children being argued as "active learners who require freedom from adult authority to explore ideas independently and make sense of their world" within the child-centred education (Ryan, 2005, p.99), children are subjected to different forms of disciplinary power that regulate them within all forms of pedagogies (Dahlberg et al., 2013).

Jorgensen and Wyness (2021) argue that, whereas traditional pedagogies are based on clear lines of power and authority between adults, teachers or practitioners, and children, child-centredness is more regulatory, with adults supervising children from afar and always in a position to change the task and encouraging children to learn in and through active play with their peers. Thus, they do not lead to a major shift in the balance of power towards children. Singer (2005) argues from the historical perspective that "liberation of the child always goes hand in hand with new forms of discipline" (p.618), and the norms about children's development, learning and wellbeing, observation or test methods are all the cultural inventions of adults which structure the interactions with children. Similarly, Burman (2007) argues that children's "active engagement on the production of own knowledge can also function as a tactic of recruitment that both renders the child more subject to regulation and makes it harder for them to escape surveillance" (p.269).

Haley further talked about how the floorbook served as a way of evaluation and linked with the curriculum expectations:

> There'll be children's quotes, photos, pictures children have made. And then to go along with that would be the observation, analysis, what the child's been learning, what they've been interested in and any curricular outcomes with linking in that, and then it'd be the planning and extension stage. So how we will move on from that, so it's just

> a way to document, to promote, to extend their learning… We would add in an evaluation separately, adding the key points and stuff as well, sort of a basis for planning.
>
> Haley, practitioner, interview excerpt, January 2021

Haley noted that when planning, for instance, they linked children's learning and interests, as they recorded in the floorbook, to "curriculum outcomes" that the setting needed to follow. She further stated the evaluation process as a part of planning by adding "key points and stuff" from the floorbook. Thus, in this particular setting, practitioners seemed to attach importance to learning outcomes and link them to policy objectives. It could be argued that documentation, planning and evaluation in this setting were embedded in the power relationship in the Scottish system, which requires assessment and monitoring of children's learning.

The Scottish Government aims to provide every child "the best start in life with free, quality education" (Scottish Government, 2018). This aspiration has resulted in further expansion of funded ELC to 1140 hours per year (Scottish Government, 2020l) with a rationale of "improv[ing] children's development and narrow[ing] the poverty-related attainment gap" (Scottish Government, 2022a). The requirement of "quality" ELC settings and monitoring children's development can be stated as underlying the development of assessment regimes for children in ELC settings (McNair et al., 2021). This is highlighted in the research project of McNair et al. (2021), which focuses on the ways practitioners document children's learning. Although the "Lived Stories", which is a form of narrative assessment to track children's progress, were seen as "a liberating practice" for practitioners as compared to standardised assessment tools, they were still embedded in the reductionist assessment system as a particular requirement of the Scottish system (McNair et al., 2021).

As both Dorothy and Haley stated above, practitioners in their setting valued children's interests, needs, and learning and therefore sought to document, evaluate, and assess children's learning with floorbooks, encouraging participation in the process. Although the practice was seen as children's choice and child-centred, it was questioned how children were part of the process and how their participation was enabled or restricted. Documentation can be a strategy to build participation, a process of collective reflection emerges, and choices and decisions can

be shared (Falco & Kishimoto, 2022). However, practitioners' narratives in this section argue that the narrow and simple way of documenting children's ideas and interests can only capture the "chosen" moments greatly influenced by practitioners, not the complexity of children's experiences in ELC settings. Selective engagement with the floorbook was found to be restrictive for children's participation, as practitioners may prioritise what they considered important as part of children's learning and assessment. Another element found as restrictive was the requirement for practitioners to link children's interests and learning with the curriculum or policy goals. In conclusion, for the reasons discussed, it has been seen that the floorbooks used in this particular ELC setting were insufficient and limited to enable and ensure children's participation.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has continued to present children's experiences, focusing on play and participation in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. By discussing the practitioners' narratives on children's particular experiences, I explored how the concepts of play and participation were conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings by highlighting some of the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In section 6.1, I have drawn attention to some practical issues regarding child-centred and play-based pedagogies and children's participation in ELC settings, which have always been controversial in the field of ELC regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. This section cites the reasons as the "traditional school approach" and a focus on practices such as testing and standardisation. Most participants in this study were aware of and valued the importance of listening to children and making their participation real in practice. However, some approaches embedded in participants' and ELC settings' pedagogies, such as addressing participation in top-down and tokenistic ways and adults' underestimating children's capabilities and agency, were found to be limiting factors in children's participation and experiences.

In section 6.2, I discussed how play was understood and experienced in ELC settings when the COVID-19 pandemic altered the conditions of play. The changes in the "nature" of play were reported in light of the changes discussed in the previous chapter. These changes tended to be positive and included play as being richer, more imaginative and deeper. More specifically, most changes in the "nature" of play have been associated with a greater emphasis on the

outdoors and interactions with nature and natural resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the importance of the role of practitioners in supporting children's play was emphasised. Thus, it can be argued that play experiences have been created through children's and practitioners' dynamic and shifted interactions with each other and the materials, measures, and limitations presented in ELC settings in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this study, play was found to evolve and adapt throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was found as a way for children to reflect on and process the COVID-19 pandemic through their experiences. Many play themes were presented in this section about the coronavirus and how children were dealing with it. Therefore, play was viewed as a way of negotiation when children were subjected to restrictions in their contexts (Cowan et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021), meaning-making on their experiences through having control in and around their own life (Cohen & Bamberger, 2021) and dealing with the changes in their lives and environment. This section, which analysed children's play experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, argues children's actively construct knowledge and exercise their agency through play in relation to other people and materials, documents and limitations.

In section 6.3, I started to discuss how children's participation was conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings. This section argued that children's meaningful participation in pandemic planning and decision-making processes throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has often been underestimated and sidelined, both at the policy and practice level, by mainly ignoring children's views and experiences. Section 6.3.1 highlighted the discussion on children's participation in decision-making that directly impacted their lives. The implemented changes were brought to the ELC settings in a top-down approach without considering their impact on children and practitioners in depth. In addition to the crisis situation, the status of children in a society that marginalises children from public decisions (Cuevas-Parra, 2021), i.e. viewing children as immature and incompetent to participate, as well as reliance on adults being accepted as key decision-makers and their "superior" knowledge (Alderson, 2008), jeopardised children's participation in decision-making which was already a challenge regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In section 6.3.2, I explored children's participation in the daily life of ELC settings, emphasising the tension in practice as listening to children does not often mean acting upon children's views and contributions. Maintaining some pedagogies and practices, such as child-

centredness and free flow in ELC was crucial in this study. However, they were limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures. Although child-centred practices and pedagogies affirming children's voices are central, in practice, it is consistently argued that children's voices are symbolically included (Arnot & Reay, 2007). Therefore, I have discussed how children's participation was limited or enabled as the conditions of participation were constantly changing. On the one hand, the interruption of these pedagogies and practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures appeared to limit children's opportunities to participate in the daily life of ELC settings. On the other hand, some practitioners found treating children as a group was beneficial, putting the "best interests" of all children above their individual choices and preferences. Even when children's opportunities for participation and enacting their agency were constrained as they were located in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study argues that children have a greater level of participation in certain contexts than others, and practitioners can enable pockets of participation in ELC settings. In section 6.3.3, I critically discussed whether the "floorbook", used in ELC settings to document, assess and evaluate children's interests and learning, enabled opportunities for children's participation. The example of the floorbook presented in this study reflected the narrow way of documenting children's ideas and interests by capturing the "chosen" moments mainly structured by the adults' assessment and evaluation concerns to fulfil the curriculum or policy goals. For this reason, it has not been found to be as effective as suggested or intended in ensuring children's participation.

This chapter strongly emphasised children's knowledge and views about and ways of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. It also pointed out children as active constructors of knowledge and exercising their agency through play in ELC settings in relation to other people, materials, documents and limitations. It also exemplified how children's participation in decision-making processes and daily life in ELC settings has been constrained not only because of COVID-19 pandemic measures but also because of the established practices in ELC, emphasising the measuring and standardisation of children's learning and views on children, emphasising them as immature and incapable. The ongoing debates in the field remained contested, and the COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer to some of the challenges. The focus on safety and protection measures during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in prioritising protection and the best interests of children over participation in ELC settings from time to time. However, this does not mean children were the passive or vulnerable subjects of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also found that children could challenge such norms by bending some

measures and rules, as discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7: CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILDHOODS AND EARLY LEARNING CHIILDCARE (ELC) DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This chapter explores the constructions of children, childhoods and ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, the chapter provides particular discussions of the traditional and historical constructions, i.e. developmental perspectives, as well as questioning these constructions with more recent understandings in childhood studies, i.e. recognising the complexity and interconnected relations in children's lives.

The literature reviewed shows that at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, children were positioned as a "risk" and "pandemic problems" in the media and society. This has led to underestimating children's experiences and views and reinforcing the view that they are passive and incompetent. This chapter explores multiple understandings of children and childhoods in the ELC setting context during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the understandings of childhood within the developmental paradigm that reflect children as incompetent and incapable (James, 2009; Qvortrup, 2009), therefore not yet "being" (Woodhead, 2009), are discussed by looking at age-based hierarchical approaches in the ELC settings. Second, the constructions that emphasise children's active role and participation in society (James, 2009; Prout, 2005; Spyrou, 2018) are explored by looking at how children know and understand the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures and how they create meanings for themselves and others. Third, the constructions that demonstrate children as competent social actors and recognise their agency (Esser et al., 2016; Qvortrup, 2009) are discussed, focusing on children's negotiations and ways to bend the rules and measures imposed on them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reviewed literature in this study argues that narratives such as "recovering", "learning lost", and "catch up" have been the responses of governments within and between countries during the COVID-19 pandemic (Egan et al., 2021; Rogers, 2022). The literature has also revealed the challenges faced by staff working in ELC environments globally as part of the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations. This chapter explores the constructions in early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of this study. First, the "loss" narratives about children's academic knowledge and skills that appeared when children were away from ELC settings are discussed, with the appearance of "catch up" and "schoolification"

narratives. Second, practitioners' efforts to support children are explored when children were away from ELC settings and after ELC settings were reopened, focusing on children's learning, emotions and wellbeing. Third, the "care" and "early learning" aspects are discussed in relation to increasing pressure on practitioners and the field itself during the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing debates in the field, such as the lack of value placed in "care" work.

7.1 Children and childhoods in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, not only were children affected by decisions that directly affected them, for example, ELC settings closures, but there have been various indirect impacts of this crisis on children, for example, how they were being treated in society (Lundy et al., 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic, from a medical perspective, early evidence suggested that children were not seriously affected by COVID-19, and their symptoms were often mild; therefore, they were identified as at low risk of contracting COVID-19. Jiménez et al. (2023) argue that this contributed to governments marginalising children in the responses to COVID-19. Moreover, children were thought to be less affected than other groups due to a general assumption that the economic and other impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic had little relevance to children (Bessell, 2021).

A quick shift in the conception of children from "pandemic innocents" to "pandemic problems" started to appear in media and society (Richardson et al., 2021, p.9). Children started to be positioned as a "risk" and stigmatised in media as "super-spreaders" of the virus to more vulnerable members of society (Jiménez et al., 2023; Lundy et al., 2021). Similarly, Cortes-Morales et al.'s (2021) and Cortes-Morales and Morales' (2021) analysis of the viewpoints from different countries, including studies and media coverage, showed a generalised discourse about children as "vectors" for the disease; "voiceless receptors of virtual education"; an extra burden for parents/carers who have to cope with working from home without the usual childcare support, and passive victims of mental health issues because of the restrictions. These discourses have rendered children's views and experiences invisible through months of restrictions, separation from others, such as elderly family members, and interruption of "care interdependencies and intergenerational interactions" (Cortes-Morales et al., 2021, p.5).

The above discussions showed the different constructions of children and childhoods in society and media during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, I discuss some understandings about children and childhoods that emerged during the interviews and explore how they have been constructed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic due to shifting experiences of children and practitioners in the contexts of ELC settings. The discourses discussed in this section are often based on how practitioners viewed children's responses to changing practices and experiences in ELC settings and children's various ways of dealing with these changes. In some contexts, children were seen as too immature to understand the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures, while in others, children's understanding, participation in meaning-making, and competencies were valued by the participants of this study. These are discussed in detail in this section.

7.1.1 Children are "too young" to know

For some practitioners in this study, children's age, maturity and competencies emerged as fundamental frameworks for their understanding and knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken in ELC settings. This section discusses how children were viewed and approached in ELC settings based on age-based hierarchical thinking. In the excerpts in this section, competence is often framed as something that children intrinsically have or lack, often associated with their chronological age (Blaisdell, 2020; James & James, 2009). Some practitioners highlighted the differences between younger and older children, emphasising their age and capacity. For instance, practitioner Lillian shared that:

> There are a lot of younger children as well, some of them didn't understand anything because of their age. But we had some children that would be a bit older that had a bit of an awareness. We didn't go into great detail about things.
>
> Lillian, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

As Lillian explains above, younger children's understanding of COVID-19 pandemic measures was underestimated because of their "age", while slightly older children were assumed to have "a bit of an awareness". In any case, staff in Lillian's setting seemed to choose not to "go into great detail" when talking to children about the situation. Similarly, Megan shared the moments when all children returned to the ELC setting after the long closure:

> That six-month break, you know, it's a long time when you are four. Some of them would stare at you, and you'd been talking to them about the nursery, and then they suddenly look at you and go, "Ah, you are at my nursery." "Yeah, yes." And it was taking some of them sort of maybe 20-30 minutes for them to make that connection… Our youngest ones, they just weren't able to tell us exactly what they were thinking because they just didn't have the language, or maybe the cognitive capacity to think, in that way, I suppose.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

Megan noted above that young children were unable to say what they were thinking due to their limited language, and it could take "20-30 minutes" for them to connect to get to know people they knew before closure. She placed great emphasis on children's "cognitive capacity" to think, process and make sense while applying age-based criteria to distinguish the children. In the above excerpts, children were mainly conceptualised as "lacking, deficient, passive, incomplete, under-developed-and the more so the younger the child is" (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p.58). Also, while verbal communication appeared privileged in Megan's excerpt, younger children's communication through many other means of non-verbal communication was excluded. The way practitioners communicated with children and how much they shared with them about the COVID-19 pandemic was shaped by age-based hierarchies in these cases.

These practitioners' understandings can be explained with a particular perspective on social competence. In one way, it is "mastery of some task-domain", implying a developmental perspective that views children essentially as learning to be "competent" from an adult perspective (Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 1998, p.17). As in the quotes above, the development of children's understanding and making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic is seen as a journey towards being "mature" and having "adult competence" (Woodhead, 2008, p.27). Related to these views, children's participation in the discussions of the COVID-19 pandemic was restricted due to the age-based hierarchies in ELC settings. Le Borgne and Tisdall (2017) suggest that children's exclusion from participation is further increased when competence is assumed to be individualised and internal rather than recognised as relational and enacted. The relational view of competence would suggest that adults and children could support each other's competencies in different contexts (Blaisdell, 2020). In the above cases, possible

opportunities to enable a space where children and practitioners reciprocally share information and support each other seemed to have been missed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews further showed that before the first ELC settings closure, some practitioners tended to be cautious about talking with young children about the COVID-19 pandemic. Chloe stated her concerns as follows:

> If they asked, we would have honest conversations, and it's hard. They're young children, and I don't know. Not many of them seem that interested in it at that point. I think after now, we would definitely talk about it, but before, it didn't come up so much.
>
> Chloe, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

Following the excerpt above, practitioners tended to have conversations with children only if asked by them and found it "hard" to have "honest conversations" with children mainly because the children seemed too young to understand because of their age. Regarding this, practitioners were unsure how aware the children were of the situation and how much detail they might want to know depending on the children's maturity level. In the first weeks, it was reported that the main source of children's knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic was children's own families rather than practitioners, as most practitioners were cautious and tended to avoid going into details to see how things unfolded. Similar concerns of practitioners continued when children were fully returned to their settings after the first closure. For instance, practitioner Dorothy exemplified her thinking on how children might understand the changes by saying, "they're so young, they don't really understand why it's different". The positioning of children as passive and incompetent implies the lack of view of children as social actors who can participate in social life both in ELC settings and society. This can be linked with the public concerns in the Global North about:

> children's presence in 'public' spaces, mostly notably the twin fears that some (Apollonian) children are vulnerable to dangers in 'public' places, and the unruly behaviours of other (Dionysian) children can risk adult control of 'public' space.
>
> Holloway & Valentine, 2000, p.10

In line with the quotation, adults' concerns about children and doubts about sharing information with them can be associated with adults' positioning of children as vulnerable and passive. In these particular cases, children were not deemed a "threat" or "danger" to others and society. However, as mentioned above, they could explain some exclusionary and discriminatory practices towards young children in society, e.g. stricter measures applied for children than adults in some countries, including the UK, for instance rules banning children from shops (Adami & Dineen, 2021).

Tisdall (2018) argues that the "age" and "stage" framework continues to have a strong impact outside the domains of child development, so "age" could be "a reason to include or exclude children, without any further evidence or justification needed" (p.23). Therefore, it can be further assumed that "the individual assignation of incompetence to children" puts children in a less powerful position than those adults who are assumed to be competent (Le Borgne & Tisdall, 2017, p.123). Competence is also linked with the argument about children's rights (Abebe, 2019). In this understanding, children who have not reached the age of majority are not considered competent to fulfil social responsibilities such as maintaining the COVID-19 measures, for instance (James & James, 2009). In this context, the value of young children's perspectives and capacities is not appreciated (Lansdown, 2010).

Before the ELC settings were closed, some practitioners mentioned that they sat down with children and talked about the COVID-19 pandemic to find out what children knew about it and inform them about the changes and restrictions. Age-based differentiation in children's competency appeared significant in some interviews, as in the above excerpts, such as older children being more aware of the overall situation and making sense of the implications. They were seen as capable enough to explain certain things to the "little" ones, such as why washing their hands was important and ways to stop the spread of the virus. Although age is often used as a "proxy" to assess competence, age is often "culturally relative, and children develop it through experience and exposure" (Abebe, 2019, p.5). The data suggests that it is important not to assume children's incompetence based on age (James & James, 2009) and rather consider their complex interactions with their environment and the context in which they live, especially as it became important during the COVID-19 pandemic in which they had fewer opportunities to participate in social life (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; 2021).

7.1.2 Children are active participants in creating knowledge

From a different perspective than the one above, most of the children in ELC settings were described by practitioners as knowledgeable about the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus and why certain measures and limitations were in place. Children's detailed knowledge of the virus, its ways of spreading and the importance of the measures taken have been highlighted in the other studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kahuroa et al., 2021; Nikiforidou & Doni, 2022; Pascal & Bertram, 2021; Stoecklin et al., 2021; Toniolo et al., 2021). This section explores how children are viewed as a part of "knowledge production" in this study, as everyone in the world was experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic for the first time and trying to make sense of what was happening (Waboso et al., 2023).

Practitioner Erika stated that they had plenty of conversations with children when all children fully returned to ELC settings. She read a small passage from her notes during the interview to reflect on how a particular child perceived the "virus" and the precautions taken:

> One child said, "Coronavirus started because of not very good listening. It's a tiny ball of virus that people have on their hands. And you can only see it with a microscope. You have to wash your hands for 20 seconds, and that's it. The Government make the choices for this country, stay in the house for three weeks, use masks in shops, use sanitiser and let the air dry it. I want to go back to the nursery. We need to stay calm and be nice." That was one child's perspective.[25]
>
> Erika, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

The above excerpt clearly demonstrated the child's specific knowledge of the virus, which was "tiny" and invisible to the naked eye. In the excerpt, the child seemed to know where the virus was most likely to be found and the measures that could be taken to get rid of it, highlighting certain information such as "wash your hands for 20 seconds". The passage also showed the new regulations in children's lives, such as mask wearing, handwashing, isolation and physical

[25] This practitioner, Erika, has taken part in another research study. During our interview, she read this excerpt from her own documentation notes, which was also placed in the following research study: *What do young children have to say? Recognising their voices, wisdom, agency and need for companionship during the COVID pandemic by Pascal and Bertram (2021).*

distancing to protect each other. Furthermore, the child was aware that this concerned the whole country and specifically pointed to the "government" as the responsible body which "makes the choices" for the country and its people. The child made sense that people needed to follow the rules to prevent spreading the virus to be able to go back to the setting. This reflects children's "shared responsibility" and "collectivism" as children place a high value on keeping themselves and everyone safe (Koller et al., 2023, p.10).

Further examples of children's specific knowledge and understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic were provided by other practitioners. While practitioner Arianna quoted that some children called it "a nasty bug that makes us unwell", Madeline noted children in her setting called it "a little bug, come and kill you". Erika noted it was perceived as "an adult disease" by the children. Therefore, the children expressed that "grownups can't really go near each other" by referring to the physical distancing measures for adults. These quotes from the children imply children's great awareness and understanding of what was happening and the measures taken in public life and their settings.

In addition to children's knowledge and understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic, their adaptation to new life in ELC settings was frequently highlighted by the participants of this study. Children's ways of coping with the changes in their daily routines and practices have often been interpreted as "smooth" by the practitioners as children easily adapted. These tended to be seen as a strength of children in this study. For instance, practitioner Erika commented on the time of transition from home to ELC settings after the first lockdown, comparing it to the past:

> In the past, we'd maybe have more parents who would come into the building, and they would maybe establish children settling a little bit more, but children generally have responded quite well to saying goodbye to parents. And maybe that understanding that's part of the new way of living with the virus.
>
> Erika, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

In the quote above, Erika focused on how, unlike in the past, children responded "quite well" to saying "goodbye to parents" at the door. She interpreted the fact that children readily accepted changes in their routines as a "part of the new way of living with the virus". The

practitioners' reflections can exemplify that practitioners were quite impressed by the children's capability to adapt to new life in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. They can be linked with the emphasis on children's active participation in preparing for and coping with the crisis and adapting to the changing circumstances (Chatterjee, 2018). The protective factors that contribute to children's coping in the face of crisis have been argued in the literature range from "children's own inner resources and competencies, to interpersonal relationships, to safe infrastructure and strong institutions" (Chatterjee, 2018, p.122).

The interviews with practitioners further revealed children's ways of knowing about the COVID-19 pandemic and related measures. First, children had directly experienced certain restrictions and measures in their own lives during the COVID-19 pandemic as what they were allowed to do and not. For instance, the frequent concerns of children during the lockdowns appeared to be not being able to see their friends, visit their family members and attend ELC found wide coverage in the literature as well (Egan et al., 2021; Fenmachi & Edah, 2022; Timmons et al., 2021). Practitioner Chloe exemplified this by sharing a conversation she had with children during the first lockdown when the strictest measures were taken:

> "I've not seen my grandma because of Coronavirus… Oh, I can't go swimming because of Coronavirus, or I can't go to my friend's house because of Coronavirus."
>
> Chloe, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

The child in Chloe's excerpt has articulated the limitations of her own life, pointing to the "coronavirus" as a reason. Similarly, practitioner Erika shared a dialogue from online meetings with children in her setting during the closure of ELC settings:

> One child said, "I just stayed home. On the way home from our camping trip, we went to the animal park, which is a bit like the zoo… and on the other side of the road, it was closed. I did see some people on Zoom. Remember, you did the gatherings."
>
> Another child said, "We can't go to a woody bay just now because of the virus. We can't go to nursery… We have a list of things for when the virus is gone. We will put the nursery on the list. It's a long list. We have written granny and granddad, safari park… park with the dark slide, the park."

Erika, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

Like Chloe's excerpt, the children in Erika's example clarified what they could or could not do while staying home during the lockdown. Also, one child talked about the new common way of communication via "Zoom", which was also used in ELC settings during the lockdown. The other child noted the list of things he wanted to do "when the virus was gone". These examples show that the restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic directly impacted children's lives, and children very well understood why they could not do certain things.

It can be argued that practitioners' efforts to keep communication with children in many settings in this study during the first lockdown, especially through the video calls, helped children make sense of their own experiences, such as staying at home, by hearing other people and their peers have had similar experiences. Sharing experiences and certain moments can exemplify children's interactions with others as contributing their knowledge and constructing further interactions. The quotations from Erika's communication with the children above revealed their hopes and plans for seeing their friends, having fun and returning to their ELC settings once the restrictions were over. These further underline how children's frustration, views and actions were collaboratively created through their interactions with others, their understandings of the COVID-19 pandemic, the space around them and in relation to other people's interaction with one another in the world (Waboso et al., 2023).

After discussing children's direct experiences with restrictions and limitations, secondly, their exposure to information by their near surroundings and media about the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken was found in this study as another way of knowing about the COVID-19 pandemic. The practitioner, Rena, shared her conversation with a little boy in her class. She said the boy told her:

> "Yeah, Nicola the Surgeon." And I'm like, "I don't think she's an actual doctor surgeon," and he's like, "No, Nicola the Surgeon says we can't go to the play park, and we can't do this, and you got to do what she says because she's in charge." He's very, you know, he's very serious about it. And he will also tell you he will make sure that everybody has washed their hands coming from the garden. He'll stand and hold the soap to make sure that everybody washes their hands properly.

Rena, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

The child had likely seen and listened to Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish First Minister, during the pandemic, on TV giving the daily update on COVID-19, specifically on health and safety restrictions and measures. The child might have interpreted Nicola as an actual doctor ["surgeon"] responsible for people's health. The child may have heard his parents or other household members talking about Nicola Sturgeon. In this sense, TV and news seemed to help disseminate discourses about safety and health measures (González-Calvo et al., 2022), and children have become part of the interpretation and application of these discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Rena's excerpt, the child did not passively accept what he heard on TV or from others, but instead, he listened and interdependently reflected on the processes as he stated, "She's in charge." The child further adapted the measures to his own life and the life of ELC settings by ensuring that everyone washed their hands "properly" using soap. These positionings recognise the key paradigms in childhood studies, as children are "active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live" (James & Prout, 1997, pp.8-9; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Qvortrup, 2009).

Following Rena's excerpt, the child's attempt to make sure that his friends were following the "rules" of handwashing in the setting could be interpreted at first glance as children not only making sense of the measures but also valuing the measures and taking responsibility to protect themselves and others. However, Rena later added that some children in her setting were quite worried about the virus and people getting sick. For instance, it has been reported that some children associate "dirty hands" with "getting ill". Some other studies found that some children were afraid of touching things in ELC settings due to fear and insecurity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Wistoft et al., 2021). On closer examination of Rena's excerpt, the act of the child could be related to his anxiety or about taking control of an "out of control" context in order to feel "secure" or "relaxed". As Kahuroa et al. (2021) argue, children's increased knowledge and understandings seemed to create "a sense of personal control through children being able to name what they were experiencing and identifying family and community measures to keep themselves safe" (p.13).

Overall, it can be argued that children understand and make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic and related knowledges through their interdependencies. As Waboso et al. (2023) argue, children were engaged in knowledges and informed through and by others. They were entangled in relationships beyond their individual positions. How children have constructed their knowledge, understandings and experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies this. This section suggests that the way children act in the world and the way they co-produce knowledge is thus co-constituted by their relationality to others, such as other people, media and regulations, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

7.1.3 Children are competent and agentic

In this section, the arguments illustrate children's negotiations within the changing life in ELC settings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic limitations and measures. They demonstrate children as competent and recognise their agency within certain limits. These views have particular importance to go beyond some deficit views on children and childhoods and open up alternative views.

The practitioners in this study reflected on children's reactions towards the implemented changes in ELC settings. The following excerpts illustrate practitioners' differing perspectives on children's pushing the boundaries in ELC settings:

> So, the garden has a fence across the middle... And we are yet to see how that feels to the children. I have just heard that three of the children have just tried to run through the fence to get to the sandpit. So, it's quite funny.
>
> Joyce, practitioner, interview excerpt, November 2020

> We've put up a little wall in the garden that we've called the Berlin Wall. And some of the children are trying to climb over the Berlin Wall or go around the side of it. And I'm thinking, absolutely great.
>
> Lauren, manager of an ELC setting, interview excerpt, December 2020

> So, we made a small barrier, but the children tried to climb over or sit on the barrier. They spoke to their friends, and they wanted to play, and they found that difficult. So that was quite tough to see.
>
> Morris, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

As in the above excerpts, children's lives in ELC settings have been in relation to the structural arrangements of settings, and children are actively experiencing and affecting how the space can be used and negotiated, as discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis. They referred to children's abilities to negotiate and make some choices in restricted and limited contexts. At the same time, the excerpts showed how children actively embrace the limitations and negotiate them to produce something meaningful for themselves. In the excerpts above, children's responses can be interpreted as pushing the "rules" or boundaries set out by adults as a result of the COVID-19 guidances and regulations. Children can be viewed as agents with consequences that adults may, and often do, want to control (James & James, 2004). However, adults like Joyce and Lauren somehow acknowledged that children were provoking life in the setting by subverting the rule of "stay within the bubble". Children's responses to barriers as climbing over or running through them elicited a more positive response from these two participants as "funny" and "absolutely great". Lauren also drew an analogy between the physical barrier and "the Berlin Wall". On the other hand, Morris focused more on the effects of limitations on children rather than on children's efforts to cope with the change and push boundaries by "[climbing] over" the barrier. He found it "tough" that the barriers prevented children from talking to and playing with their friends. The sense of powerlessness that practitioners felt towards regulations and limitations is mentioned here, as most of the practitioners in this study openly stated that the imposed limitations were not in line with their pedagogical beliefs.

In the next excerpt, practitioner Sophia shared her observation from the various settings she visited throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and illustrated children finding their own ways to deal with the limitations:

> I went to another setting, and they were like, no sand allowed. You can't have sand. And then children were like scraping the little corners [to get sand]. And I just thought,

> oh, it [sand pit] needs to be covered properly… And then the setting I'm in now, they had this big sand pit, and it's no sand play. But even yesterday, I walked past the children, and some sand had escaped onto the ground, and they're playing with the sand. So, we have these rules… children are finding ways to play with bits of sand on the edges. To an extent, we kind of go, "Oh, look over here!" You know, we just sort of let that happen and let the children find their ways.
>
> Sophia, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

The above interview excerpt initially described a situation that was not in line with COVID-19 measures, the existence of some sand that escaped the attention of adults. Sophia continued to explain that children were playing with bits of sand and interpreting that as how children dealt with the situation that limited their experiences in settings. It could be argued that children navigate adult-measured or defined spaces quite smoothly by subverting the structures quietly rather than openly revolting (Brembeck & Johansson, 2010). Many practitioners in this study stated negotiation is part of children's daily interactions in ELC settings, especially between children and the imposed regulations.

As in Sophia's excerpt above, children were viewed as competent to negotiate the situation or find their own ways as long as they were allowed or practitioners ignored the situation. This was also an example of bending the rules in settings and how practitioners rationalised the interpretation of rules. Adults might have decided not to enforce those rules too strictly because they did not fully believe in them, or they might feel guilty for limiting children's experiences. There could have been quite different consequences for children's experiences if adults had decided to enforce those rules around sand more strongly. For Sophia, these acts could be tolerated "to an extent". Thus, children were allowed to continue playing with a piece of sand. On the one hand, children's own negotiations seemed to be their deep engagement with their surroundings. On the other hand, their engagement depended heavily on the structures around them or adults to support, guide and facilitate or prevent (Donegan et al., 2023). Therefore, children's agency cannot be seen as "a force that can liberate children from structural constraints" (Gallagher, 2019, p.191) because this view may lead to overlooking how some children are highly restricted by their contexts and failing to perceive how children's agency is 'thinned' by such aspects (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019).

Within the daily life of ELC settings, some moments of frustration arose when children experienced challenges in managing their daily life in the setting, making choices and exercising their agency. For instance, with increasing amounts of handwashing during the day in line with government guidance, practitioners recounted the verbal refusal of some children to follow this practice:

> In the beginning, the handwashing got a little bit out of control. I think on the first couple of days when everyone was getting used to the rules, they'd wash their hands so many times... And then there was just anarchy, and they [children] started complaining about washing their hands so much. Eventually, some just refused to wash their hands anymore. They were like, "I washed them already."
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, December 2020

In this particular case, according to Megan, there was "just anarchy," where children began to "complain" about the practice imposed on them by adults. It was noted that some children refused to "wash their hands anymore", claiming that they had already washed them. Lauren provided another example. She stated that as a result of encouraging children to wash their hands many times a day, the children responded, "No, I'm sick of washing my hands." Here, it was seen that children openly rejected the practice when it became overwhelming or when they desired to do something different. The practitioner, Shelby, provided another example as children sneaked some toys in their pockets, such as a little car, although taking any toys from home was restricted during COVID-19. These excerpts from different practitioners demonstrate that despite the structural constraints, children find their ways "to command adult attention, express preferences, refuse things they do not like, get more of what they want and constantly stretch the limits of their own capabilities" (Gallagher, 2019, p.192). This reveals how children can manage their daily lives in their environment, make choices within limits, and use strategies to maintain their choices.

Children's wide knowledge and understandings of the overall COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed above, and engagement in the "new" life of ELC settings and relations with others, as discussed in the previous chapters, can be evidenced that children are not passive subjects to what is going on. Rather, they are empowered through their exploration and experimentation of the limits of their capabilities (Koller et al., 2023) and the others (practitioners, settings'

rules in this context). Within the COVID-19 pandemic and related limitations and struggles, children sometimes were seen as "vulnerable" as they were exposed to changes and measures without having too much say. Gallagher (2019) argues that children exercise agency through "vulnerabilities", and it does not mean "a lack" but instead an "openness of being affected by events, which is fundamental to the ability of life to feel, grow, change and act" (p.193). Similarly, the excerpts in this section exemplify that children's agency is continuous and dynamic with changing conditions in ELC settings and can be inhibited or encouraged over time depending on the contexts and relations in which they are found (Robson et al., 2007a).

The discussions in this section illustrate children's contribution to their own childhood and being and becoming part of the construction of life in ELC settings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Within this, children's negotiations and finding their own ways illustrate children as interdependent agents and children's agency as located in social relations and interdependency (Esser et al., 2016). The section argues that agency is embedded in a whole network of different people, objects and practices and produced in conjunction with and distributed among a whole network (Esser, 2016; Spyrou, 2018; Oswell, 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the structures in ELC settings and relationships in structures. As argued, agency is relational; what the pandemic did through these structural effects on relationships, highlighting and amplifying the existing challenges in ELC settings, did indeed have an impact on children's agency, for example, limiting the opportunities for children to exercise agency.

7.2 Early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic

Government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have varied within and between countries, municipalities, and local authorities, mainly around "recovering", "learning lost", and "catch up" narratives (Egan et al., 2021; Rogers, 2022). Earlier in this thesis, discussions were presented regarding changes in the daily lives of ELC settings and the experiences of children and practitioners in the context of the COVID-19 measures and limitations. Following these discussions, in this section, I explore the multiple constructions of early learning and childcare aspects during the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin by discussing the loss narratives about children mainly due to the closures of ELC settings and linking them to the narratives of "catch up" and "schoolification". Then, I discuss what was important in ELC settings during the

COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the work of practitioners on children's wellbeing and learning, both when children were away from ELC settings and when they returned. Finally, I examine the aspects of learning and childcare in the field, drawing on common issues during the COVID-19 pandemic and persistent debates in the field. This study argues that some of the constructions discussed in this section that were already dominant in the field intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some of them shifted based on the focuses and concerns during that time. These are discussed in detail in this section.

7.2.1 Loss narratives for children and the appearance of "catch up" narratives

The literature reviewed on the closure of ELC settings, both globally and in the UK, highlights the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's learning (Howard et al., 2021b; Engzell et al., 2020; Maldonado & De Witte, 2020; Rose et al., 2021a), their wellbeing (Capurso et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2021; Fenmachi & Edah, 2022; Jiao et al., 2020; Spiteri, 2021; Veraksa et al., 2021a), and other aspects of their lives such as safety and access to services (Maynard et al., 2022; Public Health Scotland, 2022; Save the Children, 2020). Consistent with the literature reviewed, participants of this study expressed their concerns about children when they were away from ELC settings, especially during the lockdown times of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this section, I discuss participants' "loss" narratives, particularly related to children's "schoolified" forms of learning and socio-emotional skills and then the appearance of "catch up" narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this study, some practitioners described the time children were away from ELC settings during the first lockdown as a major "loss" because they believed that children lacked the opportunities to learn and mature certain knowledge and skills deemed essential for their later educational life. Practitioner Lisa, for example, referred to the time of closure as "a huge thing that children miss[ed] out from nursery to primary one". The concerns about children's lost learning opportunities in their early years are linked with early learning and childcare being the subject of increasing research and policy spotlight. The dominant discourses of lifelong learning emphasise that learning begins at birth, and the discourses of investment and early intervention in early childhood for the benefits it provides in later education (Moss, 2008; 2013) may have caused these concerns. Rouse and Hadley (2018) argue that the neoliberalist rhetoric that prioritises learning in a linear traditional schooling format and, more disturbingly, reflects

the pressure to measure and assess children's learning and academic achievement early in a child's life has become the focus of governments. As such, they argue that these focuses have repositioned ELC and given greater priority to educational aspects, emphasising early childhood as an important phase for developing critical attitudes and dispositions towards academic learning. This positioning in early learning and childcare was reflected by Deborah when she said:

> We prepared children for school for the whole of their preschool year, particularly from Easter to summer. We do a lot of work with schools. And we're linked to many cluster school, and we visit schools, the teachers come to us... And we help them to focus and help them to concentrate for longer periods of time. And I think for some children… I think it will be very difficult for them to transition into primary one… We've worked with these children for two years, sometimes three years, and then to not have this really important part of their education. And I think it's a huge loss to them.
>
> Deborah, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

In the excerpt above, Deborah, like some of the other practitioners in this study, talked about their regular "preparation" works for transition to primary school before the COVID-19 pandemic, such as having a visit to schools, working on certain skills, and doing activities aimed to increase children's concentration on the task. These views assume the role of ELC as preparing children to perform well in primary school by ensuring that children acquire certain skills, knowledge and dispositions required to be successful learners (Moss, 2013). Deborah acknowledged the critical role of these works in children's later educational life and found the lack of these works due to the lockdown period quite concerning, so their absence was seen as a "huge loss" for the children.

Practitioners were concerned not only with "academic loss" but also with the emotional difficulties that arise in children due to these interrupted transitions. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, most practitioners acknowledged that some children were concerned about returning to ELC settings that looked and functioned very differently from before and being separated from their parents/carers. After children returned to their settings, further "loss" narratives about the changes in their particular skills and behaviours were noted. Practitioner Layla summed up the first day after the reopening:

> Children often forget the routines and rules and lots of spillages at the table. Lots of cups were knocked off the table, and lots of things that they were doing before independently are not happening as much now. So, things like put your coat on, you scraping your plate, um, the children knew how to do it in here very well. It's part of their daily routine. But they've not been here for eight weeks. And even the problem solving of how do I take this ball, this plate and this cup? How do I scrape it into the food bin? So, that whole problem-solving side and that whole independence, we feel there are some losses there as well… We've seen a lot of different behaviours for some of the children who could possibly share before who can't share now.
>
> Layla, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

In the excerpt above, Layla stated that children "forgot" the rules and routines of ELC settings due to their long absences. She clearly exemplified the specific things that were part of the daily life of ELC settings that children could easily do before the COVID-19 pandemic but were unable to do "independently" when they returned, for instance, putting on their coats, scraping their plates after eating and so on. That is why Layla added that as a staff team, they realised that most children needed extra support to get used to the routines of ELC settings when they returned. Furthermore, Layla, with some other practitioners, expressed that some children were quite withdrawn in terms of emotional and social skills regarding the negative effects of lockdowns emphasising the assumptions that children lacked social interaction and communication during that time. As mentioned above, children's acting independently, solving a problem and sharing and turn-taking have been reported as problematic. Therefore, these areas were noted as children's "losses" during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it was noted that children's social and emotional needs were exacerbated due to the breaking of connections they had before. This is in line with the COVID-19 pandemic literature reporting emotional, behavioural, and attentional difficulties in children (Loades et al., 2020; Mochida et al., 2021; Public Health Scotland, 2022; Shum et al., 2021).

After focusing on the losses in "schoolified" learning and certain skills, some participants were wary of the possibility that "catch up" narratives would emerge in early learning and childcare. "Catch up" narratives were argued to be a substitute for learning and experiences thought to have been missed during the lockdowns. As the literature points out, narratives of "learning

loss" and "catch up" have become apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic and have drawn increased attention by governments and policymakers to grapple with the consequences of schools/ECEC closures and learning disruptions (Harmey & Moss, 2021; Martin & Moss, 2021). The UK Government has been criticised due to closing schools for failing to consider the potential harms to children and young people and due to further revealing the narratives of "learning gaps", "learning loss", and "catching up" (Lewis et al., 2021). In England, for example, it was argued that there should be a "boost" for children to "catch up", and summer schools and longer school days were suggested (McCann, 2021). From a different perspective, Children's Commissioner in Scotland has pointed out the "serious risks" of extended closures of schools on children's wellbeing and their human rights (Williams, 2020), not directly focusing on the "learning loss".

In this study, Patricia, who worked in a local council, shared her worries regarding the "catch up" narratives that were publicly debated in Scotland at the time before ELC settings were reopening:

> I worry that there'll be a "catch up" narrative. And some people might flip to more formal learning too soon, and that would worry me. I hope we don't go down that route.
>
> …advocating two more hours a day for kids. And you're like, what about their mental health and wellbeing. It was already too long. We don't want to fall into that trap. I do think we need knowledge-based and depth of learning as well. But there are different ways to do it.
>
> Patricia, staff working in a local council, interview excerpt, February 2021

In the excerpt above, Patricia expressed her concern that when children returned to ELC settings, there would be a greater emphasis on a more schoolified format of learning or curriculum or more hours spent in ELC settings, thus taking on the appearance of a "catch up" narrative to replace those missed during the COVID-19 pandemic. She believed that children had already spent too long in ELC settings, so she did not advocate extending school hours for children. Catching up rhetoric has also been criticised in the literature. Clark (2023) argues that the catching up rhetoric, emphasising the language of competition, primarily indicates economic concern rather than social and pedagogical. The proposed solutions supported

increasing learning time as children can often be considered future human capital in early childhood (Auld & Morris, 2019; Fairchild, 2021). In the excerpt above, while recognising the importance of "knowledge-based" learning, Patricia stated the different ways to do it and, more importantly, the wellbeing of children should be the priority at this critical time.

The particular focus on a "schoolified" format of learning and related concerns about children during the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the danger of "schoolification" in early learning and childcare. This can lead to a school-like approach in ELC settings, emphasising a narrow didactic approach to education and learning (Moss, 2008) by concentrating the focus on literacy and numeracy, as discussed in the following section, and neglecting other important aspects of early learning and development such as holistic learning or nonformal learning processes (Moss, 2013; Woodhead, 2007). It can be argued that focusing on children's "learning loss" due to ECEC/school closure and heavily focusing on children's educational needs during the crisis time reflects the developmental perspectives of childhood, in which childhood is thought of as a progression towards adulthood and can be measured with a set of norms, which depend on western standards (Gavin, 2021). This ongoing tension in ELC has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Formosinho (2021) suggests that schoolification processes evolved from already emerging trends in mainstream early childhood education, and some early childhood centres reverted to the "traditional transmissive mode" as there was a tendency to return to "the well-known and already experienced pedagogic format" in the moment of crisis and uncertainty (p.148). These further expose a "deficit approach to education provision" where schools are viewed as identifying and "fixing" students to improve their achievements (Themelis & Tuck, 2022, p.157). Furthermore, these framings position adults as holding the knowledge to formulate solutions while unhelpfully referring to children and young people as a "lost generation" (Jiménez et al., 2023, p.4) and positioning them as passive recipients of responses to crisis situations.

The concerns mentioned above did not mean that the focus on children's wellbeing upon return was overlooked in the ELC settings in this study. Although practitioners were concerned about children's loss during the lockdown period, interviews revealed that most participants in this study did not fall into "that trap" mentioned by Patricia above when their ELC settings were reopened. Instead, they expressed that they prioritised the wellbeing of children. These are explored in the next section.

7.2.2 Supporting children during lockdowns and reopening of ELC settings

After discussing the loss narratives and the "catch up" narratives in ELC, in this section, I discuss how children, as well as families, were supported by practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The section first explores how "home learning" and connections with children were enabled during the lockdown through online materials or platforms; some aimed to provide play-based ideas, while others focused on more formal learning activities. Next, the emphasis on children's wellbeing when the ELC settings were reopened is discussed.

This study revealed the efforts of practitioners to best support children and parents/carers, especially during lockdowns and transition from home to ELC settings. Phone calls, emails, and online meetings were specified as ways to communicate with parents/carers and children during the lockdowns. Practitioners from some settings expressed that they recorded videos including sorts of different content such as baking, yoga, painting, gardening, singing and daily stories and shared them with families through Learning Journals[26] or YouTube channels to stay connected with children when they were away.

The literature highlights that online platforms were used globally during the COVID-19 pandemic to interact with children by encouraging active participation and engagement (Hu et al., 2021; Kim, 2020; Szente, 2020). Both in this study and in the literature, the benefits of these platforms were stated to maintain the connection between teachers, peers and learning activities, maintaining children's emotional wellbeing (Dayal & Tiko, 2020) and helping children regulate their emotions, as well as creating a space for children to communicate with their peers (Veraksa et al., 2021b). The common practices of ELC settings in this study were reflected by Arianna when she talked about how learning journals were used in her setting during the first lockdown:

> So, we've been posting lots of ideas and activities… we've had baking activities, we've had literacy activities, painting, crafts, and stuff to do outdoors. And we've had a really

[26] Learning journals are closed online platforms used widely in ELC settings, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents have access to see comments, observation notes and photos uploaded by practitioners and they could also provide their own comments and notes.

> great response from those parents and comment all the time, telling us how much children have loved it. We've also activated a feature called home learning. So, parents can post onto the journals what they've been doing at home with their children. So, we can see what they've been doing as well, which was really nice. It's really keeping that relationship there with parents and children, which I think is really important, and that we don't let that break down during this time.
>
> Arianna, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

Arianna stated that they offered the activities or play ideas to parents/carers to increase parents' interactions with their children and support children's "home learning". The learning journals were stated to be an interactive space for parents/carers and children to comment on. Arianna said they received a "great response" from parents/carers and comments about "how much children have loved it". These forms of interactions were interpreted as an opportunity for connection between the lives of home and the ELC setting by encouraging more parents to share what they were doing with their children at home. As Arianna emphasised, it was "really important" to maintain these relationships and not let them "break down" during the challenging time. Other interviews reported further benefits, such as being aware of the needs of children and families and monitoring the wellbeing of children during the lockdown times.

With the use of these online platforms, new possibilities for collaboration with families and their active participation in children's education in different contexts have been noted through the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic (May & Coulston, 2021; Merfeldaite et al., 2021; Mirkovic & Kamdar, 2022). From a slightly different point of view, the increased participation of parents/carers in the online processes of children's learning has been interpreted as responsibility for children's educational work, mainly starting to pass to parents/carers (Stoiljković, 2020). So, ELC settings have been transferred to children's home environments (Hoskins et al., 2023). Thus, the ELC settings and home spaces and times have been mixed up during lockdowns (Malta Campos & Vieira, 2021). Hereby, as Formosinho (2021) argues, these detailed planning, daily schedules and tasks for children and parents/carers provided by educational settings not only resulted in already existing "schoolification of children" but also "schoolification of parents" (p.8).

Some practitioners reported that the activities suggested in Learning Journals or other

platforms were not intended to cover numeracy or language aspects of learning but rather to support imaginative and active play at home, as Arianna exemplified above. These practitioners further mentioned that they encouraged parents/carers to play "freely" with their children during that time by providing play ideas at home. However, the interviews found that Learning Journals, which aimed to support children's learning at home, had led to different interpretations among practitioners in terms of what they should entail. Some practitioners seemed to focus on more traditional forms of learning that encourage activities such as certain schoolified literacy and numeracy learning and support children's transition to primary school. The practitioners' efforts to support children's "schoolified" way of learning can be seen as a trend towards the "catch up" narrative in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioners' certain concerns about children, as discussed in the previous section, and how these concerns were handled seemed to feed off each other. In this study, practitioners' concerns about children, such as the loss of learning opportunities necessary for children to be successful learners in primary school, have shaped their focus on supporting children at home. For instance, in some settings, like in Lisa's, practitioners prepared "packs", including "a little workbook for children [who would be going up to primary school in August] to practice their letter formation and pencil grabbing". In another example, Megan explained well how this happened in her setting by sharing some videos with children and families during the first lockdown:

> I'm going to be uploading some little videos that are more specifically aimed at their sort of literacy and numeracy and sort of outcomes that we would be working on this term, but obviously, it isn't happening at nursery. So, this would be things like syllables and words and clapping rhymes, looking at rhyming words and rhyming families, making up silly sentences that rhyme or finding words that start with the same phoneme, or, you know, like segmenting words and blending, all oral, and other little things, count to ten, backwards and, and maybe some, you know, basic shape recognition.
>
> Megan, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

In the excerpt above, Megan presented activities focused on "literacy and numeracy" skills, exemplifying how they supported children's "schoolified" way of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. She clarified that they continued to work through videos on specific skills and knowledge that normally took place in ELC settings before the COVID-19 pandemic. So, ELC

is seen as "ensuring that the child is readied for the requirements of the school system" and as "to successfully prepare children for the school and its long-established culture" (Moss, 2008, p.227). Some ELC settings in this study can be argued as taking the "school readiness" role, with the assumption that education is necessarily hierarchical "with learners developing, stage by stage, towards a maturity marked by becoming an autonomous subject" (Moss, 2013, p.4). With these assumptions, children were provided learning experiences during the lockdowns to develop future-oriented and concrete subject knowledge to become successful future learners.

The section now discusses the shift of emphasis from supporting children's "schoolified" form of learning to focus on children's wellbeing, especially during the reopening of ELC settings. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the loss of real and perceived opportunities to build relationships as it unexpectedly interrupted relationships between children, practitioners, and peers, and these relationships were not as easily accessible as before. The impacts of the sudden loss of these interactions on children's wellbeing have been highlighted by many participants in this study, especially during the first lockdown. Therefore, the time period when children returned to ELC settings had been interpreted as a time to "reconnect and recover" with a focus on children's emotional wellbeing in this study.

It has been argued in this study that ELC settings provided "positive" environments in the lives of children, especially those who were thought to have had negative experiences at home during the lockdown. For instance, practitioner Rena reflected on children's returning to ELC "we've got the children in a place where they're safe, and they're getting fed and… we've actually got them in." Another practitioner Sophia interpreted that as "help[ing] the child to cover a little bit time with somebody else… and keeps a bit of routine going." These practitioners' views imply the crucial role of ELC in this study in countering the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, families and communities, promoting children's social and emotional development and wellbeing and providing safe spaces for children, as suggested in the literature review of this thesis (Giannini et al., 2020; Spiteri, 2021; Van Leare et al., 2021).

Harmey and Moss's (2021) literature review suggests that children needed "more time and flexible opportunities" when they returned (p.15). They argue that the curriculum can be used to support children's learning and self-expressions about the pandemic, which seems to contradict the idea of "catch up" as a response to the lost learning. Similarly, some practitioners in this study stated that the main priority was given to work aimed at recognising children's

emotions and feelings in addition to health and safety measures, especially in the first months of ELC reopening after the first lockdown. This is reminiscent of "slow pedagogy" that encapsulates the "idea of an experiential and relational pedagogy where the emphasis is on engagement between the teacher, children and the environment" (Clark, 2023, p.39). For instance, Joseph highlighted the importance of being…

> empathetic and understanding, slowing down the expectations, building from where children are, not where we [practitioners] want them to be somewhere.
>
> Joseph, academic in the childhood studies field, interview excerpt, December 2020

In the interview, Joseph asserted the possibility of "over labelling" based on where children were expected to communicate and connect with other children when they returned to ELC settings. Therefore, in the excerpt above, he made clear the importance of being "emphatic" and "understanding" and building from where children were at the moment with "slowing" expectations. In another example, practitioner Rebecca talked about focusing on the wellbeing of children in their setting, emphasising reconnecting with them:

> We do lots of little group activities around emotions and things like that… we'll probably be given time to speak to children on an individual basis, not like taken out of the room, but just to make sure they [children] have that one-to-one time, just to kind of check in with the child and test as you can general wellbeing.
>
> Rebecca, practitioner, interview excerpt, May 2020

In the excerpt above, Rebecca exemplified her work around emotions and tracking children's "general wellbeing", both one-on-one and as a group activity. She seemed to value the idea of "being with" children at the present moment without needing to quickly move on to the next thing. In this way, it can be said that Rebecca valued listening to children and strengthened the relationships in ELC settings. As Rebecca pointed out above, it can be argued that the COVID-19 pandemic made shifting the horizons of nursery settings beyond the traditional institutions as a place of learning and play possible, including supporting the wellbeing of children, which became important during the crisis time (May & Coulston, 2021).

This section demonstrates that ELC settings have different focuses during the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in different constructions around early learning and childcare. For instance, when ELC settings were closed, the education aspect of ELC was prioritised as the appearance of loss narratives on children's learning and the practitioners' efforts to provide "schoolified" learning format. Then, when children returned, the focus seemed to shift to children's wellbeing by emphasising the care relationships in ELC settings, such as prioritising relationships, connections and children's emotions. The next section examines aspects of childcare and learning in detail, taking into account existing debates in the field.

7.2.3 Debates on the aspects of "childcare" and "early learning"

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on various deeply rooted issues in ELC globally (Swadener et al., 2020). These include undervaluing ELC work, underfunding, compensation inequalities for practitioners, and lack of understanding and respect for the field (Fairchild, 2021; Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021; Osgood, 2021). After discussing the loss narratives in ELC and practitioners' efforts to best support children in challenging times, a discussion of the "childcare" and "early learning" aspects of ELC is placed here. First, participants' reflections on the working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the overemphasising of cleaning regimes, are discussed. It is then discussed how the ELC was undervalued at the policy level, in the media and society, and how the "care" work carried out by practitioners was underestimated during the COVID-19 pandemic. These are discussed in line with the ongoing debates in the ELC field.

Most participants in this study spoke of the increasing demand for cleaning regimes in ELC settings due to the COVID-19 pandemic measures and the heavy focus on health and safety measures. Joseph, an academic in the childhood studies field, highlighted the difference between practitioners working in early learning and childcare and teachers working in school environments. While practitioners reportedly felt extreme pressure every day to maintain deep cleaning and sanitation measures and keep their environment "free of COVID-19", Joseph said teachers did not feel the same pressure as their colleagues working in ELC. He also added that more resources, such as cleaning teams, would likely become available for schools. This differentiation further points to the differences between the working cultures in ELC and the working cultures in the schools. Oliveira-Formosinho (2001) argues that the role of early years'

practitioners is similar to that of other teachers in several respects but also differs in many ways due to the professional nature of their work. This may be closely linked to the view that the work of practitioners at the ELC has traditionally and historically been taken for granted, and the value of their work is often publicly denied (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Langford & Richardson, 2020; Moss, 2020), as well as society's lack of recognition of the workforce working in the field as professionals (Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021).

Practitioner Ivan exemplified the work culture in early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic by claiming that "cleaning does [have] a vital purpose to signify social standing", and he spoke about the gendered nature of the work (Cameron et al., 1999; Osgood, 2021). Peeters et al. (2015) argue that this "female field" is apparent in team culture, materials, educational activities and interior design. Similarly, Ivan added his interpretation of a massive cleaning and washing of the toys and materials at the end of the day and displaying them to make them visible to the management or other staff members:

> Cleaning, it's a way that people show that they are virtuous. In some ways, I feel that these big, these very visible, very public displays of washing are a kind of an advert for the people involved, the settings involved to say that, you know, "There's no virus here." "We're not the kind of dirty underclass type of folk that you might imagine would have viruses and things." Here, we're demonstrating our great virtue by washing everything too much.
>
> Ivan, practitioner, interview excerpt, February 2021

For Ivan, displaying cleanliness indicated how hard practitioners worked or spent their days in the ELC settings, as practitioners were often judged on their day by the mess they made or by the neatness of the cleanliness around them at ELC. As he claimed, "public displays" of washing and cleaning have become more significant and visible during the COVID-19 pandemic and meant "a kind of an advert" for staff and settings showing there was "no virus here". The public appearance of "cleanliness" in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic was argued by another participant, Rita, as a result of the great pressure and burden on practitioners and settings as "being risk free". While the role of practitioners has changed with the "need to be seen as productive", the need to be seen as performing and "busy" has shifted to a new dimension during the COVID-19 pandemic (Clark, 2023, p.9), as maintaining the

cleaning regimes.

While more focus was placed on health and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, some regular works at the ELC had been suspended, reduced or limited. For instance, the expansion of funded ELC to 1140 hours per year for all 3 to 5-year-old children and eligible 2-year-old, originally intended for August 2020, had to be paused due to the COVID-19 pandemic and was resumed in August 2021 (Scottish Government, 2022a). Amanda, who was working in a local council, noted that meetings, for instance, about ELC and leadership programs, had been put on hold. She also mentioned lots of other work interrupted, such as inspection of the ELC settings and training for the staff. Amanda commented on this as follows:

> It does seem a bit strange that… almost forgotten, well, actually, there's still a big group of people still working, there are still children that are within the services that need to have the quality staff. There, for example, the care inspector had stopped inspecting for a big chunk of time. However, there are still people out there operating services that are not a good quality. So, I was a bit taken aback by the fact that within the pandemic, the first thing that seems to have gone is the importance of our early years in terms of making sure that people were still getting, still receiving, the highest quality of care that they could get.
>
> Amanda, staff working in a local council, interview excerpt, February 2021

Amanda reflected that there were still many "people out there operating services" and children "within the services" during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, making sure children still receive "the highest quality of care" had been one the first things that seem to have gone, as inspection of ELC settings has been discontinued, according to Amanda. She expressed disappointment that staff and children at the ELC were "almost forgotten", especially at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the importance of ELC seemed to be gone.

In addition to disruptions at the regulatory level, practitioners spoke of historically ongoing issues for their work at the ELC exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just a few practitioners emphasised that the critical work carried out as a frontline worker was briefly valued by parents and society at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, for the rest of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of practitioners largely reflected on the issues

such as a lack of enough respect and value for their work, poor working terms and conditions and low payments. Similar concerns have been reported in studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; Logan et al., 2021; Quinones et al., 2021). These are also well recognised issues for the field of ELC in the literature (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Langford & Richardson, 2020; Moss, 2020; Van Laere et al., 2014; Vandenbroeck & Peeters, 2008). Practitioner Chloe reflected on her frustration with highlighting how their role was not recognised enough and at the "bottom of the pecking order" compared to the "school teachers":

> It's a difficult job. It's badly remunerated. Not hugely respected. Not by our families, but, you know, in terms of the policymakers, it felt we were always forgotten about at the end, you know, all schools are going back, blah, blah, blah, oh, our nurseries like. We were kinda at the bottom of the pecking order. Yeah, so a bit more understanding of the role that we play…
>
> Chloe, practitioner, interview excerpt, March 2021

Chloe made it clear that their work and roles were "badly remunerated" and "not hugely respected", emphasising that they were "always forgotten" as staff at the ELC. Like Chloe, several other participants in this study expressed concerns that their hard work was not well appreciated by society and that their sacrifices were not adequately recognised and valued by policymakers or the wider community during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings were in line with those of other studies conducted in various country contexts (Chalari & Charonitis, 2022; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; Logan et al., 2021; Quinones et al., 2021). The overall situation has laid open persistent issues in the early learning and childcare sector. It has reinforced that the needs and concerns of practitioners and other staff working in ELC have been rarely considered within the system design (Bryant, 2020). Osgood (2021) argues that the prevailing research into the early childhood workforce has tended "to be narrowly concerned with the identification of best practice, and measurement of effectiveness" (p.172) but failed to engage with the workforce who is keeping the child "at the centre of their practice, whilst constantly having to withstand endless judgment and critique of their chosen profession" (p.173). These ongoing issues have not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, they have amplified, as argued above.

Following persistent issues in ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic, the reinforcing distinction between the "childcare" and "education" aspects also appeared in the interviews. It has been mentioned in the literature review chapter that the aspects of care and education in the field of ELC have historically been conceptually and practically separated and still have an impact on policy and provision (Cohen et al., 2021; Cooper, 2020; Kaga et al., 2010; Moss, 2020). The participants of this study claimed that this division, in addition to the above issues, led to the "devaluation" of ELC, particularly in the media and wider society. The academic in the field, Louise, shared her feelings on the matter:

> So early years has been devalued again, where early years are about caring for children in order to let parents go back to work… one thing you'll be aware of is that the media started talking about childcare again instead of education and care. So, there was a real political shift there. And so that worried me a lot.
>
> Louise, academic in the childhood studies field, interview excerpt, April 2021

Louise expressed her worry that the field of early learning and childcare would be "devalued again" during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the media only spoke of "childcare" without emphasising both "care" and "education" aspects. During the COVID-19 pandemic, children and families continued to require ELC services, so many staff working in ELC became "essential workers" during the lockdowns. ELC has become a foundational part of the economy with their place in calls to "reopen the economy" (Logan et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021; Westbrook et al., 2022). Within this, there was a "political shift" for Louise, which viewed ELC settings as places where children's care was taken to enable parents/caregivers to return to work.

Following Louise's worries regarding the field, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the expectation from practitioners of the intensive implementation of cleaning and safety measures has led to the dangerous reduction of practitioners' care work to "a shallow meaning of childcare" (Lee, 2020, p.391), ignoring the understanding of care as "relational, messy, situated and contextual" (Ailwood, 2020). The literature suggests that care work was often silenced and undervalued in ELC (Ailwood, 2017; 2020) due to the focus on neoliberalist discourse, e.g. where measuring and assessing children's learning became the focus of the government, and competition was encouraged (Rouse & Hadley, 2018, p.160). As has been argued in chapter 5

as well, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has demanded new ways to understand and imagine what care may entail in the ELC setting during the COVID-19 pandemic (Lee, 2020) as a result of measures such as physical distancing and face coverings.

As a result of the ongoing issues in the field and working conditions in the COVID-19 pandemic context, some participants stated during the interviews that several people they knew had already left or were planning to leave the ELC sector entirely because they did not want to work under these conditions. Amanda, a member of staff working in the local council, justified this tendency as practitioners did not want to "spend the whole time worrying about how to keep a nursery clean". Instead, she noted that their main reason for being in the ELC sector was "lov[ing] children, [wanting] to be with children and work with children". For some practitioners, close contact with children was a main part of their job. However, certain care practices and relations were sidelined in their work due to the expectations and obligations to comply with the COVID-19 pandemic measures, as discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

This section indicates that some of the "care" work, cited in the literature as "humanistic" and "social" aspects of ELC (Campbell-Barr, 2014), were difficult to value during the COVID-19 pandemic. Reasons included working conditions in ELC settings relating to implemented measures such as heightening cleaning regimes and established issues in the field, such as lack of enough respect and value for the work of practitioners. It could be said that the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the tensions between care and education in the ELC. Overall, both the findings of this research and the literature imply that early childhood practitioners globally had dispositions to contribute to society by keeping the education and care for children in uncertain times with varying degrees of societal appreciation and putting children's learning and wellbeing at the forefront despite the challenging circumstances (Bussey et al., 2022). However, while practitioners shared they felt responsibility and pride and that it was important to be a part of society during these difficult times, they also felt anxiety, fear and vulnerability in becoming a frontline worker, in addition to the ongoing challenges embedded in the ELC.

7.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, emphasising the particular discussions from the literature. In

section 7.1, I examined the constructions of children and childhoods in ELC settings by analysing how children knew and understood the COVID-19 pandemic and negotiated changes and measures in their ELC settings based on the excerpts shared by the participants. This section has presented multiple interdependent constructions that position children within the networks of relationships with others. In section 7.1.1, age-based hierarchies emerged that determine children's age, maturity, and competence as conditions for children to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic, and these understandings have impacted how much information practitioners shared with them and how conditions were enabled for children's participation.

In section 7.2.2, children were seen as active co-constructors of the knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic, positioned to interact with others, measures and regulations. In this section, the children's comments and reflections on the limitations they had directly experienced in their own lives and that they were exposed to from the news and society have shown their relationality to the wider world beyond their individual positions and contribution to knowledge. Thus, children were accepted as a part of society and connected to others around them so that they could be seen as part of the interpretation and implication of the COVID-19 pandemic measures. In section 7.2.3, the excerpts shared by the participants showed children's ways of negotiating with the structural constraints in their lives. The excerpts have exemplified children's control over their lives by expressing their choices, refusing certain things, and occasionally bending the COVID-19 pandemic rules and measures. These have shown that children actively and dynamically construct ways in which they can exercise their agency in ELC settings. However, these processes can be inhibited by the structures or adults depending on the contexts and relations (Esser et al., 2016; Robson et al., 2007a).

These sections have argued that the multiple constructions of children during the COVID-19 pandemic included developmental perspectives that children were too young, immature and incapable and, therefore, in need of protection. At the same time, the discussions have emphasised children's active role and participation in society and therefore valued their agency within a specific framework. It could be argued that children's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have been contextually, interdependently and relationally co-produced. Thus, "the child is not regarded as an autonomous and detached subject, but as living in networks of relationships, involving both children and adults." (Moss & Petrie, 2002, p.143).

In section 7.2, I highlighted early learning and childcare constructions by focusing on different

phases of the COVID-19 pandemic and discussing what has been prioritised during that time. Section 7.2.1 has explored the time when ELC settings were closed, and the narratives have highlighted that children "lost" opportunities to learn certain skills and knowledge that were considered important for their current and future "academic" life. These have increased emphasis on numeracy and literacy activities in some ELC settings through "Learning Journals" during lockdown. In addition, "catch up" narratives have received greater coverage by the media, governments and policymakers, as discussed in the literature review. The danger of these narratives was noted as "schoolification" in ELC in this section. While there was a tendency towards promoting "schoolified" form learning, particularly when children were away from ELC settings, the focus had been placed on children's emotions, wellbeing and socio-emotional development when ELC settings reopened.

Therefore, section 7.2.2 has continued to explore the impacts of the prolonged absence from ELC settings, which are social spaces for children to develop emotionally, gain a sense of independence, and establish relationships outside of the family (Martin & Moss, 2021), focusing on how children and families were supported during the lockdowns and reopening of ELC settings. The unexpected long closures of ELC settings have been associated with a loss of interactions and connections between children and practitioners and the loss of "positive" and "supportive" roles of ELC in children's lives. As a result, practitioners' efforts to minimise these negative impacts on children's lives were discussed by focusing on narratives of reconnection and recovery in ELC settings, in line with the emphasis that practitioners placed on children's wellbeing upon children's return to ELC settings.

In section 7.2.3, I exemplified the increased pressure on ELC and the staff working there with the COVID-19 pandemic measures and regulations. The growing demand for cleaning has resulted in the public displays of cleaning regimes, which meant "cleanliness" and "being risk-free" and placed greater value on the image of cleanliness over the meaningful engagement with children in the ELC settings. This can be linked with the traditional and historical constructions in the field, as discussed in this section. Furthermore, the danger of not enough value and respect for the work of practitioners within the ELC sector during the COVID-19 pandemic and a deepening of the divide between the "childcare" and "education" aspects were discussed as a part of the persistent issues in the early childhood sector. In this study, the care work carried out by practitioners during the challenging time was undervalued due to other focuses, such as safety and health measures and concerns.

These sections have shown the different focuses and emphases on early learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. The multiple constructions are closely related to how ELC settings have been positioned at different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the lockdowns, ELC settings, for example, were positioned to primarily support children's "schoolified" form of learning. The role of ELC settings has changed slightly after reopening, focusing on children's wellbeing and emphasising reconnection and recovery by providing "positive" environments for children who struggled during the lockdowns. The ongoing debates in the ELC have been exacerbated within these constructions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the distinction between the "childcare" and "education" aspects has been reinforced.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

This research aimed to explore how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Scottish context. To address the aim, the following research questions were explored:

> **Question 1:** How has the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy documents published accordingly, affected the daily life, practices and experiences in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives?
>
> **Question 2:** How have children's experiences of play and participation been shaped in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic?
>
> **Question 3:** How have the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The research questions were addressed using a qualitative methodological approach based on a total of 35 online interviews with practitioners and stakeholders (managers of ELC settings, academics in the childhood studies field and staff working in a local council) and analysis of documents published by the Scottish Government. The online interviews with people who worked directly with children during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed me to explore the research questions at the different stages of the pandemic by engaging with people working in different roles. Interviews with adults and the narratives and examples they provided helped illustrate daily life in ELC settings and children's and practitioners' experiences from the participants' perspectives. Additionally, the key guidances and documents published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic were analysed for a critical review of the policy context to situate the study within the policy context.

The findings of this research are interconnected in many ways, highlighting the relations between processes and practices in ELC settings, guidances published by the Scottish Government, experiences of children and practitioners in the daily life of ELC settings, and

constructions of childhoods and early learning and care during the COVID-19 pandemic. The images of children and childhoods and their relationality and interdependencies acted as golden threads throughout the findings chapters. This concluding chapter begins with a summary of the findings of this research based on three research questions. The chapter then discusses the theoretical contribution of the research to the literature. This is followed by implications for policy and practice. Finally, I discuss the implications for future research and present some concluding reflections.

8.1 Summarising findings and answering research questions

The research questions have guided the discussion and analysis throughout this thesis. They were explored across the three findings chapters. In the following sections, I reorganise the findings by answering each question in turn.

8.1.1 Research question 1

> How has the COVID-19 pandemic, and the policy documents published accordingly, affected the daily life, practices and experiences in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives?

Drawing on the interpretive paradigm, in chapter 3 I maintained that reality is socially constructed as the experiences of children and practitioners occur in "social, cultural, historical or personal contexts" (Hennink, 2020, p.15). Therefore, I have explored the COVID-19 pandemic and the policy context of this research in depth in chapter 4 by looking at the main guidances and relevant legislations published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic. This provides contextual background for the daily life, practices and routines in ELC settings throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including times of lockdowns and the subsequent reopening of the settings. In doing so, this research has emphasised the importance of paying attention to the research and policy context. Following this contextual chapter, how policy context has framed daily life, practices and experiences in ELC settings were predominantly discussed throughout chapter 5.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, public health measures predominantly determined whether ELC settings remained open or closed and how they functioned globally and in the Scottish context. Published guidelines have shown the Scottish Government's ambition to ensure that as many children as possible safely returned to ELC settings at the earliest possible date after the first lockdown (Scottish Government, 2020g), emphasising children's health and wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2020g; 2020i; 2020k), recovery and children's learning (Scottish Government, 2020b). In line with these guidances, the measures taken after reopening, including, but not limited to, physical distancing between adults, wearing face coverings, and limitations on children's groupings and use of space and materials, have affected the functioning of settings, daily flow, practices and routines.

The guidances from the Scottish Government, interpreted policies and advice from the local councils and protocols defined by the management teams of ELC settings constructed the context of ELC settings for the daily practices and routines in several complex, sometimes ambivalent ways. The constant review and updating of guidances, inconstancies between the versions of guidances and some ambiguous statements have resulted in challenges in the daily life of ELC settings and "frustrating" and "confusing" experiences for practitioners, such as "increased workload". The "top-down" and "hierarchical" processes in ELC during the COVID-19 pandemic have pointed to a particular dichotomy in the field regarding where knowledge is produced and applied (Urban, 2008).

Staff working at the practice level have implemented, activated or disregarded the guidances in different dimensions and ways, considering the physical characteristics of the environments and their own pedagogical beliefs. Within the imposed changes, the adaptability and flexibility of practitioners to respond to the guidances were apparent in this study, consistent with the findings of other studies (Bussey et al., 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Negrette et al., 2022). The data also showed that the participants of this study were uncomfortable with some of the implementations that affected children's and their own experiences, such as the unequal division of space and resources. In these cases, they took an active role in minimising the disruption to children's experiences. For instance, they "soften" the appearance of physical barriers that divide space to allow children to see each other in some ways.

Some major alterations occurred in line with the guidances, permeating every aspect of the daily life of ELC settings, such as creating "bubbles" and the separation of spaces and materials

in order to limit contact. In addition, some practices and routines, such as handwashing, cleaning and outdoor use, were intensified. In contrast, others, such as singing and playing, were interrupted on many levels due to limitations placed on daily life. Practitioners noted the importance of routines in providing a sense of predictability and control in children's lives, as argued in the literature, especially in difficult times (Aslanian, 2017; Capurso et al., 2020; Wildenger et al., 2008). Therefore, practitioners reported that they maintained familiar routines or established new routines, e.g. having gathering times in the mornings, to decrease some of the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 pandemic measures and regulations have permeated most aspects of daily life in ELC settings, and the experiences of children and practitioners have been shaped in many ways, for example, through the rearrangements of spaces and resources. With the implementation of the "bubble" system, "new" divided spaces for the bubbles, separation of the common areas and allocation of resources took place in ELC settings. Space, as socially produced in daily interactions (Vuorisalo et al., 2015), has been interpreted by children and practitioners in ELC settings and redefined in interactions. Some of the changes were reported as favourable, resulting in having "warm", "nurturing", and "safe" spaces through the efforts of practitioners, and these were believed to help children find a range of protection, security and continuity (Dahlberg et al., 2013) in the challenging times. On the other hand, separating spaces with different kinds of physical barriers was found to limit children's free movement and opportunities of interaction with others. In addition, the reallocation of resources, splitting and removing some, resulted in "unstimulating" and "unresponsive" environments in the ELC settings.

Outdoor learning was widely recognised in Scotland before the COVID-19 pandemic (Inspiring Scotland, 2019; Scottish Government, 2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic has taken this further. The limitations imposed by the pandemic and additional requirements such as cleaning ensured a smooth transition to the outdoors that offers freedom, flexibility and independent mobility for both children and practitioners. Practitioners positioned children as having greater agency over their play and learning when they were outside. Consistent with the findings of other studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Abbott & Flynn, 2022; Engdahl & Pramling Samuelsson, 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Lafave et al., 2021; Wistoft et al., 2021), practitioners emphasised the importance of the outdoor spaces and natural resources as being "exciting", "lively" and "rich" filled with opportunities to learn and explore.

The changes mentioned above have resulted in changing relationships in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In connection with these, (re)shaped daily interactions and relationships in ELC settings were revealed through the construction of everyday practices and routines. These pursued complex and contradictory interests and resulted in altered relationships among children and practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations have disrupted established interactions and relationships, as children could not see each other and their practitioners for a long time during the lockdowns and could not mingle freely with other groups upon their return. On the other hand, the creation of "bubbles" with smaller numbers of children and consistent practitioners, as well as smaller spaces which they inhabited, resulted in more "intense" and "closer" relationships within "bubbles". This practice further reinforced children's experiences of "being part of a group" and forming "a group identity", such as naming their bubbles and creating their own signature food, song and space. They have worked to strengthen relationships and build a shared culture among children (Clark, 2023) in these challenging times.

Regarding practitioners' experiences, some measures, such as physical distancing and wearing masks, brought additional issues and internal conflicts not only to their relationships with children but also to their work of care and "love". For example, using Tronto's (2013) analysis of care processes, I discussed practitioner Layla's care experience under the COVID-19 pandemic measures. I explained the complexity of the situation: on the one hand, practitioners felt responsible for maintaining the care work as part of their job, and on the other hand, they felt the need to follow the precautions and guidances that limited their care work. The care work and the concept of "love", which have already been debated in ELC (Ailwood, 2017; 2020), have been further challenged by the additional COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations, maintaining protection narratives in ELC settings.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically altered the conditions and structures in which children's and practitioners' experiences were embedded, as discussed throughout this section. Analysis in this research has shown that children and practitioners entangled with the guidance, space, resources and pandemic itself in complex and interrelated ways. This research has suggested that the (re)arrangements in the life of ELC settings with the COVID-19 pandemic

measures could facilitate, invite or hinder certain interactions and experiences through the interaction of children and practitioners with them.

8.1.2 Research question 2

> How have children's experiences of play and participation been shaped in ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic?

As discussed in Chapter 6, this research has explored the shaped play and participation experiences in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic from practitioners' perspectives. Firstly, children's play experiences have shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic, associated with major changes in routines and practices of ELC settings, reconstructions of space, resources, relationships, and, more specifically, transition to the outdoors. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's play appeared mostly positive, except the lockdown periods, in line with other studies (Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; 2022; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). Children's play was described as richer, deeper and more imaginative when children and practitioners were fully returned to ELC settings. The data has shown that the benefits of play were closely related to the outdoors, natural resources and loose parts that children were heavily occupied with during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings showed that children did not forget how to play or engage in social interactions while away from ELC settings.

Not only has the "nature" of play changed, but also its "function". Play has gained a new function in ELC settings, unlike before the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study have suggested that play functioned as a way of children's meaning-making of their COVID-19 related experiences and dealing with the changes, uncertainties and challenges in their lives. In accordance with the existing literature on play in crisis situations (Cohen & Bamberger, 2021; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðarsdóttir, 2022; Neale, 2020; Rogers, 2022), children have found some ways to exercise some form of control and gain autonomy in their lives through play during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, children's play included preparing the "magic potions" to cure the virus, using "laser guns" to protect themselves, and adapting the familiar chasing game to their virus-related realities. These play experiences showed that children were not passive subjects in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic; rather, they became empowered by exploring and discovering through play they adapted.

Additionally, intergenerational understanding of play appeared, and recognition and appreciation of play experiences across children and practitioners intensified. For instance, practitioners have identified their roles as creating opportunities to support and facilitate children's play when the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions applied. So, the benefits of play, such as coping with the difficulties in crisis time, could be intensified with the participation of an adult (Cohen & Bamberger, 2021). The data aligned with the alternative views that play is a living resource and a negotiated terrain (Ryan, 2005) and that children's experiences were not independent of the conditions created by adults or other agents, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secondly, the importance of children's participation was greatly emphasised by the participants of this study, focusing on the policy and practice levels in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study and the existing literature (Campbell et al., 2021; Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Lundy et al., 2021; McNair et al., 2022; Peleg et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022), it was reported that children's participation in decisions and planning that had a direct impact on their lives and consideration of their views and experiences at the policy level was largely neglected during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this was not a new phenomenon. It was a problem that went beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. It was part of the debate on the current state of the ELC, as adults' concerns about children's protection and best interests have often been found in tension with children's participation in daily life and decision-making processes (Gal & Duramy, 2015; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022). This study also revealed that the focus of adults has shifted to protecting children rather than enabling children's participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many possible reasons and explanations have been found in the literature for largely disregarding the participation rights of children and young people in COVID-19. Firstly, "a narrow understanding of the best interests of the child" (Cuevas-Parra, 2021, p.91), so a tendency to prioritise children's physical survival, not their wider range of human rights (Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Morrison & Houghton, 2022) can be stated. Secondly, Tisdall and Morrison (2022) highlight that recognising vulnerability, which seems to be a fundamental component of understanding childhoods, does not mean recognising children's human rights and is often associated with a paternalistic discussion about children's capacity. Thus, it is used to rationalise the gatekeeping of adults while limiting children's human rights, especially

participation rights. Thirdly, the complex status of children and childhoods in society as children neither specify the research agenda nor conduct research, so they are not part of policymaking (Anderson, 2005), not only during the COVID-19 pandemic but generally. These included underestimating children's understandings and capabilities (Alderson, 2008; Cuevas-Parra, 2021), viewing them as too incompetent or immature to participate (Mac Naughton et al., 2007; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019), and seeing the process as a waste of time (Alderson, 2008). Some of these understandings were mirrored by some of the participants in this study.

Practitioners in this study associated children's participation with certain participatory practices and pedagogies such as free flow and child-centredness. They were emphasised as something that should be maintained despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in terms of practitioners' understandings, child-centredness was a heightened challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the limitations on free movement and choices that directly affected children's experiences. For example, children's daily experiences were found to be highly restricted, as the doors between spaces in ELC settings were closed, and children were unable to choose where they would spend their days indoors or outdoors. Therefore, the conditions for children's participation were limited in this context.

I provided a critical analysis of the "floorbook" of how it was used in a particular ELC setting as an example of enabling children's participation during the COVID-19 pandemic in chapter 6. The floorbook has been described by the participants of this study and in the literature (Warden, 2006) as a way to document and assess children's interests and learning. Through a detailed analysis of participants' excerpts, floorbook emerged as a practice that functions to assess and evaluate children's development and learning rather than documenting children's rich, process-based experiences. This analysis also revealed other tensions in children's participation and child-centred approaches. For instance, the floorbook captured the "chosen" moments mainly structured by the adults and their power and authority on the task. Children seemed to be encouraged to record certain moments associated with any particular learning and curricular outcome as a part of the assessment. The use of a floorbook in this setting also prioritised the written over the verbal or interactional forms of interactions. These can be argued as methods of observation or testing for children's development and learning, usually an attempt to structure children's interactions and activities to somehow control and silence children (de Sousa et al., 2019; Singer, 2005).

The embedded issues related to children's participation in the field have not disappeared at the practice level of ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic, even some of them have exacerbated and become more restrictive on children's experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of these challenges. Children's participation was easily overlooked during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the prioritisation of protection narratives and safety and health measures alongside existing problems. For instance, criticisms towards children's participation were shared by some participants aligned with the literature as emphasising adults' tokenistic approaches and tick box practices (Tisdall, 2015a; 2015b), a lack of in-depth understanding of children's interests and transforming them into meaningful experiences (Blaisdell, 2017). For instance, the activities to convey the importance of handwashing routines or work on emotions by colouring a "monster" were identified as tokenistic ways of dealing with the challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic and as "superficial" and lacking meaningful understandings of children's views. Therefore, this study suggests a need for more interrelated pedagogies in the field and understanding of children's participation as embedded in children's "everyday lives" rather than event-based or "spectacle".

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing debates and challenges in the ELC remained contested, and the pandemic added additional layers to these challenges. The narratives around children's play pointed out that children were active constructors of knowledge and exercised their agency through play in relation to other people, space, materials, regulations and measures. However, while many practitioners in this study seemed to value and acknowledge this, children's participation in decision-making and daily life of ELC settings remained constrained. This was due not only to the COVID-19 pandemic measures but also to the intensification of the embedded conceptualisation of children during the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. prioritising protection over participation and viewing children too incompetent or immature.

8.1.3 Research question 3

> How have the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare been affected during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Participants shared their understandings and conceptualisations of childhoods and early learning and childcare through various quotes that reflected how children knew about, experienced and coped with the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings for this question were predominantly presented in chapter 7, with some interconnected findings emerging across chapters 5 and 6.

At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, children were positioned in certain ways, such as "pandemic problems", "vectors of disease", and "super-spreaders", in the media or society, leading to stigmatisation and rendering their views and experiences invisible in public spaces (Cortes-Morales & Morales, 2021; Jiménez et al., 2023; Lundy et al., 2021). This study explored the multiple understandings of children and childhoods in ELC settings based on the adult participants' perspectives. First, the data has shown the understandings of childhood within the developmental paradigm that reflect children as incompetent and incapable (James, 2009; Qvortrup, 2009), therefore not yet "being" (Woodhead, 2009). Within this, children tended to be seen as "too young" to understand the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations associated with their limited capabilities. For example, older children in ELC settings were assumed to have "some awareness" of the COVID-19 pandemic, while younger children "did not understand" what was happening. These limited views of children and age-based hierarchical assumptions have resulted in practitioners' reluctance to share information with younger children and greater exclusion of their views and experiences. Thus, this study argues that the age and stage framework has continued to have an impact outside the field of child development and was a reason to include and exclude children (Tisdall, 2018) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, the data has shown the constructions that emphasise children's active role and participation in society (James, 2009; Prout, 2005; Spyrou, 2018) by exploring the ways in which children know and understand the COVID-19 pandemic and its related measures. The participants shared children's comments and reflections on the limitations children had directly experienced in their lives and were exposed to from the news and society. They stated children's detailed knowledge about the "virus", its impacts and the reasons for the measures taken, e.g. why they needed to stay home and could not see their friends. Additionally, children's play themes and storylines, e.g. being doctors and patients with coughing, as discussed in chapter 6, suggest that children were not passive subjects in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, they have constructed knowledge with others through exploring,

discovering and experimenting. Similarly, participants highlighted children's ability to adapt to the changing life and practices of ELC settings by emphasising their "resources and competencies" to cope with the challenges (Chatterjee, 2018). These understandings recognise children's relationality to the wider world beyond their individual positions, and the key paradigm in childhood studies of children as "active in the construction… of their own social lives, the lives of those around them" (James & Prout, 1997, pp.8-9).

Third, the data has revealed the constructions that demonstrate children as competent social actors and recognise their agency (Esser et al., 2016; Qvortrup, 2009), with a focus on children's negotiations around the rules and measures imposed on them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Practitioners' excerpts of children's responses to the limitations of life in ELC settings showed that children often attempted to protect their boundaries by pushing the rules imposed on them, such as climbing over the fences that separated spaces and bubbles, or by subverting the structures quietly, such as playing with sand left on the edges of a sand pit. However, children's acts and exercising of their agency were also found to be closely dependent on adult support and facilitation (Donegan et al., 2023). For instance, children could play with sand as long as practitioners ignored that. Although there was a restriction in relation to children's participation experiences in ELC settings, as discussed in research question 2, there were instances where children demonstrated active participation and exercised their agency. Therefore, it can be stated that children have a higher level of participation in certain contexts than others. Similarly, in this study, children tended to be positioned as active agents when they were outdoors rather than indoors, by practitioners, with an emphasis on children's ability to act independently, make plans and creatively solve problems. These understandings point out that children's agency is relational (Esser et al., 2016) and that participation is deeply connected to how children's agency is shaped by children's relations with other people and materials, policies and regulations.

As children and families continued to need ELC services during the COVID-19 pandemic, ELC became a core part of the economy, with its place in the calls to "reopen the economy" (Logan et al., 2021; Swigonski et al., 2021; Westbrook et al., 2022). With this essential role of ELC, the constructions of early learning and childcare in this study were discussed from the perspectives of adult participants. The analysis of this thesis has demonstrated different focuses and emphases on early learning and childcare at different stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, as discussed in the following parts.

First, the findings have demonstrated the "loss" narratives about children's academic knowledge and skills, with the appearance of "catch up" and "schoolification" narratives. The data showed that the time ELC settings were closed was referred to as a major "loss" because children lacked the opportunities to learn and mature certain knowledge and skills, e.g. numeracy or literacy and concentrating on tasks deemed necessary for their later education. These concerns can be attributed to the research and policy spotlight advocating investment and early intervention in ELC (Moss, 2008; 2013) and the rhetoric prioritising measuring and evaluating children's learning and academic achievement (Rouse & Hadley, 2018). As a result, this study found that in some ELC settings, greater emphasis was placed on "schoolified" learning and skills through "Learning Journals" during the lockdown. They were associated with the narratives of "catch up" and "recovering" in the media and government responses, suggesting replacing learning and experiences that were thought to be lost while ELC settings and schools remained closed (Egan et al., 2021; Rogers, 2022). The catching up rhetoric in the media and emphasis on "schoolified" learning in this study pointed out the economic concern in ELC that viewed children as future human capital (Clark, 2023). Additionally, they highlighted the "school readiness" role of ELC settings that view education as hierarchical "with learners developing stage by stage, towards a maturity" (Moss, 2013, p.4). These can be associated with the constructions of childhoods around developmental perspectives in which childhood is seen as a progression towards adulthood (Gavin, 2021).

Second, the findings have demonstrated practitioners' efforts to support children's learning and wellbeing upon reopening ELC settings, so this study suggested that the focus was largely on recognising children's emotions and feelings when ELC settings were reopened. The data also showed that using online platforms while children were away from ELC settings enabled practitioners to support and maintain interactions with children and families, and home learning included other aspects of learning rather than "schoolified" forms, e.g. providing play ideas at home. The prolonged absence from ELC settings, accompanied by interruptions in children's interactions and relationships with others during lockdowns, resulted in an emphasis on reconnection and recovery, with a particular focus on the emotions and wellbeing of children when they first returned to ELC settings. These focuses highlighted the important role of ELC settings as spaces for children to develop socially and emotionally, gain independence, and establish relationships outside of the family (Martin & Moss, 2021).

Third, the data has highlighted the "care" and "early learning" aspects of ELC, emphasising increasing pressure on practitioners and the field itself during the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of practitioners reported the growing demand for cleaning regimes that restricted their meaningful engagement with children and pressure to be "risk-free" in ELC settings, which resulted in the public display of cleaning and extra work, unlike their colleagues in schools. While these constructions during the COVID-19 pandemic pointed to historical and traditional issues in ELC, such as underestimation of practitioners' work and the public denial of the value of their work (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Langford & Richardson, 2020; Moss, 2020), the role of practitioners seemed to be valued based on performativity and busyness (Clark, 2023). The data further demonstrated the danger that the work of practitioners and the ELC was not adequately valued and respected during the COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. some critical work, such as inspection of ELC settings and supporting the workforce was suspended for a certain period. The findings also showed that the work of practitioners at this critical time dangerously started to be mentioned within "a shallow meaning of childcare" (Lee, 2020) and that certain care practices, referred to as "humanistic" and "social" aspects of ELC (Campbell-Barr, 2014), were set aside due to obligations to comply with the safety and health measures of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study has highlighted the importance of a "relational, messy, situated and contextual" understanding of care (Ailwood, 2020) in ELC, especially in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

These "emerging" constructions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, mentioned above, are both a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, related measures and limitations, and the impact of "existing" and "ongoing" understandings and conceptualisations of children, childhoods and ELC. For instance, the view of children as "incompetent" is related to the reasons why children's views and experiences have been largely ignored while highlighting the need to "protect" children and ensure their "best interests" during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the constant underestimating of children's position in society results in feeding and strengthening the view of children as incompetent. In response to these, Reid et al. (2022) suggest that it is important to challenge the "persistent constructions of children as vulnerable and best protected", which failed to meet children and young people's rights to protection, provision and participation. Rather, children should be considered as social actors to ensure their rights are respected (Reid et al., 2022) and competent participators of the solution rather than objects in need of adult protection (Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Cuevas-Parra & Stephano, 2020; Tisdall & Morrison, 2022).

8.2 Implications for the literature

In this section, I discuss the main theoretical implications that arise from this research for existing debates in the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, children's play, childhood studies (particular focus on certain conceptualisations of children and children's agency), and early childhood literature (particular focus on children's participation and aspects of learning and childcare).

First, this study has contributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and wider disaster literature by analysing the context of ELC settings and the experiences of children and practitioners. Whilst previous research focusing on the ELC context has noted the changes in the practices and pedagogies globally as a result of measures at policy and practice levels (Bigras et al., 2021; Cortes Morales et al., 2021; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; 2022; Gomes et al., 2021; Lafave et al., 2021; Romero, 2021; Zecca, 2021), this study has provided an in-depth analysis with a focus on how fundamental policy changes were implemented in the Scottish context, also focusing on how they were experienced in the daily lives and practices, material arrangements, relationships and experiences in ELC settings. It has contributed to the literature in this field, in particular by providing evidence on the lack of engagement between policy and practice.

This study has addressed the need for more studies on children's issues, views and experiences in the disaster research agenda for improving the understandings of the impact of disasters on children as well as preparing more effective programs to minimise the negative effects and ensure children's participation in response and recovery practices, as argued in chapter 2. This study has contributed to a body of disaster research by offering a more comprehensive understanding of the context of ELC, taking into account the experiences and views of children (from the adults' perspectives) and practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the policy context. It has sought to explore the dynamic changes in the life of ELC settings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic measures and regulations, and indeed the experiences of children and practitioners, and certain insights into childhoods and early learning and childcare in times of crisis. These insights have implications for the disaster literature in highlighting the

importance and potential benefits of considering children's views and experiences in planning during future crisis or disaster situations.

Second, this research has implications for play literature regarding the conceptualisation and functioning of play in times of crisis and uncertainty. While the existing literature on play in times of crisis notes the benefits of play in children's lives (e.g. Fearn & Howard, 2012; Graber et al., 2020; McKinty & Hazleton, 2022; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021; Rogers, 2022), this research has explored the place of play in children's lives in the context of the ELC setting in Scotland. It has highlighted the importance of play in children's lives as providing a safe space for expressing emotions and fears, helping children make sense of the overall COVID-19 pandemic and coping with the challenging situation. Through exploring how children's play evolved and adapted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the understandings of the role of play in children's lives have been expanded. This research found that children's play became richer, more imaginative and more creative, in line with some other research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Cohen & Bamberger, 2021; Dýrfjörð & Hreiðrasdóttir, 2020; 2022; Pascal & Bertram, 2021). By evidencing children's play and how it was lived in ELC settings, this thesis has constituted a counterargument against some discourses that appeared in the media at the time of lockdown, which claimed that children would "forget" how to play (e.g. Busby, 2021).

This research has also contributed to alternative perspectives for play by viewing play as a form of "negotiated terrain" (Ryan, 2005) between children, practitioners, the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations, space and resources, and as a way of children participating in their everyday environment (Lester, 2011) and positioning themselves and others to form social relations (Rosen, 2017). It has shown that children's play has evolved throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. preparing magic potions to cure the virus and adapting the familiar chasing game in response to changes in their lives.

Third, this study has contributed to the literature on childhood studies, analysing the constructions around childhoods with a focus on central concepts and ideas in the field (such as developmental perspectives, children's competencies and agency). This study has addressed particular gaps in the literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, as the lack of studies focusing both children's vulnerabilities and strengths and agency (except the studies on/with older children). By focusing on multiple constructions of children up to 6 years old in the context of

ELC settings based on practitioners' perspectives, this study has addressed the gap in relation to children in ELC settings and a lack of relevant studies in the Scottish context. It has sought to explore the multiple, sometimes contradictory, constructions of childhoods in the ELC context, i.e. not only focusing on vulnerable sides but also children's agency and competencies. In doing so, on the one hand, it has demonstrated the importance of considering children's needs and responding carefully to them in times of crisis. On the other hand, this research has added findings to the existing knowledge and literature by discussing these key concepts in childhood studies. This study has identified children as competent agents and highlighted the importance of recognising children's agency as constrained by broader structural constraints.

This thesis has contributed to the literature on children's agency. Discussions on children's agency have been central in the childhood studies field. As outlined in chapter 2, the concept of agency has been increasingly questioned in recent years (Valentine, 2011; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Oswell, 2013), and the need for relational and reflective perspectives for agency has been emphasised (Esser et al., 2016; Gallagher, 2019; Huijsmans, 2011; Oswell, 2013). Throughout this thesis, questions about children's agency have come to the fore in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has been explored with relational understandings, moving beyond viewing agency in a dichotomous fashion and in a simplistic way. This study's findings have shown that children exercised some form of agency in experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic (for instance, their meaning-making of the measures or dealing with the changes in their lives) through relations with others.

This thesis has understood children's agency as located in social relations and interdependency and reconstructed possibly outside of the dualisms of child and adult, actions and structure, and so on. One of the criticisms of children's agency is to view agency as exercising free will against the constraints of social structures (Abebe, 2019). This study has added to the understanding of agency by emphasising how children's agency, beyond being inherent in each individual child, could be enacted or silenced by practitioners or the COVID-19 pandemic measures and limitations in ELC settings. Therefore, I have suggested that agency is not inherent in individual entities but embedded in a whole network of different people, objects and practices (Esser, 2016). I have also argued that agency is not a wilful choice or act (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) but rather produced out of the assembly of heterogeneous materials (Prout, 2000), and children's agency is a result of these networks of relationships and children's dependence on others (Spyrou, 2018). In this research, children exercised their

agency within particular institutional discourses around the safety and health measures of the COVID-19 pandemic, which were shaped in relation to the guidances, legislation and practitioners' activation of these texts, which enabled or silenced certain ways of being. Children's agency was found to be enacting fluidity in response to changing conditions in ELC settings, i.e. space, resources and relationships. This study has also shown how these changing conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic might simultaneously enable or restrict children's agency by making certain practices and discourses available to children and shutting down others, similar to what Klocker (2007) suggests on "thick" or "thin" agency depending on structures, contexts, and relationships. In line with recent discussions, this study has contributed to an understanding of agency as shaped by the global disaster situation that structured children's lives as multidimensional, ambivalent (Valentine, 2011) and a result of the networks of relationships (Spyrou, 2018).

Discussions on children's agency do not stand outside certain discourses of childhoods that are argued in childhood studies. Children are seen as competent social actors in childhood studies, and this serves to "counteract traditional views of children as passive dependents" (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p.255) by positioning childhood in opposition to adulthood. This can result in the assumption of unquestioned adults' agency (Oswell, 2013). However, as both children and adults are not independent beings and their lives are constructed within broader structural and social relationships, adult agency can also be questioned in relation to claims about children's agency. This study has contributed to the understanding of adult agency by emphasising the agency of practitioners around the implementation of guidances, disregarding some and activating others, and that structures frame these actions (Wagner et al., 2019).

Many studies in the field and the COVID-19 pandemic literature focus on the futurity of early childhood and frame children as "becomings". This thesis has contributed to the childhood studies literature by looking at how children are bound up with both their present experiences at ELC settings and their development and learning since children, as well as adults, are subjected to uncertainty and ambiguity and their becoming is "spreading throughout the life course" (Lee, 2001, p.85). Uprichard (2008) challenges the dichotomy in the field by emphasising the importance of "looking forward to what [a] child becomes" to explore "the ways in which this may itself shape [the] experiences of being children" (p.306). This study was able to contribute to these discussions by looking at how practitioners' concerns over children and certain focuses in ELC, such as assessment and evaluation, emphasised children's

becoming (e.g. becoming successful learners) and shaped children's experiences of being in ELC settings (e.g. engaging with numeracy or literacy activities) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this research, I have discussed several interconnected and relational, sometimes incompatible, constructions of childhoods, drawing on both developmental perspectives and more recent discussions from childhood studies, such as relational understandings of competencies and agency. A key contribution of this research, in this regard, is that children's experiences have been contextually, interdependently and relationally co-produced, and children cannot be positioned as autonomous subjects, but instead, they live in networks of relationships (Moss & Petrie, 2002). The findings have provided evidence for the debate about children's competencies by showing that how children co-produce knowledge is co-constituted by their relationality to others, including regulations, measures, media or technology. Also, the findings have pointed out children's relationality with adults in ELC settings, as their negotiations and engagement with surroundings may depend on adults' facilitation or limitation. For instance, the conditions of children's participation experiences were structured by adults in some cases in this study.

Fourth, this thesis has contributed to early childhood literature on children's participation and aspects of learning and childcare by making links between certain aspects of ELC at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and by looking at how space, resources and children became entangled in certain ways not only through how objects, design and children's bodies played within how experiences were constituted but also through the rhythms and routines of ELC settings. This thesis has clarified that there is more nuance in how children are positioned in ELC settings and that ELC settings often involve complex construction in daily life.

Evidence in this research has contributed to the existing literature on children's participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. A great deal of research has shown that children's participation in the pandemic responses or planning tended to be overlooked (Lundy et al., 2021; McNair et al., 2022; Peleg et al., 2021; Reid et al., 2022), as discussed in chapter 2. In this research, I drew attention to how children's participation was conceptualised and understood by adults and to participants' reflections on how children in the Scottish context were disregarded in the decision-making process. Furthermore, children's participation was discussed by explaining how some of the familiar challenges in the field, such as addressing

participation in top-down and tokenistic ways (Blaisdell, 2017; Tisdall, 2015a; 2015b), and the social positions of children and adults, such as confidence in adults' knowledge and emphasis on children's immaturity (Alderson, 2008; Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Moran-Ellis & Tisdall, 2019), in addition to the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic limited the opportunities for children's participation in daily routines. By analysing data, this research has also shown that the principle of "best interest" (Vandenhole & Türkelli, 2020) was applied in a patriarchal way in ELC settings at times when the focus was emphasised on prevention and protection rather than participation. This thesis has contributed to a growing body of early childhood literature by analysing the greatly favoured pedagogies and practices in ELC settings, such as child-centred pedagogies and free flow, making links to how they enabled or limited the children's participation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Analysing caring and acting with care in response to the needs of children during the COVID-19 pandemic, where these practices were restricted and limited by guidance and measures, has contributed to conceptual discussions around care in the field. The findings of this research have demonstrated the contextual, dynamic and complex nature of the processes of care relations in ELC settings, including the critical reflection of care action between children and practitioners, as well as the broader structures that affect care practices in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g. health and safety measures.

The research has also contributed to early childhood literature by exploring the aspects of learning and childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic and making links with the embedded and persistent issues in the field, such as lack of recognition of the work done by the early years practitioners and the reduction of care work to a "shallow meaning of childcare" (Lee, 2020). The findings of this research have evidenced that the schoolification process and the narrow didactic approach to education and learning can prevail in times of uncertainty. The findings also showed different focuses in different periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as shifts from learning loss emphasising the importance of "schoolified" forms of learning to focusing on supporting children's wellbeing by prioritising relationships and connections. This study has contributed to both early childhood literature and the COVID-19 pandemic by evidencing that traditional and historical constructions in the field have often continued to dominate the life and practices of ELC settings.

8.3 Implications for policies and practice

This study has implications for policies and practice in early learning and childcare. In this section, I outline the implications of findings for ELC settings and policies.

The analysis of the implementation of the COVID-19 pandemic guidances and policies in this study, drawing attention to how policies were enabled or disregarded in practice, has highlighted the importance of the agency of practitioners in the everyday life of ELC settings. The analysis has also pointed to the practical challenges due to the lack of participation of staff in policy planning or decision-making at the time of crisis. Therefore, this research emphasised the need to consider practitioners' agency and participation in policy planning, considering how practitioners' agency has been framed through the structures (Wagner et al., 2019). Similarly, as argued in the previous section, children should be a part of the policy planning and design (Gal & Duramy, 2015; Kjørholt, 2008). It is particularly important to explore further and reflect on how these can be done in crisis contexts where policies are more rapidly developed and changed than in other situations.

This study has shown how, by being activated, certain guidances create certain practices and discourses in ELC settings, and it depends on who (practitioners, managers and policymakers in this study context) is involved in the activation processes. Therefore, policies should not be seen as an end in themselves but should be tools for discussion, dialogue and reflection with the participation of staff working in the ELC. Thus, policies need to open spaces for reflection to eliminate the dichotomy between where the professional body of knowledge is produced and applied (Urban, 2008). With the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, practitioners and other staff in ELC can be invited to reflect on their experiences and ways of dealing with the challenges they face in practice and to think about alternative ways of working in the case of future disaster or crisis situations.

In addition to practitioners, it would be extremely important to find ways to include children's views in forming such policies. Some key messages can be drawn from the findings and used in media and educational settings to recognise children's competencies and abilities to be a part of the solution in crisis and disaster situations. As this research has shown, policies in ELC

settings have directly shaped daily life and practices, and when children's views are excluded from these processes, this has the potential to result in unfavourable experiences for them. The literature reviewed and the findings of this study have suggested that there is a need to ensure children's meaningful participation in ELC settings while considering the processes of protecting them, e.g. applying health and safety measures. Children's participation has often been in tension with children's protection (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Tisdall & Cuevas-Parra, 2022), but the realisation of participation is necessary for the realisation of protection (Kjørholt, 2008). This study argues that children's protection and participation are closely intertwined and that children's autonomy and dependency are mutually dependent and fluctuating (Kjørholt, 2008). Thus, both should be promoted in ELC settings and policy design.

As mentioned, this study found that practitioners limited the information shared with children for several reasons, including viewing children as too young and lacking confidence in children's capabilities to understand and deal with the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, practitioners recognised older children's contributions but tended to overlook others. Children's young age is often taken for granted in excluding children from the participation processes. The findings of this research also provided examples of children's detailed knowledge of the COVID-19 pandemic, making sense of the situation, and actively co-constructing knowledge with others. In this regard, the findings have shown that it is important to recognise children's views and experiences and their valuable contributions to help to develop strategies, responses and recovery measures to mitigate the negative impacts. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic inquiry went underway, aimed to listen to the experiences of people to identify the issues and do preparation for future crisis situations (Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry, 2023). A similar initiative could be taken with young children adopting appropriate methods to listen to their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and considering their suggestions, for instance, how the measures would be applied in ELC settings. There is thus a need to bring children's competencies and active roles into Scottish policies and rhetoric around their meaningful participation and for practitioners to enable opportunities for children's participation in ELC settings and the open space for children to share their views and experiences in education and beyond. Equally, the ongoing issues related to making children's participation real need to be explicitly acknowledged and addressed. This is particularly important in times of crisis when the protectionist narratives often supersede participation and are important in determining how future crisis situations can be managed.

This study has pointed to the need to reflect multiple and sometimes contradicting understandings of childhoods in the context of policy and ELC settings. In particular, it has shown the significance of emphasising children's vulnerabilities and needs in crisis or disaster situations, as well as their competencies to deal with the challenges they experience. The literature has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has a number of negative effects on children's wellbeing, such as anxiety, fear, and stress (Brown et al., 2020; Capurso et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2021). This study highlighted the importance of maintaining children's wellbeing and enabling a safe space for expressing emotions, fears and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research also found the importance of social relationships to children's wellbeing, especially when these relations were interrupted during lockdown times. Thus, more attention needs to be paid in recognising the impact of this period on children's social and emotional development and developing plans to support children's wellbeing in times of crisis and how it can be incorporated into policy interventions at the national level, local authorities as well as ELC settings.

This study demonstrated the practices, experiences and constructions in ELC settings and how they were impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis of this study highlighted what was given up or ignored in the first place in the crisis situation. Therefore, it is particularly important to reflect on them to show what potentially needs attention when facing such situations. The findings of this study on the importance of play and participation for children to deal with challenging experiences and develop a sense of self-efficacy (Cuevas-Parra, 2021) have highlighted the need to enable opportunities for children to enrich their experiences of play and participation in times of crisis or disaster (Graber et al., 2020; International Play Association, 2017; O'Keeffe & McNally, 2021).

It could also be argued that there is a need for critical reflection and debate in formulating and applying well-known pedagogies in the ELC setting, e.g. child-centredness around who benefits from the practice and whose best interests are considered. I argue the importance of it, especially in a crisis situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, to capture children's meaningful experiences through participatory processes. Practitioners can critically reflect on their own pedagogies and positionality, how this affects their conceptualisation of children and ELC when engaging with children, and how these conceptualisations can together form daily life in ELC settings. As Langford (2010) argues, the pedagogies in which children, peers, practitioners, and families can be at the centre and act, react and respond in relation to each

other can help overcome the negative impact of crisis or disaster situations. In addition, I argue that non-human actors such as regulations, guidance, space and materials should also be considered in ELC settings. This implies the need to consider new insights and opportunities to advocate changes in the ELC system as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Leare et al., 2021) to provide new opportunities for dealing with challenging situations.

8.4 Implications for further research

This study, as well as a majority of literature reviewed in chapter 2, has focused on the experiences and views of children from the adults' perspectives, i.e. practitioners or parents. One of the key areas that was not possible to explore was researching with children at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic in this study. Further research could explore young children's experiences and views on the crisis situation by directly asking them. This research strongly advocates making children a part of the pandemic solution by ensuring their meaningful participation in decision-making and implementation processes. Listening directly to children and exploring their experiences and views from their perspectives will be particularly valuable given the current COVID-19 pandemic literature that addresses children's experiences mainly from adults' perspectives (e.g. Di Giandomenico & Picchio, 2022; Engdahl & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2022; Kahuroa et al., 2021; Pascal & Bertram, 2021).

As the methodology chapter of this thesis discussed, it was not possible to include children in this study due to the COVID-19 measures and limitations. Future research on crisis or disaster situations could incorporate direct methods of talking to children about their experiences and views using online methods. Children's widespread use and familiarity with online platforms and communication tools during the COVID-19 pandemic may have offered a unique possibility to conduct online research with children in a crisis context where face-to-face research was not possible (e.g. Bray et al., 2021; González-Calvo et al., 2022; Koller et al., 2023; Lundy et al., 2021). However, such studies were generally conducted with older children and young people, and there is a lack of research that seeks the views and experiences and active participation of younger children in researching their experiences within educational settings and beyond. Thus, further research could explore children's experiences in crisis or disaster situations with the adaptations of online methods and dissemination beyond text-based reports, including other forms such as video and play-based expressions in

public, policy or academic spaces.

While this research aimed to explore the experiences of children and constructions of childhoods in the context of ELC settings, the importance of wider constructions has been highlighted through their home context, e.g. through the challenges which children may experience in negotiating their lives outside of educational settings, and through the challenges which children experience in transitioning to ELC. Thus, further research exploring the constructions of childhoods in home environments and ELC settings would better inform our understanding of how children understand and live through crisis situations and provide helpful insights for policy and practice in planning future crisis situations.

In relation to that, future research could broaden the focus by incorporating parents' perspectives. Parents/carers have been minimally included in the discussions of this thesis in regard to the uses of "learning journals" during the lockdowns. These can invite a wider question of how children's home experiences and communication between settings and home during challenging times impact the conceptualisation of the role of early learning and childcare. In addition, these studies, which look at institutional and family lives, could offer helpful insights into how these two lives are intertwined.

This research was limited to discussing shifts in early learning and childcare for a given period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This period of uncertainty has provided an opportunity to reassess the core aims of ELC and the extent to which long-established values are represented in current practice (Clark, 2023). Future research could explore the constructions beyond the COVID-19 pandemic in ELC settings. There is scope to explore whether the arrangements that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic affect the practices or routines of ELC settings and, thus, their pedagogies in the long term. Future research could also explore practitioners' awareness of their values, pedagogical thinking, and individual approach to their work during the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for how they view ELC.

Finally, as highlighted in the literature review chapter, a growing field of studies takes the post humanist approach (Kraftl & Horton, 2018; Malone et al., 2020; Murris, 2016; Peters & Tesar, 2018). This study is not one of them. However, as they emerged in the data, I applied some principles around space and policies and how they impacted relationships in ELC settings. The findings have shown that these can be explored more explicitly with a post

humanist approach; as my thesis has highlighted, there is a strong link between the biological realities of the virus and infection and spaces, policies and measures and how all these interact. Therefore, the findings of this thesis could be reconsidered in the future from an explicit post humanist angle.

8.5 Concluding reflections

This PhD thesis has explored how childhoods and early learning and childcare (ELC) have been conceptualised and experienced in ELC settings from the practitioners' perspectives during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Scottish context. Its key contributions were to show that constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare are complex, multiple, and sometimes contradictory and exist in interconnected networks of relationships. It has shown that the lives of children and practitioners in ELC settings are situated within and framed by the particular policies, legislation and discourses that construct childhood and adulthood. This study has provided an understanding at the practical, research and policy levels of the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of children and practitioners and stakeholders in the context of ELC. It became apparent with the experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic that children and adults have been living their lives in a web of interdependent relationships, with other people but also with the virus, regulations, spaces, materials and technologies.

Conducting this research involved a continuous learning process for me at the theoretical and methodological levels and also allowed for personal reflections throughout my work. Throughout the research, I increased my knowledge, followed the up-to-date growing literature on the COVID-19 pandemic, and contributed to filling the gaps in the literature. Regarding the methodological challenges in my research due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions and measures, the fieldwork involved multiple decision-making. I sought to ensure both the research's rigour and the participants' privacy and integrity throughout the analysis and reflections. This research has increased my commitment to research with children by recognising them as active agents and subjects of rights. The study has also increased my academic curiosity about continuing to explore the lives and experiences of children, both in educational settings and beyond.

As I was nearing the end of my PhD and finalising my thesis, in May 2023, the UN World Health Organization (WHO) declared the end of the COVID-19 pandemic as a public health emergency (WHO, 2023). It was noted that this did not mean that the COVID-19 pandemic was over. People are still losing their lives due to COVID-19, and the devastating effects of COVID-19 on people's lives continue. At the same time, we returned to "normality" a long time ago. More than three years later, this could be a moment for reflection. What does the end of the COVID-19 pandemic as a public health emergency mean for the constructions of childhoods and early learning and childcare; what opportunities remain with us, or what challenges stay with us? The findings of this study have offered opportunities and insights to advocate for changes in the views towards children and the ELC system, both now and in the future. The findings are not only important to reflect on now but also for possible future crisis situations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Timeline of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland

The timeline focuses on Scotland's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly major developments affecting ELC settings' functioning and children's and practitioners' lives.

1 March 2020 - First positive case of COVID-19 in Scotland
11 March 2020 - First case of community transmission in Scotland
13 March 2020 - First confirmed death in Scotland with COVID-19
16 March 2020 - UK government began daily press briefings
17 March 2020 - First Minister's COVID-19 speech emphasised the need to reduce all non-essential social contact for every citizens
19 March 2020 - The Scottish Government announced the closure of schools and ELC settings by the end of the week for all but the most "vulnerable" children and for children of key workers
24 March 2020 - first day of "lockdown"
25 March 2020 - letter for all registers childminders in Scotland to cease all provision besides emergency childcare for key worker families and vulnerable children (Scottish Government, 2020a)
27 March 2020 - Scottish Government published rules on "staying at home and away from others" (social distancing) (Scottish Government, 2020b)
30 March 2020 - Scottish Government produced advice for schools and childcare settings who provided care to "vulnerable" children and for children of key workers, focusing on "social distancing" in childcare settings (Scottish Government, 2020c)
31 March 2020 - Scottish Government published guidance for setting out the childcare and learning provision for key workers and vulnerable children during closures of school and ELC settings (Scottish Government, 2020d)
20 April 2020 - Scottish Government published guidance to support home learning for children and young people (Scottish Government, 2020e)

10 May 2020 - Scottish Government announced the change on how often people could go out. As of 11 May, once-a-day limit, which people only permitted to leave home once a day to exercise, was removed (Sturgeon, 2020a)

15 May 2020 - Advice was published for schools and childcare settings that provided care to children, focusing on physical distancing and hygiene measures (Scottish Government, 2020f)

18 May 2020 - It was announced that testing for COVID-19 was open to anyone over the age of five who was symptomatic (Scottish Government, 2020g)

21 May 2020 - Scottish Government published the route map which presents a phased approach to easing restrictions based on evidence (Scottish Government, 2020h).

21 May 2020 - Scottish Government announced that children would return to schools on 11 August subject. ELC settings were planned to open over the summer (Scottish Government, 2020i).

21 May 2020 - The strategic framework for Reopening Schools, Early Learning and Childcare Provision in Scotland - has been published by Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2020j)

26 May 2020 - Scottish Government published summary of scientific evidence about coronavirus relating to opening schools and ELC settings (Scottish Government, 2020k).

28 May 2020 - Statement given by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon that the move to Phase 1 of the route map out of lockdown, beginning on 29 May (e.g. childminding services and fully outdoor nursery provision could start to reopen from 3 June with limited number of children) (Sturgeon, 2020b)

01 June 2020 - The guidance published for fully outdoor childcare providers and for childminder services to support a safe reopening, which planned to operation from 3 June (Scottish Government 2020l; 2020m)

05 June 2020 - The guidance published to help local authorities, ELC settings and schools to support children and young people's learning (Scottish Government, 2020n)

05 June 2020 - The guidance published to support teachers and practitioners in preparing their curriculum offer for and during the Recovery Phase (Scottish Government, 2020o)

15 June 2020 - Guidance published for early learning and childcare (ELC) providers to support a safe reopening during Phase 3 (Scottish Government, 2020p)

18 June 2020 - Announcement of the move to Phase 2 of the Route Map out of the lockdown, and of introduction of changes (Scottish Government, 2020q)

09 July 2020 - Announcement of the move to Phase 3 in Scotland's route map through and out of crisis (Scottish Government, 2020r)

21 July 2020 - Scottish Government announced extended testing eligibility to children under five who displayed symptoms (Scottish Government, 2020s).

30 July 2020 - Announcement that schools reopening full-time from 11 August (Scottish Government, 2020t)

30 July 2020 - Guidance published for early learning and childcare (ELC) providers to support a safe reopening, *came into effect from 10 August 2020* (Scottish Government, 2020u)

11 August 2020 - Pupils returned to schools in Scotland

21 August 2020 - Guidance published for early learning and childcare (ELC) providers to support a safe reopening, *came into effect from 10 August 2020* (Scottish Government, 2020v)

08 December 2020 - First vaccinations against COVID-19 had been given in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020w)

19 December 2020 - Announcement on tightening the COVID-19 restrictions, especially around festive period due to spread of new variant (Scottish Government, 2020x)

04 January 2021 - Mainland Scotland went into second lockdown from 5 January.
All schools were advised to use remote learning until the end of January, except in the case of vulnerable children and those of key workers (Scottish Government, 2021a)

02 February 2021 - Scottish Government announced that children on ELC and primary schools (P1-3) were scheduled to fully return to their settings from 22 February (Scottish Government, 2021b)

22 February 2021 - Children in ELC returned full time to their settings

16 March 2021 – Scottish Government published a timetable for easing restrictions (Scottish Government, 2021c).

06 April 20221 - Announcement on all pupils would return to full-time school after the Easter holiday (Scottish Government, 2021d).

20 April 2021 - Announcement on Scotland would move to Level 3 from 26 April (Scottish Government, 2021e).

14 May 2021 - Announcement on most of mainland Scotland would move to level 2 from 17 May (Scottish Government, 2021f)

22 June 2021 - Announcement that all of Scotland would move to protection level 0 on 19 July (Scottish Government, 2021g)

03 August 2021 - Announcement that Scotland moved beyond level 0 on 9 August, (physical distancing and limits on gathering would remove) (Scottish Government, 2021h)

05 October 2021 - Scottish Government published Coronavirus (COVID-19) education recovery: key actions and next steps document (Scottish Government, 2021i)

14 December 2021 - Updated guidance was published by Scottish Government to manage the increased risks of transmission associated with Omicron (e.g. reducing social interactions at home or indoor places) (Scottish Government, 2021j)

14 March 2022 - Announcement on all international travel restrictions for people coming to Scotland would end from 18 March (Scottish Government, 2022a)

Appendix 2 – Guidance and documents published during COVID-19 pandemic

The following guidance and documents, published by the Scottish Government during the COVID-19 pandemic, were drawn upon in this thesis:

Guidance published for ELC settings to support a safe reopening:

21 May 2020 - The strategic framework for Reopening Schools, Early Learning and Childcare Provision in Scotland - *'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic'* (Scottish Government, 2020j)

15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services (Scottish Government, 2020p)

30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare service, *came into effect from 10 August 2020* (Scottish Government, 2020u)

Guidance published for reducing the risks from COVID-19 after ELC settings fully reopened:

30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3)

14 December 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 4)

26 January 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 5)

16 February 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 6)

09 April 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 7)

21 May 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 8)

20 July 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 9)

03 August 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 10)

11 August 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 11)

23 August 2021 (Version 11.1)

17 September 2021 (Version 11.2)

23 September 2021 (Version 11.3)

11 October 2021 (Version 11.4)

30 November (Version 11.5)

17 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 13)

23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14)

06 January 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 15)

17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16)

17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17)

18 April 2022 - Reviewed

02 May 2022 - Revised guidance published

31 May 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early Learning and Childcare Services Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 20)

29 August 2022 - last update on the website

Appendix 3 - Table shows the measures and limitations in ELC settings during the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland

	Main guidance
Creating "bubbles"	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** 'Caring for children in small groups' (Scottish Government, 2020, p.18). **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** Settings should establish cohorts of children who will work together consistently throughout sessions. ***size group:*** These cohorts, of up to 8 children. ... The aim of small cohort working is to limit the number of close contacts for each child and member of staff. ...Therefore, cohorts of children should not be in close contact with other cohorts, and cohorts should not mix freely. ... ***space arrangement:*** Providers should ensure that settings have sufficient space available to ensure that cohorts are not in close contact. ... In addition to this, consideration should be given to what additional space is required to minimise interactions between cohorts. This could include use of loose furniture to create spaces within playrooms, floor markings for circulation, etc. ... Each setting should ensure that adequate space is available for cohorts to transition between spaces (e.g. from indoors to outdoors or to the toilet) while minimising contact. ***contacts while managing groups:*** 'In practice we understand that there are times when other staff members may need to provide cover for children from another cohort. However, this should be for limited periods and physical distancing must be maintained between adults. Staff should ensure strict hygiene practices are carried out if they are caring for different groups' (Scottish Government, 2020).' (Scottish Government, 2020). **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** **important change after 15 June 2020:** 'Given the ongoing suppression of the virus, and updated scientific advice, management of children in consistent cohorts of 8 will no longer be required. ... However, this does not mean that settings should return to normal operation. It is still important to limit children's contacts. Contacts should be limited by managing children within groups. Consistency of groups is beneficial, and efforts should be made to keep children within the same groups for the duration of the day or session, where possible. ***size group:*** The appropriate size of groups will depend on the age and overall number of children, and the layout of the setting. The general approach should be to minimise the size of groups where possible. ... It would therefore be reasonable for children to be managed in groups up to the size encountered in primary school, for example 25 to 30 children. However, larger indoor groupings should be avoided.' ***space arrangement:*** More than one group can use a large space, but children should not mix freely with children in other groups, including in open plan settings. The management of groups should reflect the circumstances of the setting. ***resources arrangement:*** Consideration should be given to the removal of unnecessary items in the setting to maximise capacity and decrease the number of items requiring cleaning, while ensuring the children still have adequate resources and furnishings to support quality experiences. Sharing of resources should be minimised. Where resources are used by different groups (e.g. on a rotational basis), consideration should be given to cleaning between uses in accordance with requirements ***contacts while managing groups:*** 'Staff members should work with the same groups where possible throughout the day, and a number of key workers may work together. If cover is required for breaks, toileting etc., this should be managed within the staff working with a particular group. If staff need to work with other groups, this should be for limited periods.' **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** 'Contacts must be limited by managing children within groups. Consistency of groups is beneficial, and children should remain within the same groups wherever possible. ***size group:*** It would therefore be reasonable for children to be managed in groups up to the size encountered in primary school, for example no more than 25 to 33 children in any one group. The adult to child ratios in the national care standards must continue to apply. large indoor groupings should be avoided. ***space arrangement:*** In addition to above - In such settings, the layout of the playroom should be carefully considered to allow groups to remain separate. Use of management approaches such as clearly allocated areas, or physical barriers such as furniture, etc should be used to support separation of groups. ***resources arrangement:*** stayed same ***contacts while managing groups:*** stayed same

	20 July 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 9): **Update:** Now that we have moved to protection levels, the Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues have recommended that the size of cohorts can vary according to the protection level in which the setting is located. **Level 3, 4:** To limit interactions children should be managed in smaller groups, at most equivalent to those in primary school classes –e.g. max 33. **Level 2**: To limit interactions children should be managed in consistent groups with a maximum size of 48. **Level 1:** To limit interactions children should be managed in consistent groups with a maximum size of 56. **Level 0:** The only restriction on group size is registration capacity. **For 4, 3, 2, 1 :** Children should remain within the same groups wherever possible and should not mix freely with children in other groups. To avoid confusing children, this should apply when children are outdoors as well as indoors. ***The other restrictions stayed same.*** **10 August 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 10):** **In addition to above:** In protection level 0 and below, there is no requirement to separate groups when they are outdoors. Settings should make as much use of outdoor space as possible as the risk of transmission is lower outside than it is in indoors. **Groups can be mixed when outdoors** where that makes it easier to maximise the time children spend outdoors. **17 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 13):** In light of the Omicron variant settings are encouraged to apply this guidance as soon as it is feasible to do so. -actions to minimise child to child and staff to staff contact through the use of groupings in indoor spaces, wherever that is possible. The general approach should be to minimise the size of groups as far as possible and limit movement between groups unless that is absolutely necessary. **23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14); 17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16):** Minimising contacts through the use of groupings within settings should be considered in indoor spaces, wherever possible. The general approach should be to minimise the size of groups as far as possible and limit movement between groups unless that is absolutely necessary. The size of such groupings might differ depending upon local circumstances and the need to minimise disruption – for example a grouping might refer to a whole room in a setting, or a smaller or larger grouping. Head teachers or managers are best placed to make risk assessments and take decisions about the best approach for their individual setting. Large indoor groupings should be avoided. There is no requirement to separate groups when they are outdoors. Settings should make as much use of outdoor space as possible as the risk of transmission is lower outside than it is in indoors. **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17):** no measures or limitations stated about grouping children or uses of spaces for other groups

face coverings	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic**': no advice **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** no advice **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'Where adults cannot keep 2 metres distance from other adults, and are interacting face-to-face with other adults for 15 minutes or more, face coverings should be worn. In other circumstances, adults should not need to wear face coverings. Some children may need additional support/reassurance about the reasons for adults wearing face coverings. Face coverings should not be required for most children or adults (those clinically advised to wear a covering would be an exception). The wellbeing and needs of the child, should remain a focus of attention with a recognition that face coverings can limit communication, which young children often rely on with the ability to view faces and non-verbal cues being important to learn effectively. ... However, staff wishing to wear face protection should be enabled to do so.' **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** **change:** Considering the changed position on infection and transmission rates in the community, the evidence and experience of settings re-opening between August and October 2020, and recent scientific evidence, the Sub-Group has since concluded that its advice on face coverings in settings should be further strengthened and augmented to manage the main area of risk within education settings, which is adult to adult transmission. - Face coverings **are not required** when working directly with children, including on the floor or supporting children to move around the building or with toileting, or as a result of being less than 2 m distant from children. - Face coverings **should** now be worn by all adults when physical distancing is not possible, - Face coverings **should be strongly encourage**d for parents and other visitors to the setting (whether entering the building or otherwise), including parents at drop-off and pick-up. **16 February 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 6):** **updated advice:** - It is not recommended that children aged 5 and under wear face coverings in an ELC setting. However, children, like adults, **wishing to wear** a face covering in any part of the setting **should be permitted** to do so. - Face coverings **must** be worn by adults wherever they cannot maintain a 2 m distance from other adults (e.g. in corridor and communal areas). - Coverings **should** also be worn by staff and visitors when not working directly with children, for example when in office and admin areas, canteens (except when dining), staff rooms and other confined communal areas, (including staff toilets) , except where a person is exempt from wearing a covering. - Face coverings **should** be worn by parents and other essential visitors to the setting when entering the building, and should be strongly encouraged when parents/carers are drop-off and pick-up their children. **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17):** Wearing a face covering is one of the ways you can help prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, we recognise the importance of faces being visible to children to aid in communication and relationship building. Face coverings are **not needed** when: - Working directly with children, including on the floor or supporting children to move around the building or with toileting, or as a result of being in close physical proximity to children. When face coverings **should be** worn: - By staff and professional visitors when in communal areas and not working directly with children, except where a person is unable to wear a face covering, in line with general guidance for safety in the workplace. Examples of communal areas are: the office and administration areas, canteens, staff rooms and other confined communal areas, including staff toilets. - By parents and other visitors into the setting, in line with wider Scottish Government guidance on the wearing of face coverings.

	31 May 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early Learning and Childcare Services Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 20): Wearing a face covering is one of the ways you can help prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, we recognise the importance of faces being visible to children to aid in communication and relationship building. While wearing a face covering is no longer a requirement it remains strongly recommended if you are 12 years or over in indoor communal areas or on public transport, in line with the staying safe and protecting others guidance. Any individual who wishes to continue to wear a face covering in a workplace, health and social care or school setting (including childcare) should be supported to do so.
physical distancing	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** 'It is not appropriate for young children to maintain the models of physical distancing that would be suitable for older children, either practically or in terms of child development. In particular, it is not desirable or possible to implement strict physical distancing between young children or between a young child and their key worker. ... Physical distancing between adults in the setting, including parents at drop-off and pick-up times.' (Scottish Government, 2020, p.18). **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** **In addition to above, it was added:** 'It is important for children to feel secure and receive warmth and physical contact that is appropriate to their needs, in particular when they are receiving personal care, need comforting or reassurance. Keyworkers will need to be close to the children, particularly young children and should feel confident to do so. ... Individual physical distancing applies to staff, parents (and any other adults who may attend the setting)' (Scottish Government, 2020). **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** no change **In addition to above, it was added**: 'Children are not required to physically distance from each other, or from adults. ... Adults in settings should stay 2 metres apart in line with physical distancing principles.' **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** no change **16 February 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 6):** reminder that physical distancing between adults remains a fundamental protective measure that should apply at all times. Individual physical distancing applies to staff, parents and carers (and any other adults who may attend the setting). **03 August 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 10):** **change:** Settings should continue to adhere to the 2 metres physical distance between adults. However, when Scotland moves beyond Level 0, the physical distancing requirement for adults in ELC settings will be **at least 1 metre**. If settings already have 2 metre physical distancing arrangements that work well and do not limit capacity then they may retain these for logistical reasons. **Parents/carers visits introduced:** **Levels 4, 3, 2, 1:** Telephone calls, online meetings and 'virtual' visits should be the norm for meetings with parents. However, where it may be in the best interests of children for a parent or carer to attend in person, this should be considered on a case by case basis, for example in relation to child protection issues, addressing additional support needs or where a parent has a disability which affects communication over the telephone or online. **Level 0 and beyond:** Visits by parents/carers **are be permitted** when planned in advance but should be limited to up to three households at a time or per day if they are indoors, and up to 10 households at a time or per day if they are outdoors. **At all levels:** Visitors should maintain physical distancing from other adults who are not part of their household and should aim to physically distance from children who are not part of their household as far as is feasible, recognising that some children will find this difficult. If the visit takes place indoors ensure that the meeting space is well ventilated, face coverings are worn by adults **17 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 13):** Visits to settings by parents: 'virtual' visits should be the norm for meetings with parents.

	17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16): Physical distancing between adults remains a fundamental protective measure that should apply at all times. Individual physical distancing applies to staff, parents and carers (and any other adults who may attend the setting). When Scotland moves beyond Level 0, the physical distancing requirement for adults in ELC settings will be at least 1 metre. **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17); 31 May 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early Learning and Childcare Services Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 20):** It is important for children to feel secure and well cared for, including through physical contact that is appropriate to their needs, especially when they are receiving personal care, need comfort or reassurance. Therefore, it is not appropriate to ask young children to maintain physical distancing from adults or other children. Staff and visitors should follow general guidance for safety in the workplace in indoor communal areas and when not working directly with children, and when moving around the building.
hand washing	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** 'Enhanced hand hygiene' (Scottish Government, 2020, p.18). **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'Arrangements should be implemented for enhanced hand and respiratory hygiene by adults and children in the setting. ... During this period ELC services must ensure that handwashing facilities are accessible for children and they may wish to have a supply of antibacterial hand gel available to parents and staff at the entrance to the setting. Staff should ensure enhanced hand hygiene measures are in place including washing their own hands and the hands of all children: - ensure all staff and children wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds frequently - handwashing should be encouraged on arrival at the setting: - before and after eating - after toileting - at regular intervals throughout the day - when moving between different areas (e.g. between different rooms or between inside and outside)' (Scottish Government, 2020) **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** no change **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** no change **23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14); 17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16):** no change **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17):** **change:** Ensuring that everyone within a setting carries out hand hygiene practices thoroughly, at the right time, using appropriate facilities and products helps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other infections. **Hand hygiene for children:** It is important that children understand why it is important to wash their hands and are supported to do so. They should be taught how to wash, rinse and dry their hands correctly from an early age. **Support children with handwashing at the following times:** - On arrival to the setting - Before and after eating or handling food - After toileting - When returning from play outside

	- After blowing their nose, coughing or sneezing - After contact with contaminated surfaces - At regular intervals throughout the day
cleaning practices	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic'**: 'Enhanced ...cleaning practices' (Scottish Government, 2020, p.18). **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'an extension of the cleaning regime normally used in early learning and childcare settings, with table tops, chairs, doors, light switches, banisters, equipment sinks, and toilets being cleaned more regularly. There should be routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched objects and hard surfaces, this should include equipment staff use, (e.g. telephones, keyboards, door handles, and tables). Toys and equipment that children access should be cleaned each day; between sessions and at the end of the day or in the morning before the session begins using standard detergent and disinfectant that are active against viruses and bacteria.... Each setting should be cleaned every night or when children's sessions change, in preparation for a new group of children being in the next day/session. ... Children will require comfortable areas to play, however any soft furnishings such as throws should be removed, unless clearly required. ' (Scottish Government, 2020, p.no) **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** Same requirements kept as in 15 June 2020, except the change on: 'Children will require comfortable areas to play. Soft furnishings such as throws, if required, should be used for individual children and should be washed after use' (Scottish Government, 2020). **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** no change **20 July 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 9):** **enhanced cleaning requirements by protection level was introduced.** Settings must ensure their cleaning practices for toys and soft furnishings reflect **the requirement at each protection level:** **Level 4-3:** Soft furnishings such as throws and bedding should be used for individual children. If shared they should be laundered between use. If individual, they should be laundered frequently and as a minimum weekly. **Level 1-2:** Soft furnishings (such as throws and bedding) should be laundered frequently - as a minimum weekly. **Level 0:** Soft furnishings (such as throws and bedding) should be laundered in accordance with usual cleaning schedule. **For all levels:** Toys and equipment that children access should be cleaned daily or, if groups of children change during the day, on a sessional basis. At least twice daily cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched objects and hard surfaces. **23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14)**; **17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16):** This should be an extension of the cleaning regime normally used in ELC settings, with touchpoints such as table tops, chairs, doors, light switches, banisters, equipment, sinks, and toilets cleaned more regularly. There should be routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched objects and hard surfaces as detailed in the table below. This should include equipment staff use, (e.g. telephones, desks, handles, keyboards, door handles, and tables). - Soft furnishings (such as throws and bedding) should be laundered in accordance with usual cleaning schedule. - Toys and equipment that children access should be cleaned daily or, if groups of children change during the day, on a sessional basis - At least twice daily cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched objects and hard surfaces. **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17); 31 May 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early Learning and Childcare Services Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 20):** ***became less intense:*** It is important to maintain high levels of cleaning within childcare settings to reduce the risk of transmitting COVID-19 and other infections. Settings should produce local cleaning schedules which stipulate how frequently cleaning should take place and who is responsible for carrying it out.

	A full routine clean should take place at least daily, which includes touch surfaces such as door handles, telephones and keyboards. This should then be followed by a second clean later in the day of touch surfaces only. ***Equipment cleanliness*:** All toys and equipment must be safe for use and well maintained to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Toys and equipment that children access should, as far as possible, be cleaned daily and if visibly contaminated or if groups of children change during the day, on a sessional basis.
uses of outdoors	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** 'maximising use of outdoor spaces. This will allow the reopening of ELC and childcare capacity over the summer, in addition to maintaining critical childcare provision' (Scottish Government, 2020). **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'Evidence suggests that outdoor environments can limit transmission, as well as more easily allowing for appropriate physical distancing between children, and staff should consider how they can safely maximise the use of their outdoor space. Where ELC services have access to an outdoor area or garden, they should try to use this space as much as possible across the day. If outdoor equipment is being used, settings should ensure that multiple cohorts of children do not use it simultaneously, as well as considering appropriate cleaning between cohorts of children using it' (Scottish Government, 2020). **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services**: no change **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** no change **23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14); 17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16):** no change **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17); 31 May 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early Learning and Childcare Services Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 20):** Outdoor play-based learning is an integral, every day, part of early learning and childcare in Scotland. It has many benefits for children's physical and cognitive development, physical health, and mental wellbeing. It improves their social competence and connection with their communities and helps them develop a connectedness with nature. It is our vision that children in Scotland will spend at least as much time outdoors as they do indoors as part of their ELC experience. The Playwork principles specifically support school age childcare development. Being outdoors also helps to limit the transmission of viruses and illnesses, including COVID-19. Staff should consider how they can safely maximise the use of outdoor space, as well as the opportunities of day visits and excursions.
food practices	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** no advice **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'It is important to continue to ensure that mealtimes are a relaxed and enjoyable time where children can socialise, while implementing practical approaches to prevent the spread and control of infection. Staff should follow usual good hygiene practices when preparing or serving food or assisting children with packed lunches. Arrangements in each setting may depend on whether food is being prepared on the premises: - having set snack times for cohorts - whether it would be beneficial for children to stay in play spaces to eat - maximising the use of the outdoor environment for dining' (Scottish Government, 2020). **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** no change **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** no change **23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14); 17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16):** no change

	17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17) and later: no measures or limitations stated
transition time drop off/pick up	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** no specific information regarding children's drop off/pick up times **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'The arrangements for parents to drop off and collect children requires careful consideration, to ensure that large gatherings of people can be avoided, and physical distancing maintained. Physical distancing between staff and other adults in the settings (including parents) must be adhered to at all times. ...Some approaches that local authorities and ELC providers should consider include the following: - staggered and allocated drop off/pick up times (so that not all children arrive onsite at one time) - consideration of additional access points and children's routes to play spaces when they arrive at the facility. This could include children heading straight to the area in which their group are working, which could be indoors or outdoors, after washing their hands - where parents are dropping off young children and it is not possible to maintain physical distancing between adults, staff and children should wash hands after the child is safely in the setting' (Scottish Government, 2020). **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** same as 15 June 2020 **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** ***in addition to above:*** Parents and carers should be strongly encouraged to wear face coverings at drop-off and pick-up. **23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14); 17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16):** The arrangements for parents to drop off and collect children requires careful consideration, to ensure that large gatherings of people can be avoided, and physical distancing maintained. Physical distancing between staff and other adults (including parents) must be adhered to at all times. - Parents and carers (and older siblings where they are required to accompany parents) should be strongly encouraged to wear face coverings at drop-off and pick-up - Staggered and allocated drop off/pick up times (so that not all children arrive onsite at one time). **About transitions to primary schools** **21 May 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 8):** Primary schools may wish to offer some in person transition support from ELC to primary school in June to supplement online transition activities. Decisions around in person transition support should be made on a collegiate basis, with full involvement of the school and ELC staff involved. Where possible, primary schools should promote the use of the outdoors for transition days, as that is the safest space in which young people from different settings should mix. However, children do not have to be invited as an entire P1 year group, but could be grouped together in small bubbles in line with those applicable in their ELC setting, or in small groups from several settings. Unless absolutely necessary to offer comfort and support to children who are anxious about the visit or become unsettled during the visit, ELC staff and other adults (including parents) should not be present with the children throughout the transitions visit. ELC staff can accompany the children to the school but remain on hand from a safe distance. **17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16):** Allows primary school teachers and senior school staff to visit ELC settings as part of the transitioning process. Considerations for school visits by children and young people entering P1 or S1 should be risk assessed and built into the relevant decisions when undertaking transition planning.

	17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17): Arrangements should be decided locally based on the best interests of children, families and staff. Specialist, peripatetic and agency staff, parents, carers and other visitors are welcome to attend settings, recognising the important role that they can play in supporting children's development and wellbeing. **31 May 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early Learning and Childcare Services Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 20) :** There are no ongoing COVID-19 related or other public health restrictions or recommendations on any movements in or out of ELC settings. This includes no requirement or recommendation for staggered pick-ups or drop-offs, break or lunch times, restricting visitors (including parents and carers) or restricting visits out of settings.
singing	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** no advice **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** no advice **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** no advice **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** 'Advice from the Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues shows that there are increased transmission risks associated with music and drama activities. ... The Sub-Group has specifically considered the question of singing in ELC settings. It has concluded that singing should not happen indoors as an organised, large group activity. However, the Sub-Group recognises that children sing naturally in the course of activities and play, and should not be discouraged from doing so, and that singing can also be used to comfort young children when necessary.' **21 May 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 8):** **In addition to above advice**, the government introduced four levels and they reviewed them regularly on the latest evidence. Each level contains a number of restrictions in order to suppress the coronavirus. **At level 4**, that singing should not happen indoors as an organised, large group activity. Some settings have allowed this outdoors and where that is the case this should be take place with as many appropriate mitigations as possible (at low volume; for short periods of time; in small groups; and with greater physical distancing). As before, children need not be discouraged from singing naturally in the course of activities and play and singing can also be used to comfort young children when necessary. **At levels 3, 2 and 1,** singing outdoors and indoors is permitted **for children** in ELC settings, as long as careful attention is paid to ensuring effective and adequate ventilation and subject to risk assessment and other risk mitigation measures being implemented. Other risk mitigations include singing: outdoors or indoors in large, well-ventilated spaces; at low volume; for short periods of time; in small groups; and with greater physical distancing between adults. **At level 0,** singing outdoors and indoors is permitted for children in ELC settings. **20 July 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 9):** **changes for adults:** **At level 4**, Singing should not happen indoors as an organised large group activity. **At levels 3, 2, 1,** singing outdoors and indoors is permitted **for children and adults** in ELC settings, as long as careful attention is paid to ensuring effective and adequate ventilation and subject to risk assessment and other risk mitigation measures being implemented. Other risk mitigations include singing: outdoors or indoors in large, well ventilated spaces; at low volume; for short periods of time; in small groups; and with greater physical distancing between adults (even beyond the minimum 2 metres). **At level 0,** singing outdoors and indoors is permitted.

	23 December 2021 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 14); 17 February 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 16): The sub-group's advice in the light of the ongoing success of the vaccination programme, and the importance of singing for the health and wellbeing of children well as their social, physical and cognitive development is that singing is permitted, indoors and outdoors. Children need not be discouraged from singing naturally in the course of activities and play and singing can also be used to comfort young children when necessary. Safety mitigations should continue to apply in relevant settings where singing, music and drama are taking place (e.g. good ventilation, enhanced hygiene, etc.). **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17) and later:** no measures or limitations stated
sand, water and playdough play	**21 May 2020 - strategic framework 'Excellence and Equity during the COVID-19 Pandemic':** no advice **15 June 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19) Phase 3: guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'It is recommended that children access toys and equipment that are easy to clean. Resources such as sand, water and playdough should be used only by one cohort of children.' **30 July 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on reopening early learning and childcare services:** 'Resources such as sand, water and playdough can be used with regular cleaning of the equipment used. Water and playdough should be replaced on a daily/sessional basis, when groups change' (Scottish Government, 2020). **30 October 2020 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 3):** same as above **06 January 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in ELC Settings (Version 15):** **added:** sand need not be changed on a daily basis and standard cleaning and changing protocols should suffice if good hand hygiene is carried out prior to and following use of the sandpit. Standard cleaning and changing protocols should be implemented in the event of any visual contamination of the sandpit or its contents. **17 March 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early leaning and childcare services guide Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 17); 31 May 2022 - Coronavirus (COVID-19): Early Learning and Childcare Services Guidance for early learning, school aged childcare and childminder settings on reducing the risks of COVID-19 (Version 20):** Sand does not need to be changed daily and standard cleaning and changing protocols should suffice if good hand hygiene is carried out prior to and following the use of the sand

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Appendix 4 – Invitation to online research

THE CONSTRUCTION OF EARLY CHILDHOODS IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Hi everyone!

I am Gizem, second year of PhD Student at the University of Edinburgh. I am undertaking the interviews with early years practitioners for my PhD research. Interviews mainly aim to understand how the pandemic has affected constructions of early childhood in nurseries in Scotland.

I would like to invite you to take part in my research! I am expecting to have a conversation around 35-40 minutes via MS Teams or Skype in the most convenient time and date for you.

The interviews include combination of traditional semi-structured interviews and visual methods. In the first part, semi-structured interviews, I will ask about the changes and adaptations after school re-openings.

The second part is an optional part will be more creative and fun! The visual research is also known as 'photo-elicitation', and it allows to explore new meanings and connections with the symbolic representations. For this, I invite you to take photos (between 4-10) within the nursery settings and send these to me before our interview. Then, I will kindly invite you to talk about each photo, what it represents and why you have taken it.



I hope you find it interesting! If you are working in early years sector and willing to take part in the research, please contact with me for further questions and arrangements.

My academic supervisors for this PhD project are:

Dr Marlies Kustatscher
Lecturer in Childhood Studies
Studies

Dr Kristina Konstantoni
Senior Lecturer in Childhood

Thank you so much in advance.

Best wishes,

Gizem Silistire

The University of Edinburgh,
The Moray House School of Education and Sport, EH8 8A

Appendix 5 - Research outline

The construction of early childhoods in times of crisis

My name is Gizem Silistire and I am currently in the second year of a PhD in Education at the University of Edinburgh. I am interested in the construction of early childhoods within early childhood education and care settings in Scotland, with the focus of the pandemic.

The research project

All the pandemic-induced changes impact on the lives of children and practitioners in different forms and degrees. Now, the early childhood education and care settings have to follow unusual and more strict set of rules. There is a possibility that children and practitioners are facing with more structures than before. Therefore, there might be changes in the construction of childhoods in the settings during the time of pandemic. This research aims to explore how early childhood education and care settings in Scotland are adopted during the time of pandemic, how these changes affect the construction of childhoods and children's right to play in settings.
My two main research questions are:

- How is "early childhood" constructed within nursery settings in times of the pandemic?
- What are the implications of pandemic in children's play?

The methodology

During the lockdown, I had first phase of interviews with practitioners from different nursery settings. These interviews aimed to understand the daily routines of the settings, the structures embedded in everyday children's play in pre-pandemic times. Also, the interviews aimed to explore the effects of Covid-19 outbreak on the nurseries' routines and children's lives during the lockdown. Now I am planning to have second phase of interviews with practitioners and stakeholders, separately.

For the practitioner interviews, the traditional interview method will be combined with visual research method. Semi-structured interviews will aim to follow up after lockdown and to understand the changes of nurseries routines, structures and so on. In order to have more detailed interviews, visual research methods will be used. This research method will enable to focus on details of how early childhood is constructed, finding new meanings and connections. They will be combined with the semi-structured interviews with the participants who are willing to do. Before the interviews, the participants will be asked to take a series of photographs to describe meaningful spaces, artefacts, activities within their settings that reflect their understandings of childhoods; the opportunities of play, and the effects of pandemic. This process will enable participants to create symbolic representations of the stories that they want to share. The participants can choose whether they want to take part of this or not.

In addition to practitioners' interviews, stakeholders' interviews will be conducted with the experts in the field (i.e. academics), managers, policy makers, local authority staff and etc.

Semi-structured interviews will aim to understand the current policies and documents around the pandemic, the challenges they have to deal with and the rationales behind the current implementations in early childhood education and care settings in Scotland.

Ethical considerations

- The data of this research will be used for my PhD thesis, written publications and presentations. With permission from the participants, I will use short excerpts from interviews in an anonymised way.
- All data will be treated as confidential and the name of nurseries, practitioners and children will not appear on research findings or reports. They will all be changed so no nursery and individual that take part in the research can be identified.
- The participation in the research is voluntary. The participants can withdraw the participation at this research at any time.
- The photos (not including any children and adults) provided by participants can be presented in the thesis and further publications, if they have a consent to do so.
- I will obtain consent from participants and I will consider their consent as an ongoing process in which they can opt in or out at any time during the research process.
- Only I will have access to the raw data. All data will be stored in my password-protected computer. All data and records will be destroyed after the completion of my PhD and publications of articles.

My academic supervisors for this PhD project are:

Dr Marlies Kustatscher
Lecturer in Childhood Studies

Dr Kristina Konstantoni
Senior Lecturer in Childhood Studies

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you so much in advance.

Yours sincerely,

Gizem Silistire
PhD student

The University of Edinburgh,
The Moray House School of Education and Sport, EH8 8A

Appendix 6 - Consent form for practitioners

Research Title: The construction of early childhoods in times of crisis

Please read each of the following statements carefully and initial each box to show you consent to it.

- ☐ I hereby agree to take part in an interview with Gizem Silistire. The information gathered will be used for the completion of researcher's PhD thesis and possible further publications.
- ☐ I have read and understood the information leaflet about the research.
- ☐ I agree that the interview will be audio-recorded.
- ☐ I agree that the photos (not including any children and adults) provided by me can be presented in the thesis and further publications (if applicable)
- ☐ I understand that the participation is voluntary, and if I do not wish to answer any questions or stop the interview, I am free to do so at any time. Also, I can withdraw any information I have provided.
- ☐ I understand that the interview will be treated as confidential and my name will not appear on any research findings or reports. Also, the identity of nursery and children will be anonymised.
- ☐ I give permission to the researcher to use short quotations from the interview in an anonymised way in the PhD thesis.

Name:
Signature: Date:

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me.
My academic supervisors for this PhD project are:

Dr Marlies Kustatscher
Lecturer in Childhood Studies
Studies

Dr Kristina Konstantoni
Senior Lecturer in Childhood

Yours sincerely,

Gizem Silistire
PhD student

The University of Edinburgh,
The Moray House School of Education and Sport, EH8 8A

Appendix 7 - Consent form for stakeholders

Research Title: The construction of early childhoods in times of crisis

Please read each of the following statements carefully and initial each box to show you consent to it.

- ☐ I hereby agree to take part in a semi-structured interview with Gizem Silistire. The information gathered will be used for the completion of researcher's PhD thesis and possible further publications.
- ☐ I have read and understood the information leaflet about the research.
- ☐ I agree that the interview will be audio-recorded.
- ☐ I understand that the participation is voluntary, and if I do not wish to answer any questions or stop the interview, I am free to do so at any time. Also, I can withdraw any information I have provided.
- ☐ I understand that the interview will be treated as confidential and my name will not appear on any research findings or reports. Also, the identity of nursery and children will be anonymised.
- ☐ I give permission to the researcher to use short quotations from the interview in an anonymised way in the PhD thesis.

Name:
Signature: Date:

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me.
My academic supervisors for this PhD project are:

Dr Marlies Kustatscher
Lecturer in Childhood Studies

Dr Kristina Konstantoni
Lecturer in Childhood Studies

Yours sincerely,

Gizem Silistire
PhD student

The University of Edinburgh
The Moray House School of Education and Sport, EH8