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## Preliminary Abstract

### **Constructing social class: what matters to young children? A sociomaterial exploration of how class is produced by 4-5-year-old children in an English primary school**

This thesis examines whether young children construct social class through their day-to-day lives with peers, and if so, how. Accepting invitations posed by existing research, I reconsider a concept traditionally characterised through adult measures (i.e. occupation or education) and counter the prioritisation of children's future developmental outcomes over their lives in the present.

Through engaging in a six-month ethnographic entanglement, I explore what aspects of classroom life come to matter to 4-5-year-old children at a school pseudonymised as Parkside Primary. Utilising a sociomaterial framework and drawing on Baradian posthuman performativity, social class is conceptualised as 'doing', something that is (re)made through micro-moments unfolding across all matters in the classroom. By involving the children in interpreting events, I attempt to challenge discourses of childhood that have previously excluded them from class research and weave their perspectives into how we can come to know class *differently*.

Findings illustrate how certain goods and experiences, such as branded water bottles or birthday parties, came to matter between children at Parkside and could be used to negotiate friendships in the classroom. Yet it was not these goods and experiences alone that construct class, but their tangling with the spatial, temporal and physical organisation of the classroom to produce moments where they can matter. Through their translation into an affective register, I propose that capitalist and neoliberal principles have become entwined with the construction of children's lives, where what matters at Parkside is not universally accessible based on economic differences.

Through this, I hope to bring substance to the ghostly presence of social class, identifying, diversifying and democratising everyday opportunities to respond to neoliberal ways of being. In doing so, this project intends to show how social class *can* be explored with young children, through collaborative methods as well as by rethinking the concept.

# **Constructing social class: what matters to young children?**

A sociomaterial exploration of how class is produced by 4-5-year-old children in an English primary school

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**School of Education, Durham University**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of PhD in Education, April 2025.**

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# 1 Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Consumerist childhoods

*As the children stream into the classroom, conversations buzz excitedly as they bustle towards the cloakroom. Their cheeks and noses are pink from the cold January air and they clutch small toys and garish backpacks tightly. The cloakroom is a hive of activity as the children gather together proudly presenting new items received as Christmas gifts for the inspection of their friends. Almost involuntarily I find myself asking, “Wow, is that what you got for Christmas?”*

[Description produced from memory]

This scene is taken from my days as a former primary school teacher. Post-Christmas, the young children in my class would return to school with a recognisable animation in the air, particularly in those first days of January. The delight was always infectious; I loved to see the children’s enthusiastic interactions. Their joy made me nostalgic for Santa Claus’ visits in my own childhood, perhaps prompting my overt admiration. This was echoed in my experiences of teaching slightly younger and older children, as well as in similar scenes of birthday children bringing new gifts to school. For children in my class, these novel items appeared to be the ‘stuff’ that mattered to them, at least momentarily, in their day-to-day lives at school.

In the scene above, to be a child celebrating Christmas is to receive gifts from Santa and bring these to show your friends at school. Add to this, the excessive purchase of food, household decorations and the plethora of Christmas experiences marketed for children (e.g. visiting Santa) and families can be left with a significant financial burden to ensure that children ‘experience Christmas’ (Earwaker, 2022). Yet, this is not just limited to the festive period (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Pagla and Brennan, 2014; Roche, 2009; Steinberg, 2011). Expanding across the abundance of commodified goods marketed at children, clothes, toys, lunchboxes, water bottles, accessories and foods represent just some of the consumables that make up the ‘stuff’ of young children’s childhoods (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Roper and La Niece, 2009; Steinberg, 2011).

Thus, childhood as experienced is suggested to have become intertwined with consumerism, commodified and “appropriated for corporate profit” (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017, p. 208; see also hooks, 2000; Roche, 2009). This saturation has led to claims of a moral crisis, “the end of innocence” (Giroux and Pollock, 2010, p. vii), which concerns the corruption of young children in particular (Steinberg, 2011). Indeed, these are fears that children’s innocence is being contaminated by marketing ploys, turning them into vacuously materialistic ‘brats’ (Delgado, 2023; see also Buckingham, 2001; Roche, 2009). For example, media articles critique commercialised family Christmases drenched in the seemingly shallow morals of consumerism (Buckland, 2024; Delgado, 2023; West, 2015; Wilson, 2021), with parenting blogs advising how to ‘keep your children grounded during Christmas consumerism’ (Baker, 2018). In her *Scary Mommy* blog titled “12 ways to get your kid to care less about ‘stuff’”, Mayer explains:

[t]here’s no denying that peak consumerism hits during the winter holidays. Who among us doesn’t wonder at least once during the month of December if we’ve accidentally raised a little Veruca Salt or Dudley Dursley<sup>1</sup>? But our kids’ tendency to *want, want, want* doesn’t magically disappear once the holidays are over or cease to exist outside of their ever-growing Christmas wish list. (Mayer, 2024, para. 1, emphasis original)

Whilst accounts vary in their presentation of children as ‘wise consumers’, ‘passive victims’ or ‘spoilt brats’ (Buckingham, 2011; Delgado, 2023; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Nairn et al., 2008; Steinberg, 2011), this desire to *cure* children’s “tendency to want, want, want” (Mayer, 2024, para. 1) resonates elsewhere, for example:

- *Why too much stuff can make kids unhappy* (Khan, n.d)
- *How do you stop kids from being materialistic?* (Reddit, 2019)
- *I feel like my kids are too obsessed with valuables. How do I teach them not to value material things as much?* (Quora, 2025)
- *6 Ways to Tame Materialism in Kids* (P&G Everyday, 2014)

This moral imperative for families to rid children of their materialistic ways arguably rests on discourses of childhood that position children as innocent in need of protection (James et al., 1998; Jenks, 2005). As hooks (2000) despairs, for “children...entering the

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<sup>1</sup> Two characters from films who are presented as spoiled by their parents by receiving everything they want.

world of consumer capitalism, there will never be a set of basic values that can ward off the politics of predatory greed” (p. 88). This is perhaps linked to developmental discourses that construct children as not yet mentally mature enough to critically reject the manipulation of rose-tinted advertising (Kline, 1993; Steinberg, 2011). Whether ‘wise customers’ or ‘passive victims’ of consumerism, discourses of childhood appear incompatible with consumerism, as a corruption of their perceived innocence or an exploitation of their immaturity (Burman, 2008; hooks, 2000; Prout and James, 2015; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005).

This aporia is knotted between childhood as expressed through consumerism and a desire to rid children of their materialistic ways (Steinberg, 2011). Yet, in societies where cultural practices such as Christmas can be expressed through economic means, is it possible to expect ‘stuff’ not to matter to children?

## 1.2 Capitalism, neoliberalism and social class in the UK

Hence, consumerism is held up as a threat to the innocence of childhood (Buckingham, 2000). Whilst consumerism is often explicitly named in the articles and accounts above, rarely are critiques linked to capitalism as the economic structure that has given rise to it (Reay, 2006; Walkerdine et al., 2001). As hooks (2000) states, “everybody talked about money, nobody talked about class” (p. 22). Compared to social class, consumerism is perhaps more widely accepted as self-evident; we can all ‘see’ people “busy buying or planning to buy” (hooks, 2000, p. 6). Consumerism can therefore be separated from the political ‘baggage’ of historical rejections of class by individuals (Savage et al., 2001) and the UK Government (Gewirtz, 2001; Walkerdine et al., 2001). There is also a tension in applying social class, as a concept traditionally characterised through adult measures such as salary and occupation, to children’s lives. This alludes to the complexities of representing social class, particularly in young children’s lives, that will be discussed throughout this thesis.

Derived from the arrangement of wage-labour, capitalism is driven by the exchange of goods (Marx, 1888/2008). This exchange of goods (for money) is suggested to go beyond essentials such as food and clothing: lifestyles (Gewirtz, 2001) through to our sense of self-identity (Braidotti, 2011; Rose, 1999) are proposed to have been

commodified and sold back to us through products available to consume (hooks, 2000; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Steinberg, 2011). Thus, in the UK, commodified lives are suggested to be synergetic with neoliberalist ideology (Rose, 1992; Walkerdine, 2019), a latent form of capitalism which rests on these ideals of consumerism and choice through burgeoning and unregulated markets (Gewirtz, 2001; Moss, 2017). As such, economic differences can be considered symbiotically entwined with cultural practices through recourse to consumerism (R. Butler, 2019; Bradley, 2015; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Sims, 2017).

Using neoliberalism as an analytical lens, it becomes possible to link consumerism as the dynamics through which social class may be constructed in capitalist societies (R. Butler, 2019; hooks, 2000; Walkerdine, 2019). That is, by rooting how we express ourselves – our desires – in commodified and consumable products, individuals are suggested to (re)produce ways of living that are inseparable from capitalism (Braidotti, 2011; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Massumi, 2015; Walkerdine et al., 2001). As hooks (2000) explains, “the well-off and the poor are often united in capitalist culture by their shared obsession with consumption” (p. 46), a common interest that “helps sustain the false notion...[of] a classless society” (p. 46). In doing so, Massumi (2015) suggests that capitalism has perniciously created the conditions for its continued survival, through co-opting individuals at the level of the ‘soul’ (Rose, 1999).

As Reay (2004) proposes, this infers a bottom-up view of social class where “[c]lass inequalities...are made and remade at the micro level, in and through innumerable everyday practices” (p. 1019). In assimilating into individuals’ lives in multiple, varied and (sometimes) desirable ways, class distinctions are suggested to have become diffused through society’s practices, norms and ways of being; giving it an *everywhere yet nowhere* quality (Bradley, 2015, p. 45; Savage et al., 2005; see also R. Butler, 2019; Skeggs, 2004). Such innumerable everyday practices become intertwined with our emotions, *felt* in the moment as well as lived. Consequently, examining class in neoliberal England involves “tracing the print of class in areas where it is faintly written” (Savage, 2003, pp. 536-537).



### 1.3 Rationale

Whilst my past experiences and the media articles presented at the outset of this chapter suggest that young children are *not* exempt from consumerist lifestyles, existing literature seems to have largely overlooked the construction of social class in young children's lives (Hill and Tisdall, 2014; Millei and Kallio, 2018). As already hinted at, this may be due to theoretical tensions in social class as traditionally defined through adult measures. Throughout this thesis, I suggest that this is also concomitant with constructions of childhood that simultaneously produce children as 'innocent' and 'immature' (Iqbal et al., 2017; Meyer, 2007; Wyness, 2019), feeding into the aporic contradiction at the heart of consumerist childhoods.

Indeed, there is often a reluctance to consider that ideas conceived as 'adult' are relevant to children's 'pure' and 'apolitical' childhoods (Millei and Kallio, 2018; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005; Steinberg, 2011). This was the case for children's experiences of gender/sexuality and ethnicity/race before studies began to challenge this framing (Barron, 2007; Blaise, 2005, 2010; Connolly, 1998; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Walkerdine, 1993). Such research challenges discourses of childhood that construct children as innocent and immature of such 'adult' notions (James et al., 1998; Steedman, 1990). These childhood discourses are underpinned by the pervasiveness of developmental psychology for understanding children (Burman, 2008), specifically through an over-emphasis on children's development for the future as "adults-in-the-making" (Thorne, 1993, p. 3).

Thorne (1993) reframes this imbalance, contending that "[c]hildren's interactions are not preparation for life; *they are life itself*" (p. 3, my emphasis). As the scene introducing this chapter suggests, children's day-to-day experiences have very real implications for their lives in the present that should not be disregarded by prioritising their future outcomes (Thorne, 1993). Whether such interactions construct class is an area understudied with reference to particularly young children (around 5-years-old) in favour of a focus more broadly on developmental outcomes (Burman, 2008). To consider whether social class is present in the day-to-day lives of young children, we must find ways to think beyond purely adult measures of social class and reconceptualise it according to what matters

to children in their social contexts (Pugh, 2011; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019). This involves not just challenging *what* we know, but *how* we come to know social class.

Accepting these invitations, this thesis will mesh with such threads and lines of thinking offered by existing literature, as introduced above. Indeed, the theme of “invitations” (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 499) is woven throughout this thesis, attempting to reframe ‘gaps’ in existing literature as aspects that are just out of focus under current theoretical lenses (Walshaw, 2007). As will be reestablished in Section 2.1, these invitations can be broadly summarised through two core and interrelated points which form the rationale for this thesis:

- 1) Theories of social class, informed by Marxism, have intersected with discourses of developmentalism and innocence in childhood to shape young children’s involvement in existing social class research. This has led to a continued focus on developmental outcomes and little exploration of particularly young children’s contributions to social class.
- 2) The ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning social class as a theoretical concept, informed by Marxism, make it methodologically problematic to study with particularly young children.

## 1.4 Situating this study

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate whether young children construct social class through their day-to-day lives with peers, and if so, how. Thus, in response to the invitations outlined, two research questions are posed:

- 1) What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?
- 2) In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

I engaged in a six-month ethnography to explore what ‘stuff’ matters to 4-5-year-old children as part of their peer culture (Corsaro, 2015) in a school pseudonymised as Parkside Primary in Northern England. The children were involved in the ongoing interpretation of events through discussion sessions and creative projects to weave their

perspectives into a theoretical reconsideration of social class (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019).

Such an emphasis on ‘stuff’ via consumerism necessitated a framework that was sensitive to the materiality of daily life in the classroom. Ergo, this thesis is situated within a posthuman performativity framework inspired by Barad (2007). This framework is a sociomaterial exploration of the spatial, temporal and physical matters that construct events alongside humans (Lenz Taguchi, 2009; Rosiek, 2018). By drawing on the notion of ‘affect’ via Massumi (2015), I intend to offer a possible explanation for how capitalism, via commodification (Braidotti, 2011), enters alongside these matters as a motivating force (Colebrook, 2002). In doing so, I investigate *what* comes to matter to the children at Parkside and *how* these differences are (re)made (Kleinman and Barad, 2012).

Through this, I consider whether what matters to the children at Parkside is constitutive of social class. This relies on poststructural thinking by drawing on a performative understanding of class as ‘doing’, inspired by J. Butler (1996) and developed by Barad (2007). Performativity considers children, as well as all other matters, agentic in that what comes to matter is *made different* through their action (J. Butler, 1996; see also Barad, 2007; Mulcahy, 2012). Like the idea of a peer culture (Corsaro, 2015), this mounts a theoretical challenge to developmental discourses of ‘immaturity’ in childhood, through making space for children to construct class “in and through innumerable everyday practices” (Reay, 2004, p. 1019).

As such, I hope that the greatest challenge we can pose to neoliberal ways of being is to haul them under the spotlight to show “where we stand” (hooks, 2000, p. viii); proving that not only do they exist, but that no-one and no-thing is exempt from its symbiotic existence (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Massumi, 2015; Rose, 1999). Whilst this may seem overwhelming, in doing so, it may be possible to open-up manifold points of intervention (Fenwick et al., 2015), confronting the faint traces of class head on and suggesting ways that we may live *otherwise*.

## 1.5 Thesis structure

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter Two: Literature review and Chapter Three: Theoretical framework will set out the literature that this thesis rests on. Chapter 2 outlines the literature surrounding the substantive content of class, enabled by the application of certain theoretical frameworks that will be explored in the following chapter. Notably, how class as a concept has developed and changed (Section 2.2), the state of social class research with young children (Section 2.3), broader research into young social lives (Section 2.4) and insights from exploring the classed experiences of older children (Section 2.5) will be explored. The chapter concludes with a discussion of what can be learned from this literature as well as what avenues have been left unexplored.

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 work together to build the interwoven substantive and theoretical rationales for this thesis. As such, these chapters overlap; whilst one necessarily comes before the other, I have tried to facilitate the joining of complimentary sections with frequent references to where conversations are continued elsewhere in this thesis. The substantive literature is presented first in the hope that its empirical and often concrete ideas assist in framing and illustrating the theoretical discussion that follows.

The first half of Chapter 3 critically reviews what aspects of class appear out of focus through the theoretical lenses that dominate existing literature, with an emphasis on learning through the concept of performativity. Section 3.3 punctuates the middle of this chapter with what I interpret as knots, or theoretical invitations, ripe for further exploration. Namely, a framework that would build on the insights of performativity, consider matters beyond purely human constructions of class and make space for children's agency. Accepting these invitations, the second half of the chapter then introduces sociomaterialism by way of Barad (2007) in addition to employing the conceptual tool of affect (Section 3.4.4). In Section 3.5, the chapter concludes by considering how a sociomaterial framework can be applied and utilised for this study.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodology and methods that constitute this study. Section 4.2 begins by covering my ethnographic approach before describing the methods of data

collection in detail. The fieldsite, Parkside Primary, is introduced alongside the human participants in Section 4.3. This section attempts to set the scene of the research, a narrative which continues in more depth through Chapter 5. Throughout Section 4.4, the ethical considerations for the study are discussed in extensive detail to reflect the myriad ways in which ethical practice emerged *through* actions in the field, rather than as the deployment of pre-planned procedures. As the chapter sets out, reflexivity is identified as integral to claims of quality and legitimacy in qualitative research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017), and thus, this is explored in Section 4.5. The analysis findings and their re-presentation through writing is considered in Section 4.6 before the chapter concludes.

As the theoretical chapter lays out in Section 3.3, existing literature has left out of focus alternative ways that we can come to know children's experiences of class; as such, this is a methodological (epistemological) challenge with substantive (ontological) implications. Hence, Chapter 4 constitutes a relatively large proportion of this thesis. This is an attempt to practically illustrate how, to explore substantive gaps in children's experiences of class (ontology), we have to also consider how we come to know that information (epistemology). Thus, in hopes to know this *otherwise*, as this thesis attempts, I endeavour to respond to the invitations posed by each; those that are ontological (Chapter 2), epistemological (Chapter 3) and methodological (Chapter 4).

As the knots of Chapter 3 suggest, this thesis undertakes to foreground other matters alongside humans in how class is constructed. For this reason, Chapter 5 acts as an introduction to the findings through re-presenting the sociomaterial threads that tangle to constitute daily life at Parkside. This chapter considers the spatial and temporal rhythms that contextualise the findings that follow, for example, how the classroom is arranged and how these spaces pattern the school day. Section 5.3 explores my embodied responses to these sociomaterial threads, acknowledging my role as an inseparable part of my ethnographic encounter and employing the emotional and sensory literature explored in Section 4.2. Although relatively small, this chapter represents an important bridge between the methodological focus of Chapter 4 and the intricate detail woven in the findings chapters that follow (Chapters 6 and 7); both from a contextual point of view as well as introducing my theoretical framework in action.

Chapters 6 and 7 comprise the findings of this thesis, organised into four “model cases” (Krause, 2021, p. 8) under two thematic headings; (re)constructing belongings and (re)constructing experiences. Chapter 6 explores how children’s belongings – water bottles and wellington boots – come to matter in daily classroom life at Parkside. Similarly, Chapter 7 presents how this is also the case for certain experiences – enrichment activities and birthday parties. Whilst the chapters are organised around these model cases, the various sub-sections attempt to illustrate how the sociomaterial conditions that enable them to matter are as much the producers as the products themselves. Both chapters follow a comparable structure: each model case is explored in relation to the sociomaterial aspects of the classroom and illustrated by a vignette. Due to the level of detail included, each section concludes with an immediate discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions.

In conclusion, Chapter 8 will draw together the analyses and summarise the responses they present to the research questions. The invitations posed in Chapters 2 and 3 will be revisited in considering the original contribution of this thesis from substantive and theoretical perspectives, as well as implications for policy and practice. In full circle, I then deliberate potential invitations that this thesis may have left out of focus and thus, are ripe for continued exploration.

## 2 Chapter Two: Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the literature surrounding the substantive content of class, enabled by the application of certain theoretical frameworks that will be explored in the following chapter. Beginning with a discussion around social class, this chapter outlines the concept as informed by Marxism, links with neoliberalism and how the definition has broadened due to the work of working-class female academics (Sections 2.2-2.2.3).

This has produced certain ways of knowing social class that I suggest are at odds with discourses of childhood, thus shaping social class research with children (Section 2.3). Nevertheless, much can be learned from existing literature into children's social class across different paradigms; the chapter continues by presenting developmental studies and the work of prominent theorists in the field into classed language, culture and parenting (Section 2.3.2).

This is followed by a consideration of research into particularly young children's<sup>2</sup> social lives with reference to gender, race and ethnicity rather than class (Section 2.4). Such studies draw on alternative discourses of childhood that construct children as 'beings in their own right', knowledgeable and mature (Prout and James, 2015). Whilst there is a body of literature that has begun to apply this understanding to children's experiences of class, these studies are often with older children. The chapter outlines these studies with a consideration of what they may suggest for the exploration of particularly young children's social class (Section 2.5). Throughout the chapter, I trace a series of threads drawn out from the existing literature through four intermediary summaries (Sections 2.2.4, 2.3.3, 2.4.2, 2.5.3).

The chapter concludes with the "invitations" (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 499) presented by the literature reviewed and how these, in partnership with those in Section 3.3 culminate in the rationale for this thesis. Whilst the rationale emerges from across an

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this chapter, the terms 'young children' and 'particularly young children' are used to differentiate relative age-groups in research studies. The former refers to research with children 6-years-old and older whereas the latter refers to children 5-years-old and younger.

amorphous body of literature, for convenience, I have separated it into two core and interrelated points already introduced in Section 1.3:

- 1) Theories of social class, informed by Marxism, have intersected with discourses of developmentalism and innocence in childhood to shape young children's involvement in existing social class research. This has led to a continued focus on developmental outcomes and little exploration of particularly young children's contributions to social class.
- 2) The ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning social class as a theoretical concept, informed by Marxism, make it methodologically problematic to study with particularly young children.

Indeed, these points are difficult to separate, and it is most likely that both have interacted to shape the state of the literature on which this thesis rests. Nevertheless, these points are split out across this chapter and the next: This chapter discusses the substantive literature on researching social class with children (point 1); the following chapter will focus on the theoretical literature relating to social class (point 2). Whilst these points could have been reversed, divided or presented in many other different formations, it is hoped that the initial emphasis on empirical literature assists in framing the theoretical discussion that follows.

## 2.2 Social class in England

Although it has taken on many definitions, social class as a variable of social distinction has commonly been recognised as a constituent of economic and material factors, namely occupational status (Devine et al., 2005). Historically, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Marxist theory, Karl Marx (1888/2008) with his colleague Friedrich Engels theorised social classes as the result of the antagonism between profit and wage labour in Western capitalist economies; namely how those with power – the *bourgeoisie* – exploit those who have only their labour to sell – the *proletariat* or working-class (Callinicos, 2019; Marx, 1888/2008). Whilst models of social stratification pre-date this, the focus of Marxist thought around capitalism has perhaps underpinned its continued use through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Callinicos, 2019).



In their original model, the mode of production – the shape of the economy and resulting occupations – was industrial, however Marxism attempted to provide a broader explanatory model relating different modes to capitalism throughout history (Marx, 1888/2008; Murphy, 2021). Through this relation, the working-classes become alienated from their labour, thus trapping them further in wage-labour relations (Marx, 1888/2008). Thus, Marx (1888/2008) calls the working-class to unite as they have “nothing to lose but their chains” (p. 34); by becoming aware of their exploited position they can revolt against their oppressors (the bourgeoisie) to establish a socialist society (see also Callinicos, 2019).

Changes in the modes of production over the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with the industrial and technological revolutions have led to fierce debate over the relevance of class analysis for understanding contemporary society (Bradley, 2014; Devine et al, 2005). Savage (2003) suggests that towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “de-industrialisation, the eradication of apprenticeship as a distinctive mode of training, and the declining fortunes of trade unions and the Labour movement, meant that the working class was no longer a central reference point in British culture” (p. 537). From their interviews with Mancunians, Savage et al. (2001) found class descriptions that are characterised by hesitancy and a rejection of class in the pursuit of “ordinariness” (p. 876). Whilst this led Savage et al. (2001) to conclude that class is a weak marker of identity, they contend that class still matters. Rather, it is exactly this hesitancy, rejection and ambivalence that characterises class identity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (see also Hey, 2005; Reay, 2006; Savage et al., 2001).

### 2.2.1 Social class and neoliberalism

Walkerdine et al. (2001) link this move away from class (both by individuals and in academia) to the British Government’s attempt to shift towards a narrative of a ‘classless’ society in the 1980s-1990s (see also Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2006; Savage, 2003). Contending that class distinctions are no longer relevant, the British New Labour Government in particular promoted values of individualised responsibility and entrepreneurialism as the tenets of economic success (Ball, 2013; Gewirtz, 2001; Jones et al., 2015; Reay, 2006; Savage, 2003). Symptomatic of the ideology of neoliberalism,

ideas such as free-markets, economic competition, deregulation, consumerism and choice become the pathway to prosperity for all (Gewirtz, 2001; Moss, 2017; Sims, 2017). These principles are suggested to rest on the neoliberal proverb of meritocracy, or the idea that the harder you work, the more you will achieve (Reay, 2006).

Thus, meritocracy sanctifies the notion of hard work as a criterion of success. However, this is at the expense of those who encounter barriers because of their background (hooks, 2000; Reay, 2022). Through ‘pure grit and determination’, Jones et al. (2015) suggests that British Governments, namely Conservative, promote the idea that *anyone* can achieve anything. Jones et al. (2015, p. 6) point out that this utilises “aspiration [as] a rhetorical device that seeks to whitewash a neoliberal economic and political project and the staggering inequalities it produces.” Drawing on Foucault (1978), many academics have highlighted how such a project supports and has been supported by population sciences that encourage measurement, classification, universalisation, normalisation and pathologisation (Ball, 2013; Walkerdine, 2020). In particular, it is the universalisation of middle-class ideals and ways of being, such as high aspirations, that are suggested to have become the norm (Edwards and Power, 2003; Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2006, Skeggs, 2012).

Many academics concur that neoliberalism has insidiously assembled the modern mantle of class rejection whilst simultaneously covering up the tracks of its own construction (Ball, 2013; Bradbury, 2013; Bradley, 2015; Manosalva, 2024; Massumi, 2015; Reay, 2017; Sims, 2017; Tyler, 2013; Walkerdine, 2006, 2019, 2020). Rather than being named, the retreat from class existence has meant that class distinctions have become implicit in societal (middle-class) ‘norms’ and diffused throughout British society’s institutions – such as education – and culture (Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2006; Savage, 2005; Skeggs, 2012; Walkerdine, 2020). For example, through notions of culturally or linguistically ‘deficient’ children as predominantly those who are working-class (Bernstein, 1975/2003; Cushing, 2020; 2021; 2022; Nightingale, 2020) or teachers’ ‘ideal’ UK school-starter as middle-class (Bradbury, 2013; Edwards and Power, 2003). As hooks (2000) recalls, “being outside the in crowd” (p. 27), where the in crowd is always middle-class. These ideas will be explored further in Section 2.3.2.

### 2.2.2 The neoliberal self

Thus, in neoliberal Britain individuals are suggested to be ‘made’ through comparisons to the universal middle-class norms (Walkerdine, 2020). Rose (1999) exposes modern forms of political power that “mak[e] it possible to govern human beings in ways that are compatible with the principles of liberalism and democracy” (p. vii). This is through forms of regulation that *produce* rather than limit individuals’ sense of self:

... however apparently external and implacable may be the constraints, obstacles and limitations that are encountered, each individual must render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realization. (Rose, 1999, p. ix)

Drawing on Foucauldian “governmentality”, Rose (1999, p. 5) links this project of the self back to Marxist critiques of bourgeois individualism, whereby the subject expresses themselves through capitalist means (see also Wyness, 2019). Like a parasite, capitalism is suggested to infiltrate individuals at the level of the soul (Rose, 1999; see also Braidotti, 2011; Massumi, 2015). This creates the impression of agentic constructions of the self, whilst serving the interests of neoliberalism or capitalism (hooks, 2000; Walkerdine, 2003, 2020). For example, hooks (2000) recalls learning that many of her “material longings” (p. 20), such as a memorable “lovely yellow dress” (p. 24), would never be fulfilled due to a lack of money, with her mother disciplining her for morally shallow consumerism. In Section 3.4.4, this conversation is continued from a theoretical standpoint with reference to capitalism in the affective register (Massumi, 2015).

Indeed, Braidotti (2011) suggests that the construction of the neoliberal self is enabled through the commodification of identities “repackaged as acts of self-expression” (p. 285, see also hooks, 2000; Savage, 2003; Skeggs, 2004). Through commodification, individuals can create their identity by consuming products that express their perceived sense of self (Bradley, 2015; Buckingham, 2000; Tyler, 2013; Pilcher, 2011; Pugh, 2009; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017). As Giroux and Pollock (2010) suggest, corporations like Disney “represen[t] the new face of neoliberal power, capable of not merely providing entertainment but also shaping the identities, desires, and subjectivities of millions of people across the globe” (Giroux & Pollock 2010, xv).

Hidden in this ‘freedom’ are the limits of what identities are available to consume in societies, primarily through the mass media (Buckingham, 2000; Leader, 2018; Steinberg, 2011; Wyness, 2019) as well as economic barriers to consumption (hooks, 2000; Pugh, 2011; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Consequently, Baudrillard (2016) suggests that “the managed possession of consumer goods is individualizing and atomizing [and] leads to distinction and differentiation” (p. 5). These serve the neoliberal ideals of competitive individualism (Ball, 2013; Ryan, 2017) and symbiotically entwine self-expression with capitalist consumerism in contemporary societies (R. Butler, 2019; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; hooks, 2000; Savage, 2003; Saltmarsh, 2007).

### 2.2.3 Broadening the definition of class

Ergo, for capitalist societies in particular, social class has moved beyond Marxist occupational roots to become much more multifaceted by definition:

Class is a social category which refers to lived relationships surrounding social arrangement of production, exchange, distribution and consumption. While these may narrowly be conceived as economic relationships, to do with money, wealth and property ... class should be seen as referring to a much broader web of social relationships, including for example, lifestyle, educational experiences, and patterns of residence. (Bradley, 2015, p. 15)

As a result, class can be separated into ‘objective’ measurements (economic and material structures) and subjective experiences (identities or constructions through discourses) (Crompton and Scott, 2005; Devine et al., 2005; Kustatscher, 2015; Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2012), although the two are undoubtedly linked (R. Butler, 2019); for example, through commodified identities (Braidotti, 2011). This is discussed further with a theoretical lens in Section 3.4.4.

Throughout history, subjective experiences of class have been inscribed with value through everyday interactions as well as institutional recognition, creating discourses about what it means to be working-class or middle-class (Cushing, 2022; Walkerdine, 2021). Whilst neoliberalism arguably silences class (Walkerdine, 2020), research by female working-class academics has been instrumental in maintaining a substance to class. Through capturing lived experiences, it is possible to discern how economic or ‘objective’ realities are lived out, felt and reproduced in day-to-day interactions (hooks, 2000; Reay, 2006; Skeggs, 2004; Steedman, 1980, 1990; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine,

2021). Rather than “a set of static and empty positions waiting to be filled by indicators such as employment and housing” (Lawler, 2005, p. 430), class analysis moves into a field which is social, dynamic and characterised by relations and interactions (R. Butler, 2019; Steedman, 1990). As Bourdieu (1987) explains, “the space of objective differences (with regard to economic and cultural capital) finds an *expression* in a symbolic space of visible distinctions” (p. 11, my emphasis).

This suggests that “[c]lass inequalities can no longer be conceived simply in structural terms. They are made and remade at the micro level, *in and through innumerable everyday practices*” (Reay, 2004, p. 1019, my emphasis). Subsequently, class has been argued to be everywhere yet nowhere (Bradley, 2015, p. 45; Savage, 2005, p. 939); it emerges through multifarious micro-practices (Reay, 2004; see also R. Butler, 2019; Skeggs, 2004). Indeed, Savage (2003) suggests that “it is now necessary to invoke a much more subtle kind of class analysis, a kind of forensic, detective work, which involves tracing the print of class in areas where it is faintly written” (pp. 536-537). This “print of class” can be traced to the “unacknowledged normality of the middle class [that] needs to be carefully unpicked and exposed” (Savage, 2003, p. 537; see also Reay, 2004). As such, class analysis can usefully focus on economic differences that are *lived on a symbolic and cultural level* (Bourdieu, 1984/2010; Bradley, 2015; R. Butler, 2019; Reay, 2017; Savage, 2005; Skeggs, 2012).

#### 2.2.3.1 Class as ‘deficit’

Constructing middle-class cultural practices as the valued norm simultaneously creates a pathologised relational “other” (Reay, 2007, p. 1042; Skeggs, 2004; Walkerdine, 2020). Thus, the working-class are defined through a lack of valued norms (value-less) (Reay, 2007), the “negative experience of the dominant symbolic” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 91). Academics have attempted to counter this misrecognition of working-class lifestyles as deficient or lacking, highlighting that this is due to their *symbolic value* rather than intrinsic or ‘objective’ worth (Bradbury, 2013; Cushing, 2020; 2021; 2022; Nightingale, 2020; Skeggs, 2004). For example, Cushing and Snell (2022) detail how Ofsted<sup>3</sup> has conflated intelligence with middle-class Standard English expression. They point to how

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<sup>3</sup> An organisation that monitors standards in UK schools.

“the nonstandardised language practices of students and teachers are heard as impoverished, deficient, and unsuitable for school” (Cushing and Snell, 2022, p. 1). As a result, middle-class pupils who are more likely to speak with a Standard English dialect are suggested to experience more congruence with teaching practices, curricula and assessment criteria and therefore less corrective discipline (Cushing and Snell, 2022; see also Bourdieu, 1991; Rawolle and Lingard, 2022; Streib, 2011).

This has led to a view of class as a “dynamic process which is the site of political struggle” (Lawler, 2005, p. 430) as the working-class compete to establish value (see also Holt et al., 2013; Reay, 2007; Skeggs, 2004). Thus, class is “a co-constitution of experiences in specific circumstances, which are always being made, formed, contested and negotiated within specific relations” (R. Butler, 2019, p. 25; see also Bradley, 2015). R. Butler (2019) suggests that to counter this, “[f]ocusing on *what* has symbolic traction, and under *which* circumstances, enables us to identify which resources can be made legitimate ... within particular cultural systems.” (p. 24, emphasis original; see also Skeggs, 2004). How cultural practices are distinguished and afforded value through “innumerable everyday practices” (Reay, 2004, p. 1019) is therefore of central importance in understanding how class is constructed (Skeggs, 2004).

#### 2.2.3.2 Class as ‘emotions’

Drawing on the classic Marxist term “struggle”, Lawler (2005, p. 430) introduces the nature of these relational distinctions of cultural value as infused with emotions (see also Skeggs, 2004, p. 90). Indeed, through exploring the lived experiences of class, academics have highlighted the affective and emotional qualities in how class is *felt* and *expressed* (R. Butler, 2019; hooks, 2000; Lawler, 2005; Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 2004; Steedman, 1980; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 2016). Whilst affect is usually considered ontogenetically prior to emotions, for example a rapid heartbeat, emotions can be considered their social expression (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2022). For the purposes of this section, the distinction between the two terms is not paramount and so I will adopt the concepts utilised by the authors. However, in Section 3.4.4, this discussion is continued with reference to utilising affect in the theoretical study of class,

and in Section 4.2 I detail the importance of these concepts for an ethnographic study of class.

Walkerdine et al. (2001) describe how young girls growing up in 1980s Britain live out the “marks of [class] difference ... filled with desire, longing, anxiety, pain, defence” (p. 53). Steedman (1980) uses narratives from working-class girls to illustrate the “desire” (p. 18) and “weariness” (p. 18) that pervade their lives, whilst hooks (2000) reflects on similar emotions in her own upbringing, and experiencing “envy” (p. 26) in particular. Similarly, Skeggs (2004) outlines the affect saturating her interviews with working-class women as “the ubiquitous daily experiences of anger and frustration which are carefully contained and not regularly expressed” (p. 89). Elsewhere, Skeggs (2012) describes the shame and pride associated with feelings of ‘respectability’ sought after by working-class women. Conversely, Lawler (2005) describes the disgust inherent in middle-class descriptions of the working-class (see also Tyler, 2008).

The idea of desire is present in Bailey and Graves (2016) suggestion that shopping, a consumerist practice that constructs gendered and classed identities, has become affective through marketing propaganda. Indeed, Massumi (2015) concurs that the translation of capitalism into an affective register means that individuals’ interests *are* capitalist interests and thus infused with genuine “passion” (p. 85) or desire (discussed in Section 3.4.4), for example, children’s desire for branded products (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Pagla and Brennan, 2014; Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011). This is linked to self-expression through consumerism, Braidotti’s (2011) commodified identities “repackaged as acts of self-expression” (p. 285; see also Skeggs, 2004). (Braidotti, 2011; Skeggs, 2004). As discussed in Section 2.2.2, it is impossible to know one’s ‘self’ as, for example, feminine or respectable without capitalist (middle-class) expressions such as certain hairstyles, branded foods or clothing (Skeggs, 2012); symbiotically entwining self-expression with capitalist consumerism (R. Butler, 2019; Savage, 2003; Saltmarsh, 2007).

Thus, across class research, emotion can be suggested to have taken on an ontological quality in that class cannot be *known* without the inclusion of how it is *felt*. “[c]lass is at once profoundly social and profoundly emotional” (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 53).

Indeed, Mazzoli Smith and Todd (2019) point to the “affective dimension” (p. 2) for conceptualising experiences of poverty. They suggest that research focusses more on the structural and contextual issues related to children’s experiences of poverty and learning, often overlooking the felt qualities of these experiences such as coping strategies to avoid shame (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019). Likewise, R. Butler (2019) considers “emotion as a theoretical tool in class analysis” (p. 31), highlighting Australian children’s symbolic and cultural experiences of class-based distinction and differentiation.

Whilst this may suggest a *universal* quality to the study of class, these authors also highlight the importance of situating accounts in their specific contexts to understand the circumstances and possibilities that give rise to these expressions (R. Butler, 2019; Walkerdine et al., 2001; see also Tolia Kelly, 2006). For example, Walker et al. (2013) examine the idea that “shame lies at the ‘irreducible absolutist core’” (p. 215) across lived experiences of poverty. Although shame is present in their interviews across seven countries, Walker et al. (2013) point to the importance of culture in determining the forms through which shame is experienced, for example, privately, publicly, individually or collectively.

## 2.2.4 Summary

Throughout this section, I have attempted to outline aspects in the study of class that have found iterations throughout this thesis. Most notably, this is the idea that understandings of class have shifted into the social domain, with an emphasis on how economic conditions are lived out on a symbolic and cultural level (Bradley, 2015; R. Butler, 2019). This emphasises subjective experiences of “innumerable everyday practices” (Reay, 2004, p. 1019) at the micro-level, rather than macro-, ‘objective’ structures as class was conceived by Marx (1888/2008) and Engels. These practices focus on distinction, where individuals draw on available discourses to inform value-judgements that (re)make middle-class norms (Reay, 2004; Savage, 2003). These comparisons can construct the working-classes as a ‘deficient’ relational “other” (Reay, 2004, p. 1019) and thus, studies must endeavour to expose what has symbolic traction under which circumstances (R. Butler, 2019, p. 24). Such symbolic judgements are



likely to construct class by emotional/affectual ways of knowing (R. Butler, 2019; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

Whilst the concept of 'identity' is replete throughout much of the class research in this section, I prefer the more general term "experiences" as it encompasses value judgements without adhering to myths of "consistent life narratives" (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a, p. 23) that may not be universal. Nevertheless, I acknowledge the value of this concept both in existing research, and as a supplementary term to describe constructions related to the self within the broader framework of experiences. Similarly, the terms neoliberalism and capitalism are used almost interchangeably in this section to denote economic structures with corollary values. I understand neoliberalism to be a latent form of capitalism, more commonly characterised through principles rather than occupational structures (as in capitalism) (Sims, 2017). However, as the focus of this thesis is on the values associated with capitalism (and neoliberalism) rather than occupations, these terms are utilised in much the same way throughout.

## 2.3 Social class and children

The shift in class research to recognise individuals' lived experiences highlighted groups of people who were initially neglected by Marxist theory. As Marx (1888/2008) based his theory on wage-labour relations, it overlooked those whose labour did not share an explicit or quantifiable relationship with wages (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005; Wyness, 2019); namely anyone other than working men in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This critique was pioneered by first wave feminists in calls to recognise women's experiences under capitalism through their unpaid labour in the home (Crompton, 1998; hooks, 2000). Similarly, Marxism failed to conceptualise the experiences of children in original theoretical models and since, there has been a continued debate around how to theorise children's positioning when the majority (in Western societies) do not engage in paid work (Ferguson, 2017; Oldman, 1995; Wyness, 2019).

From an 'objective' class standpoint concerned with occupation and wage-labour structures, children's 'work' has been considered as unpaid labour in the home (Solberg, 2015), as schoolwork (Qvortrup, 1993), as emotionally-valuable assets for adults (Gabriel, 2017; Ferguson, 2017), as economically exploited in the childcare

economy (Oldman, 1995) and as play (Ferguson, 2017). More generally, class research has considered how capitalist modes of production have shaped childhoods (Ba', 2021; Bhattacharya, 2017; Bradley and Corwyn, 2001; Qvortrup, 1993, 2009). In doing so, authors draw attention to the “adult-centrism” (Punch, 2020, p. 130) that shapes considerations of what constitutes work, as well as what society considers as appropriate for children to spend their time doing (Morrow, 1996; Solberg, 2015; Wall, 2022).

Indeed, academia has struggled to conceptualise children’s social class from a perspective that does not prioritise adult-centric measures, such as occupation or salary (Hill and Tisdall, 2014; Street, 2021). As explored in Section 2.3.3, the focus of class analysis on the symbolic and cultural expressions of class has enabled a consideration of alternative conceptualisations of class (R. Butler, 2019; Bourdieu, 1984/2010; Lawler, 2005). Focusing on lived experiences of class has shifted attention from ‘objective’ measures of class (Skeggs, 2004), reconceptualizing it as emotional (Walkerdine et al., 2001) with working-class value (Skeggs, 2004; Reay, 2007), and as experienced in complex and varied ways by *all* who live in society, not just those who work. Nevertheless, research into *children’s* social class experiences continues to be defined by adult-centric measures that are believed to be inherently ‘objective’ and pre-empt adult discourses of class (Kustatscher, 2015).

Throughout this chapter, I will reflect on the dominance of this adult-centric paradigm when examining existing literature. This is not to suggest that this critique invalidates the research; I consider what can still be learned about the study of children’s social class from these studies. In this next section, I present the discourses of childhood that have perhaps contributed to this continued theoretical oversight towards children’s experiences of class (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019). I suggest that two themes feature prominently across research into young children’s social class: a focus on developmental outcomes in relation to social class; and an exclusion of particularly young children more generally. This section begins with more recent studies in the last decade which have sought to explore particularly young children’s *understanding* of social class. Following this, prominent research in the field of social class in childhood

will be discussed, reflecting on how the discourses of childhood discussed often frame social class in childhood through adult measures or biological development.

The sections that follow create a bricolage of what it may be possible to learn from existing research. Section 2.3.2.1 considers what we have learnt from developmental studies of social class with particularly young children. Whilst this challenges some of the discourses concerning maturity that have excluded young children from class research, it leaves others, such as developmentalism, intact. Sections 2.3.2.2-2.3.2.3 outline prominent research into children's social class more generally, illustrating how adult-centric measures and the discourses of development can still be detected. This will be followed by Section 2.4 which will present exemplary research into particularly young children's social lives (3-4-years-old), albeit with a focus on gender, race and class. More recent research into children's social class has challenged adult-centric measures and developmental dominance by focusing on children's constructions of class (see Section 2.5.2). However, this is usually with older children thus leaving implicit notions of maturity (development) unchallenged. Every section concludes with an intermediary summary of what can be learned from each body of research and what questions remain unanswered.

### 2.3.1 Discourses of childhood

Challenging the traditional view of childhood as biologically innate, Prout and James (2015) posed a simple question to consider how childhood might instead be socially constructed: "what is the child?" (p. 1). In answering this question, responses can draw on common-sense, sociological, historical, educational, psychological, medical or biological boundaries that characterise notions of the child (Jenks, 2005, p. 10). These boundaries were all drawn by different influences over time, their repetition and institutionalisation composing different ideas which have come to constitute 'common-sense' thinking about children (Prout and James, 2015). As such, whereas childhood was perhaps previously considered universal based on biological 'truths', research has begun to challenge these notions through a deconstruction of the discourses of childhood (Burman, 2008; Corsaro, 2015; Jenks, 2005).

James et al. (1998) link their account of historical constructions of childhood with the evolution of different religious and academic fields of thought. They begin with the 'evil child' rooted in 17<sup>th</sup> century Christian Puritanism followed by the 'innocent child' rooted in the romanticism of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (James et al., 1998; see also Hendrick, 2015; Steedman, 1990). In the latter model, children are considered innocent in need of protection, as pure iterations of the human form (James et al., 1998; see also Jenks, 2005). These discourses were followed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the 'naturally-developing child' promoted through developmental psychology, and the 'unconscious child' which drew on Freudian psychoanalysis (James et al., 1998). Through these discourses, Burman (2008) highlights that children were mostly conceptualised as in need or on their way to a more-developed place (adulthood): innocence in need of protection; naivety in need of education; irrationality in need of intervention; or wickedness in need of salvation (see also James et al., 1998; Steedman, 1990). In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, these discourses have been challenged by the children's rights movement which will be discussed in Section 2.4.

Hendrick (2015) emphasises conscious efforts to promote the universality of an 'ideal' childhood to support children's journey to a 'more-developed' state. This was in terms of family domesticity and parental discipline versus their absence in the form of childhood delinquency, as well as the institutionalisation of childhood through mass schooling towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Alongside remediating this delinquency, mass schooling physically separated children from society and in doing so distinguished them from adults (Hendrick, 2015). Mass schooling is also noted by other authors as a pivotal movement in the history of childhood: towards the privatisation of family life (Ariès, 1962); in terms of institutionalising power and discipline over children (Foucault, 1977); in legalising the dominant discourse of dependency (Burman, 2008); as an aspect of industrialised and gendered relations (Burman, 2017; Thorne, 1987); and in spatially separating children from adults (James et al., 1998; Millei and Kallio, 2018). Thus, mass schooling in the form of children attending school buildings away from their home can be considered an important spatial and material contributor in the construction of what it means to be a child (Steedman, 1990).

It was this idea of children's *futures* as adults which, during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, gained significant traction in the concept of development or developmentalism within developmental psychology (Jenks, 2005; Steedman, 1990; Wyness, 2019; Walkerdine, 2003). Such traction may have been ontologically bolstered by positivism, universal rationality and quest for empirical evidence which is also suggested to have grown out of the Enlightenment period in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Burman, 2008; Wyness, 2019). Burman (2008) suggests that developmentalism is rooted in the evolutionary paradigm, popularised by Charles Darwin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which assumed that young children were biological organisms endowed with innate reflexes to secure their survival. The aim was thus to understand the individual child's cognitive development as precursory or a deficient version of 'full' or 'complete' adult development (Burman, 2008; Hill and Tisdall, 2014). The child was abstracted from their social environment and studied as the physical form of developmental sequences which structure the 'universal' experiences of all children (Burman, 2008; Prout and James, 2015; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005; Steinberg, 2011).

For the study of childhood, these discourses of innocence and developmentalism, alongside the prevalence of developmental psychology, have intertwined to "sustain certain truths which constitute different "regimes of truth"" (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984, p. 74). These 'truths' are in a reciprocal relationship with common-sense thinking and a multitude of policies and practices that define and regulate what 'normal' children and 'good' parenting should be (Gewirtz, 2001; Reay, 2008; Vincent et al., 2004). For example, notions of 'good' parenting in the early 2000s were linked to children's educational development via parental involvement. Reay (2008) points to the Blair Government which placed a growing list of responsibilities on parents in relation to their children's education, such as supporting learning at home (see also Gewirtz, 2001; Wilson and Worsley, 2021).

By institutionalising universal norms which define children's appropriate educational development, "gendered, racialised and classed notions of parent are not acknowledged, rendering inequalities existing between parents invisible" (Reay, 2008, p. 643). The translation of these discourses is therefore damaging for families who do

not fit the norm, particularly those from “majority world”<sup>4</sup> (Punch and Tisdall, 2012, p. 241) contexts due to the dominance of Western thought (see also Pérez and Saavedra, 2017). Thus, children are constructed in ways that ‘makes sense’ to middle-class thought (Steinberg, 2011).

Similarly, the notion of children’s immature development is one that has been intrinsically tied to discourses of innocence in childhood throughout history, creating a moral imperative in childhood (Meyer, 2007; Steinberg, 2011). Wyness (2019) explains how these childhood discourses have protected – and excluded – children from aspects of society which they are developmentally portioned as ‘too young to understand’ or should be ‘blissfully unaware’ of due to their innocence (see also Burman, 2017). For example, paid work (Hendrick, 2015; Boyden, 2015), sexuality (Blaise, 2005; Hall, 2020; Tembo, 2022; Steedman, 1990; Steinberg, 2011), violence (Millei and Kallio, 2018) or economic disadvantage (Hill and Tisdall, 2014). However, as Meyer (2007) explains, these discourses are used to justify ‘protecting’ (excluding) children from this information which creates children who are not informed and thus, vulnerable. This vulnerability is then “read back as a sign of innate innocence” (Meyer, 2007, p. 91).

### *2.3.1.1 Tangling with children’s social class*

It is these discourses of developmentalism and innocence that I suggest have fundamentally shaped the study of, and children’s involvement with, social class research. In the following sections, the majority of the studies that characterise social class research focus on children’s developmental outcomes in relation to their class background (Bernstein, 1975/2003; Howard et al., 2018; Horwitz et al., 2014; Lareau, 2011; Paulus and Essler, 2020; Rauscher et al., 2017; Shutts et al., 2013; Shutts et al., 2016). Whilst these studies contribute a developmental perspective to the study of class, this retains the notion of children as ‘deficient adults’ whose lives in the present are justified by their future (Hill and Tisdall, 2014; Steedman, 1990; Wyness, 2019). Moreover, a focus on children’s developmental trajectories (and innocence) can be argued to be rooted in universal notions of childhood (Burman, 2008), which as Reay

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<sup>4</sup> Punch and Tisdall (2012, p. 241) use the term “minority world” to refer to the comparatively small countries - in terms of geography and location - in the West that have dominated academic thought in the ‘majority’ world.

(2008) suggests overlook the plethora of gendered, racialised and classed childhoods that exist.

These developmental aspects are often tied up within the concept of socialisation, or the idea that adults/families teach children how to behave in societies. Ba' (2021) highlights how the dominance of this concept has created a general myopia in childhood research. He suggests that socialisation as a social pattern should be treated as symptomatic of a construction of childhood – the transmission of resources for future outcomes – rather than an innate truth of all childhoods (Ba', 2021; see also Gabriel, 2017). Likewise, Corsaro (2020) highlights how socialisation “has an *individualistic* and *forward-looking* connotation that is inescapable” (p. 22, my emphasis), which arguably always leaves discourses of developmentalism intact. Other academics have also identified how the unfailing acceptance of socialisation has problematised conceptions of children's agency and excluded them from research which focuses on how they produce, rather than reproduce, society's norms (Buckingham, 2000; Connolly, 1998; Thorne, 1993). Section 2.4 reviews research into young children's social lives that has challenged this, reconstructing them as social agents.

Due to being read through discourses of innocence, I suggest that particularly young children have generally been excluded from research looking into their experiences of social class from a non-developmental perspective (see Kustatscher, 2015 for an exception). As Iqbal et al. (2017) explain, there is a commonly held belief “that young children do not perceive social difference nor assign it any social significance due to their *'innocent', unformed nature*” (p. 135, my emphasis). This discourse of innocence can be suggested to have ‘protected’ (and thus excluded) young children from aspects that they should not be morally tarnished by (Hill and Tisdall, 2014; Meyer, 2007; Wyness, 2019). In Section 2.4.1, this discourse of innocence will be challenged by existing research into particularly young children's social lives with a focus on gender, race and ethnicity.

## 2.3.2 Social class research with children

### 2.3.2.1 *Developmental research*

As implied by the discourses of childhood presented above, there is a notable body of research that approaches social class with particularly young children from a developmental perspective. These studies have used experimental trials to establish the existence or development of social class as a concept within children as young as 4-years-old (Howard et al., 2018; Horwitz et al., 2014; Paulus and Essler, 2020; Rauscher et al., 2017; Shutts et al., 2013; Shutts et al., 2016). For example, Rauscher et al. (2017) interviewed 4-6-year-olds to ascertain how they conceived of social class differences by asking the questions: “Imagine a family who has a lot of money. How could you tell they have a lot of money?” and “How does this family compare to your own family? What would your family do if they had a lot of money?” (p. 103). They found that across two years, children became more likely to associate money with differences in quality and value judgements, and less likely to rely on verbal proof of wealth (Rauscher et al., 2017).

Similarly, Shutts et al. (2016) conducted three studies to “prob[e] whether children use cues that are commonly associated with wealth differences in society to guide their consideration of others” (p. 1). To do this, they showed 4-5-year-old participants pictures of two fictional children who varied according to wealth, conveyed through “items that were new and branded” (Shutts et al., 2016, p. 8). The children were then asked questions relating to who was more likely to: own certain items or have “a house that was large and well-maintained [and] a new car” (Shutts et al., 2016, p. 9); be more popular (have more friends); or competent (colour pictures correctly) (Shutts et al., 2016). The participants were also asked which of the two fictional children they would rather be friends with (Shutts et al., 2016). From a series of trials, Shutts et al. (2016) concluded that 4-6-year-olds preferred the child associated with high-wealth cues and also thought that this child was more likely to be popular and competent.

Whilst these studies usefully demonstrate that 4-5-year-old children are able to draw on ideas and concepts associated with social class, they leave unanswered questions of how these ideas take effect in their day-to-day social lives (despite their claims).



Arguably, this is because the use of fictional children/families in experiments (Horwitz et al., 2014; Rauscher et al., 2017; Shutts et al., 2016) is problematic when making inferences about children's social behaviour. Imagined 'children' are abstracted from all other contextual cues that usually surround children at school, thus creating an artificial and sanitised replication of a child's social environment (Dweck, 2013). In some of these studies (Horwitz et al., 2014; Shutts et al., 2011), children are asked to choose between two options, referred to as forced-choice experiments, exacerbating the context of artificiality. Despite this, findings are extrapolated to the children's behaviour in their day-to-day lives where, in reality, they make intricate and nuanced decisions against a backdrop of complex social information (Burman, 2008; Dweck, 2013).

Such trials usually reflect normative definitions of wealth that are adult-centric, for example, housing (Shutts et al., 2016) or landscaped lawns and new cars (Horwitz et al., 2014). Even in studies that allow children to share their conceptions of social class (Howard et al., 2018; Rauscher et al., 2017), these studies are looking for the individual development of adult-defined measures of social class or wealth. In their absence, studies rooted in developmental psychology conclude that children are not yet cognitively capable of such understandings (for an example, see Horwitz et al., 2014), with the ultimate 'goal' being the adult-version of the concept. This overlooks how classed meanings may be produced by children whilst reinforcing discourses of development that focus on their immaturity (Danby and Baker, 1988; Burman, 2017).

### *2.3.2.2 Social and cultural research*

#### *2.3.2.2.1 Language*

Approaching class from a more social perspective, Basil Bernstein (1970, 1975/2003) created a sociolinguistic theory which focused on "the reproduction of class relationships as these shape the structure of communication, and its social basis in the family" (p. 1). Through his observations of children in England, he posited that working-class children use a "restricted code" (Bernstein, 1975/2003, p. 4) to communicate, typified by its predictability, literal meaning and context-bound nature (Bernstein, 1975/2003). Conversely, Bernstein (1975/2003) explained that middle-class children use "elaborated codes" (p. 6) that are flexible, capable of deploying abstract ideas and

utilising universal meanings. Bernstein (1975/2003) suggested that these codes, born out of class-based lifestyle experiences, are what leads to different educational outcomes for children from different social backgrounds. Rosen (1974) suggests that “it is difficult to exaggerate” the almost universal acceptance of Bernstein’s ideas for child development. Indeed, 40-years-later, Nightingale (2019) illustrates how these ideas are present in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most notably in their misuse to justify Michael Gove’s<sup>5</sup> policies targeting ‘cultural deprivation’ as a panacea for low working-class achievement in schools (see also Cushing, 2022).

Bernstein’s (1975/2003) work usefully highlights class-based differences in children’s communication styles. Likewise, his seminal paper (Bernstein, 1970) questions the validity of this knowledge in different contexts, for example: “*The context in which children learn is usually a middle class one*. Should we try to coax them to that ‘standard’ or seek what is valid in their own lives?” (Bernstein, 1970, p. 344, my emphasis). Such ideas have been fruitfully explored with reference to institutional bias towards certain styles of communication (Cushing, 2021, 2022; Streib, 2011; Tizard and Hughes, 2002), highlighting the challenges for working-class learners in middle-class contexts (see also Reay, 2017).

Despite this, Bernstein’s (1975/2003) concepts have been critiqued for reinforcing a deficit view of working-class children, both in terms of development as well as culture (Nightingale, 2019; Rosen, 1974). Through the monikers of “restricted” and “elaborated” code (Bernstein, 1975/2003, pp. 4-6), he was suggested to overlook intra-group differences within class to reify discourses of the ‘deficient’ working-class (Reay, 2006; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 2021). Likewise, his focus on the development of children’s language skills and educational outcomes illustrates the discourse of developmentalism that dominates education in general, and thus class-based research with children (see also Tizard and Hughes, 2002). Explicit in this are children’s futures as adults enabled by language transmitted through socialisation within the family (Bernstein, 1975/2003). This retains the idea that children’s class is only visible through adults and in relation to their ‘complete’ development (Burman, 2008).

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<sup>5</sup> Secretary of State for Education in England from 2010 to 2014.

#### 2.3.2.2.2 Culture

Also using the concept of socialisation, Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1984/2010, 1987, 1991) work attempted to explain the symbolic and cultural reproduction of class inequalities in society through examining the variation in their social and cultural lifestyles. Across his career, he contributed a host of theoretical concepts reciprocally developed through empirical work, intended to explain how and why people of all social classes – even those who may be oppressed – continue to reproduce their own domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Most notable are his concepts of: “capitals” (Bourdieu, 1984/2010, p. 73) to describe the economic, social and cultural resources available to individuals; “habitus” (p. 86), a concept that incorporates individuals' class-based dispositions and ways of being in social practices; and “field(s)” (p. 86), a social space analogous to a ‘game’ in which individuals compete over capital (Bourdieu, 1984/2010). Bourdieu (1984/2010) theorised these concepts as the underlying explanatory principles behind ‘practice’ which describes the patterns of performances seen in social life, giving the formula “[ (habitus) (capital) ] + field = practice” (p. 95).

These concepts have been used extensively and productively to explore children's experiences of social class in the field of education (Alanen and Siisiäinen, 2011; Alanen et al., 2015; R. Butler, 2019; Connolly, 2006; English and Bolton, 2015; Murphy and Costa, 2015; Reay, 1995, 2006; Streib, 2011; Skeggs, 2004). For example, Alanen and Siisiäinen (2011) demonstrate the effectiveness of conceptualising Bourdieusian fields in the study of young children's (re)production of inequalities. By separating social space into fields, it is possible to see how other capitals (cultural, social and symbolic) may take precedence where economic capital is not directly used; such as between children in a classroom rather than adults in a workplace (Alanen and Siisiäinen, 2011; see also Pugh, 2011).

In Bourdieusian models, the process of cultural distinction usually comes at the expense of a relational “other” (Reay, 2007, p. 1042; Kostet, 2021; Nightingale, 2019). Bourdieu suggests that these acts can be considered forms of symbolic violence which, as part of the struggle over symbolic capital, make “the reproduction and transformation of structures of domination” possible (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 15). Bourdieu

defines symbolic violence as “violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 167). Reay (1995, 2005, 2017) utilised Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic violence to show how the capitals of working-class children, such as accents or certain forms of knowledge, are continually marked as ‘deficient’ through social interaction (see also Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Edwards and Power, 2003). Thus, Reay (2007) explains how continued symbolic violence towards the working-class defines them as value-less in opposition to the middle-class; they are their relational “other” (Reay, 2007, p. 1042).

Criticisms of Bourdieu’s work point to the over-emphasis on structural determination and lack of theoretical consideration given to individuals’ agency in shaping the processes of social reproduction (Girling, 2004; Kustatscher, 2015). His theory is posited to offer a useful framework for understanding how those who *have* are able to *gain more* (the middle-classes), but at the expense of the working-classes who are resigned to adapt or remain value-less (Skeggs, 2004; see also Holt et al., 2013). As a result, Bourdieusian frameworks are critiqued for characterising the working-classes as inherently lacking, deficient or deprived due to their incongruence with the dominant middle-class norms (Skeggs, 2004). If left unchallenged, conceptualisations of capitals, such as Bernstein’s (1975/2003) ‘elaborated’ language skills, may reinforce norms that advantage middle-class families (Cushing, 2021, 2020; Nightingale, 2019), misrecognising working-class families as ‘deficient’ rather than alternative (Reay, 2006).

Nevertheless, Corsaro (2015, p. 10) suggests that Bourdieu is actually “on a track that usefully leads us away from determinism” and makes space for the active child. He suggests that it is an overreliance on cultural *reproduction* which leads to determinism (Corsaro, 2015); in other words, a lack of awareness of how the child co-constructs the meaning of culture. Indeed, more recent research has shown children’s innovation through their negotiation and activation of capitals in different fields, both symbolic and otherwise (Alanen et al., 2015; Reay, 1995; Pugh, 2011; Welply, 2017). For example, Reay (1995) exemplified how one child befriended adults in a primary school and focused on schoolwork as a way of overcoming social exclusion from her peers. Whilst Bourdieu has historically been critiqued for determinism in the reproduction of inequalities (Girling, 2004), these studies show this process is not immutable through

utilising his concepts of fields and habitus; children can and do actively remake inequalities in other ways.

Such studies offer interesting invitations in how children's social class may be considered otherwise, through a myriad of cultural resources where value is constructed by *children's action* (Alanen and Siisiäinen, 2011; Alanen et al., 2015; Pugh, 2011; Reay, 1995; Vuorisalo and Alanen, 2015; Welply, 2017). This enables us to think beyond purely adult measures of social class, such as salary and occupation, and define these according to what is valued by children in their social contexts where economic capital may not be directly present. However, Bourdieu's theoretical concepts rest on the transmission of resources from parents, defined by their social class, to children. Consequently, this may reify certain practices observed within classed populations, for example conversation skills, and then look for their effect (Kustatscher, 2015). Alternatively, without pre-defining children according to their parents' cultural resources, it may be possible to invert this logic and consider how different aspects of children's lifestyles come to be indicative of classed differences.

#### 2.3.2.2.3 Parenting

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, Annette Lareau's (2011) work into the classed parenting practices of families in the US also rests on socialisation as the transmission of resources for future development. Utilising ethnographic methods, she observed families categorised as middle-class, working-class and poor (Lareau, 2011). Lareau (2011) characterised middle-class parenting practices as "concerted cultivation" (p. 1), strategies which involve middle-class parents (usually mothers) creating lots of opportunities or experiences to progress their children's development. Conversely, she suggested that working-class parents adopted an "accomplishment of natural growth" (Lareau, 2011, p. 1) model which was based on the idea that children will thrive if parents provide the conditions to grow like love, food and safety. In addition, Lareau (2011) describes the differing consequential effects of these parenting practices, for example, middle-class children's sense of entitlement or children's varied reactions to school disciplinary strategies (see also Edwards and Power, 2003; Horvat et al., 2003).

Lareau's typology considers how cultural capitals come to be valued within certain contexts and thus social norms that may exclude or overlook different lifestyle experiences of parenting practices (Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Nelson and Schutz, 2007); see Brooker's (2003, p. 118) "parental ethnotheories" for a similar example in a UK context. However, her work – like Bourdieu's – has been critiqued in ways that relate to the discourses of class and childhood reviewed in this thesis. Firstly, Lareau's work has been accused of constructing working-class families as deficient, as their initial 'lack' of cultural resources leads to further 'deprivation' (Holt et al., 2013; Skeggs, 2004). Secondly, her emphasis on socialisation without the consideration of children's perspectives positions children as *receivers* of cultural resources, "viewed as being passive objects" (Wilson and Worsley, 2021, p. 774) rather than as agentic. This retains a focus on future-orientated discourses of childhood whilst reinforcing the view that social class is only accessible to children through top-down parenting practices.

Nevertheless, like Bourdieu's work, Lareau's concepts have more recently been applied in ways that challenge some of the original critiques. Hadley (2009) challenges the parent-child determinism of socialisation present in Lareau's original study. By including the contributions of children's peer culture to this process, Hadley (2009) "challenge[s] the claims that experts make about the link between middle-class parenting practices and negative outcomes for youth socialization [*sic*]" (p. 7). Hadley (2009) demonstrates how 5-9-year-old children "build a creative, Pokémon-centered peer culture" (p. 6) that resists their parents attempts to guide their socialisation (see also Tudge, 2008 for a focus on children's contributions to socialisation). Similarly, Calarco (2014, 2018) highlighted how middle-class pupils' advantages at school are not just a result of institutional middle-class bias and congruent parenting practices. Through interviews with pupils, Calarco (2018) illuminated how their agentic negotiation of classroom opportunities was instrumental in securing their advantage, beyond the patterns of parenting practices observed.

Streib (2011) attempts to show how 4-year-olds are active in their reproduction of class differences through an examination of their linguistic styles. Echoing Bernstein (2003) and drawing on the social reproduction typology of Bourdieu (1977) and Lareau (2011), Streib (2011) contrasts the classroom communication styles of upper-middle-class and

working-class pre-schoolers. Similar to Calarco (2018), she illustrates how upper-middle-class children dominate adult attention in the classroom through how they “speak, interrupt, ask for help, and argue” (Streib, 2011, p. 337). This “effectively silences working-class students” (Streib, 2011, p. 337) leading to more language development opportunities for upper-middle-class children. Whilst Streib’s research demonstrates how class can take effect in the day-to-day lives of particularly young children, it retains a focus on development and socialisation via language skills. Moreover, Kustatscher (2015) emphasises Streib’s “vocabulary of deficit and loss” (p. 30) when describing the working-class children, serving to reinforce normative definitions of valued capitals and reproduce discourses of the ‘deprived poor’ (see also Bradley, 2014; Skeggs, 2004).

### *2.3.2.3 Shifting the focus*

Walkerdine et al. (2001) document the gendered and classed experiences of young girls growing up from 4-years-old in 1980s Britain. Walkerdine et al. (2001) describe the parenting practices of mothers in the study when the girls are 4-5-years-old. They observed how middle-class mothers would often turn domestic work into educative play, such as a lesson about magnification when cleaning out the fish tank, teaching their daughters to advocate for their own point of view in the process (Walkerdine et al., 2001). The authors’ broader interest in subjectivities, as the identities available from discourses, usefully shifts the focus of their work from children’s development (via parenting strategies). Instead, they consider how these parenting strategies create opportunities for the girls to construct their selves in different ways, for example as independent (Walkerdine et al., 2001).

Their focus on subjectivities as self-invention drew on the importance of consumption for capitalism, converting self-expression into a commodified product (Walkerdine et al., 2001; see also Braidotti, 2011; hooks, 2000) as in the neoliberal self presented in Section 2.2.2 (see also Rose, 1999). In doing so, Walkerdine et al. (2001) challenge previous readings of class as a purely economic category, instead they “understand it as deeply implicated in the production of subjectivity, as written on the body and mind.” (p. 24). The authors are careful not to reify working-class as an essentialist identity but

instead consider what is symbolically-invested in the discourses that construct class (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Thus, whilst class undoubtedly has an economic aspect, Walkerdine et al., (2001) consider how class “produces signs whose names can only ever be whispered” (p. 19) through their translation into the girls’ identities, valued cultural practices and norms (see also Bradley, 2015).

Importantly, Walkerdine et al. (2001) incorporated the girls’ perspectives through interviews, challenging discourses that had previously constructed children’s class through developmental markers (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019). This was only as the girls got older; the classed experiences of girls at 4-years-old were primarily conceptualised through parenting strategies. Thus, Walkerdine et al.’s (2001) book was a landmark study in challenging the idea that class is not applicable to the lives of children (beyond their development) by considering children’s classed *subjectivities* as a result of their lifestyle experiences. Nevertheless, particularly young children’s perspectives are not directly included, leaving their experiences implicit in the parenting strategies observed.

Complimentary with this is the work of Stockstill (2021). She explores how rules around personal property in US pre-schools creates differing conditions for 4-year-olds’ self-expression along classed lines (Stockstill, 2021). Employing an ethnographic approach, Stockstill (2021) examined the experiences of children in a middle-class pre-school serving a predominantly white demographic, contrasted with a pre-school serving “poor children of color [*sic*]” (Stockstill, 2021, p. 6). She explored rules around personal property, such as toys or clothing, and found that whilst the middle-class setting encouraged children to bring personal property from home, this was forbidden in the poorer setting due to a risk of loss (Stockstill, 2021).

These differing rules meant that white middle-class children could assert their individuality through personal property, such as branded toys, and use it as a resource for negotiating friendships and control amongst peers in the classroom (Stockstill, 2021). Stockstill (2021) describes this expression of individuality as congruent with dominant capitalist cultural norms around consumption for self-expression (see also Braidotti, 2011; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Walkerdine et al.,



2001). Conversely, poorer children could not access this form of self-expression as they were not able to bring items from home into school due to the pre-school rules.

Stockstill (2021) suggests that such rules – although an attempt to safeguard property – reinforces scarcity within poorer children’s lives.

This fairly unique focus on class in the day-to-day lives of 4-year-olds suggests the specific ways in which inequalities matter to them, through the advantages associated with personal property in pre-school settings (Stockstill, 2021). Stockstill (2021) demonstrates how institutional rules regarding personal property, as well as classroom practices such as ‘show-and-tell’<sup>6</sup> support these norms of self-expression through material property. Thus, her work recognises the material aspect of class experiences, by “situating material objects within interactions” (p. 2) to “attend to the material side of daily life” (p. 2). This acknowledges a critique raised by Walkerdine et al. (2001, p. 32), that there is a “stubborn unwillingness” to appreciate the constraints on who can and cannot ‘consume’ (see also Fox and Aldred, 2022, p. 506; Reay, 1998), much like hooks’ (2000) unfulfilled desire for the yellow dress (p. 24). Identities, subjectivities or acts of self-expression will not be open to all in the same way (Skeggs, 2012; Walkerdine et al., 2001), particularly those that rely on capitalist consumption (Baudrillard, 2016; Giroux and Pollock, 2010). Stockstill (2021) recognises the importance of personal property for young children in their day-to-day lives, as an ingredient in constructing their class experiences with peers. In doing so, Stockstill (2021) illuminates how class *is* present in the social lives of particularly young children.

Nevertheless, as Stockstill (2021) herself states, her study aims to “enhanc[e] the literature on social *reproduction*” (p. 4, my emphasis). She categorised the children’s class according to their participation at pre-schools that serve different demographics and then explored their different experiences (Stockstill, 2021). Whilst the children’s social actions are considered, this is in terms of the *effect* of their class on their classroom lives which retains the one-way deterministic logic of socialisation already critiqued (Connolly, 1998; Corsaro, 2020; Thorne, 1993).

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<sup>6</sup> A classroom practice where children are invited to show their peers a personal item and tell them about it.

### 2.3.3 Summary

Thus, whilst discourses of development and innocence have characterised much of the existing literature into children's social class, these studies still offer many useful insights into this topic. Firstly, Section 2.3.2.1 illustrates that children as young as 4-years-old have an understanding of (adult) ideas associated with social class (Howard et al., 2018; Horwitz et al., 2014; Paulus and Essler, 2020; Rauscher et al., 2017; Shutts et al., 2013; Shutts et al., 2016). However, the focus on cognitive development in experimental studies makes inferences to children's social lives problematic (Burman, 2017; Dweck, 2013).

Secondly, prominent research into children's social class has usefully demonstrated the different symbolic and cultural values afforded to certain class practices loosely arranged into language, culture and parenting (with overlaps). Whilst Bernstein (1975/2003), Bourdieu (1977, 1984/2010) and (Lareau, 2011) have been critiqued for determinism, denigrating working-class culture and normative middle-class definitions of capitals, more recently their frameworks have been reworked in attempts to include children's actions in legitimising certain resources (Alanen and Siisiäinen, 2011; Alanen et al., 2015; Calarco, 2014, 2018; Hadley, 2009; Streib, 2011; Welply, 2017). This hints at ways that children's social class can be reconceptualised beyond purely adult measures, according to what is valued by children in their social contexts where economic capital may not be directly present (Alanen and Siisiäinen, 2011; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Hadley, 2009; Pugh, 2011; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Stockstill, 2021).

## 2.4 Young children as social agents

As the literature in the previous section suggests, since the late 1990s, there has been a steadily growing evidence base into young children's agentic social work more broadly (James et al., 1998; Prout and James, 2015). Strengthened by the post-modern turn towards multiple truths, the *new paradigm for the sociology of childhood* in the 1990s positioned young children as worthy of study in their own right; challenging discourses of futurity and shifting their ontology from "becomings" to "beings" (James et al., 1998; see also Steinberg, 2011). In their new paradigm, Prout and James (2015, p. 7) put forward five tenets: childhood as socially constructed; childhood as a variable of social

analysis; childhood as worthy of study in its own right; ethnography as a useful methodology; and the double hermeneutic of childhood (studying the construction of childhood contributes to its reconstruction). Buttressed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) established in 1989, childhood research sought to prioritise the study of children's lives in and of themselves as well as for children to be 'heard' in decisions which affect their lives (Steinberg, 2011). Although both problematic in their own ways (see Ba' 2021, Boyden, 2015; Burman, 2008; Prout, 2011, Wyness, 2019), the new paradigm and the UNCRC are arguably landmarks highlighting an ontological and epistemological shift in the field of childhood studies.

Taking up this handle, the work of William Corsaro (1979, 1992, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2012, 2015, 2020) has been instrumental in documenting how children as young as 3-years-old actively create their own "peer cultures" in education/childcare establishments. Perhaps conceptually analogous with Bourdieu's "fields", Corsaro (2015) defines "peer cultures" as a "stable set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and concerns that children produce and share in interaction with peers" (p. 122). Through extensive ethnographic work in the US and Italy, Corsaro (2015) demonstrated that whilst children may take some understandings from adult culture, they do not simply copy these norms. Instead, children innovatively apply certain practices from adult culture to both understand and create meaning in their peer culture (Corsaro and Eder, 1990; Corsaro, 2015). For example, children may utilise basic narrative themes in their play, such as danger-rescue or lost-found, but "embellish these in spontaneous fantasy play" (Corsaro, 2020, p. 14) for their own ends.

Through his work, Corsaro (2005) illuminated the collective nature of children's social lives as, much like adults, they co-create a shared culture. What's more, his innovative methods sought to challenge social constructions of adults as 'more knowledgeable'; by attending an Italian pre-school as a non-native speaker, he made space for children to instead inhabit this role as 'cultural experts' (Corsaro, 2015). This respected "children's ways of being as knowledge" (Yoon and Templeton, 2019, p. 57, emphasis original), rather than seeing their social lives as developmentally immature versions of adults'. Thus, Corsaro (2020) maintains that socialisation is "inherently problematic and is best eliminated" (p. 22) as it "neglects children's agency and has an individualistic and

forward-looking connotation that is inescapable” (p. 22). In doing so, he counters developmental discourses of childhood that promote futurity, positioning children as “becomings” rather than “beings” in their own right (James et al., 1998).

### 2.4.1 Social identities

Literature has also burgeoned around young children’s social ‘identities’, particularly in relation to certain aspects of identity. Originally, children’s identities were conceptualised through psychological models of child development, where children progress through developmental stages to recognise the self and others (Jenks, 2005). Over time, this broadened to include the importance of social relations in that to establish a self-identity is also to establish a comparison, an ‘other’ (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005). For young children, Konstantoni (2012) highlights how peer relationships are crucial in this process of identity construction, offering comparisons for similarities and differences that enable them to negotiate friendships. This emphasis on social action can also be seen in views of identity as “performance” (Barron, 2007, p. 741), where identities only exist in their ‘doing’ (J. Butler, 1996) (see Section 3.2.1.3 The poststructural influence: subjectivity and performativity).

More generally, existing literature has effectively demonstrated how particularly young children’s (<6-years-old) identities are created through their social worlds, predominantly with reference to gender (Danby and Baker, 1998; Blaise, 2005, 2010; Connolly, 1998, 2006; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993; Yoon, 2020) and race or ethnic identities (Barley, 2013; Barron, 2007; Konstantoni, 2012; Pérez and Saavedra, 2017; Scott, 2002). However, as introduced in Section 2.3.2, social class as an axis of social differentiation is relatively less explored with such a young age-group (for exceptions, see Connolly, 1998, Kustatscher, 2015; Stockstill, 2021). Moral discourses of childhood have ‘protected’ children from social class as a concept which includes economic hardship (Hill and Tisdall, 2014; Meyer, 2007) and the prominence of developmentalism for understanding children has shaped the focus of existing literature (Burman, 2008). Further to this, in contrast to gender and race and ethnicity, social class may be considered as less visually identifiable (Walkerdine et al., 2001) and therefore less ‘obvious’ for young children (Wyness, 2019).

Nevertheless, this existing body of research concerning gender, race and ethnicity offers useful insights into the study of young children's social identities. Throughout this section, children's identities are also considered as subjectivities which I consider to be a theoretical application of identity specific to Foucauldian discourse (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984). As will be discussed, literature into young children's (primarily) gendered and raced social identities highlights:

- how young children can use discourses of identity for social belonging;
- how young children are capable of producing discourses of identity initially deemed 'too adult';
- children's agential work in creating identities and;
- the importance of local contexts for identity negotiation.

These studies have also contributed important theoretical considerations for studying young children's identities which are discussed further in Section 3.2.3 Subjectivity, performativity and language.

#### *2.4.1.1 Social belonging and friendships*

Research into children's social identities illuminates the role that identities can play in children's formation of social relationships (Barron, 2007; Tembo, 2022). Blaise (2014) reviews research into young children's reproduction of gender identities, highlighting that children as young as 3-years-old regulate classroom status through enactments of appropriate gender identities (see also Danby and Baker, 1998; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a). Likewise, Scott (2002) found that 6-8-year-old African American girls "established gender boundaries and norms for exclusion and inclusion" (p. 411) in peer groupings and Yoon (2020) illustrates how girls aged 5-6-years-old used "gender performances as a catalyst for social belonging and group solidarity" (p. 3). Thus, it appears that young children's social identities can be used as a resource for establishing appropriate identity enactments (norms) through the inclusion/exclusion of children who conform/resist.

Moreover, existing literature suggests that young children may also use notions of similarity and difference in relation to their identities as a tool for establishing friendships. In her ethnographic work with children in nursery (3-4-years-old),

Konstantoni (2012) explains how “children draw upon similarities and differences between themselves particularly in relation to age/competence, gender and ethnicity – as they negotiate friendship groupings” (p. 337). A similar dynamic was noted in Barley’s (2013) ethnographic work with 5-6-year-olds in relation to their ethnic and religious identities as Arab or Muslim, with children using these identity categories as rationales for friendships. Relatedly, Connolly (2006) demonstrates how 5-6-year-old boys use aspects of their gender and ethnic identities to include or exclude peers from a game of football.

#### *2.4.1.2 ‘Adult’ discourses*

Existing research into social identities has been instrumental in illustrating how children *do* (re)construct gendered and raced discourses. Walkerdine’s (1993) observations in two English nursery schools presented how boys aged 3-4-years-old utilised gendered discourses to shift power relations between themselves and their female teacher, despite the age and status dynamics in their classroom. Walkerdine (1993) describes how the children gained power by using swear words and sexualised comments such as “Take all your clothes off, your bra off” (p. 209). Similarly, Connolly’s (1998) ethnography in an English inner-city primary school highlights the ways that 5-6-year-old boys (falsely) talk about who has sex and use racist comments to create their identities, which he interpreted as a challenge to his adult-status as the researcher. Crucially, these studies demonstrated children’s use of discourses that were initially perceived as ‘too adult’ for this age group, challenging discourses and practices of childhood that construct them as ‘immature’ and ‘innocent’ of this knowledge (James et al., 1998; Wyness, 2019).

As discussed in Section 2.3.1.1, Wyness (2019) explains how discourses of childhood have protected – and excluded – children from aspects of society which they are developmentally ‘too young to understand’ or should be ‘blissfully unaware’ of (see also Burman, 2017). Discourses of gender and race were initially conceived as irrelevant to children’s ‘pure’ and ‘apolitical’ childhoods (Millei and Kallio, 2018; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005; Steinberg, 2011). However, studies have continued to demonstrate children’s complex (re)production of racial/ethnic and gendered discourses with children

as young as 3-years-old (Barron, 2007; Blaise, 2010; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b), challenging the notion that childhood is immune from social politics (Millei and Kallio, 2018).

This is also the case for discourses of childhood that construct children as sexually innocent, meaning that sexuality is also an aspect of children's social identity relatively less explored (Blaise, 2005, 2010; Hall, 2022; Tembo, 2022; Walkerdine, 1993). Blaise (2014) explains how children are assumed to follow a logic which "begins with the sexed child who, over time and through experiences, is socialized [*sic*] into and *naturally* becomes gendered, and eventually (hetero) sexualized [*sic*]" (pp. 115-116, my emphasis). This 'natural' process relies on "developmental logic" (Blaise, 2014, p. 115), invoking discourses of childhood that understand children as immature and innocent as they progress towards adult or 'complete' development (see Section 2.3.1).

As such, there exists a common sense understanding that "children either do not or should not know about sexuality" (Blaise, 2010, p. 1). Blaise (2010) cites existing research set within developmental paradigms that has overlooked children's understandings of sexuality because of their lack of resemblance to adult notions. Nevertheless, building on the work of Walkerdine (1993) and Connolly (1998), in her ethnography with Australian 3-4-year-olds Blaise (2010) demonstrates that children of this age do possess "a considerable amount of sexual knowledge" (p. 7). In doing so, she illustrates that young children can and do engage with sexuality, a discourse previously considered 'too adult', as part of everyday life in childcare settings.

#### *2.4.1.3 Children's agential work*

Existing research into children's social identities has been instrumental in challenging the deterministic view of socialisation by exploring the agential work of young children in *producing* discourses. For example, Connolly (1998) explores how socioeconomic conditions produce valued norms which the children creatively use to produce power dynamics between them and their peers. He found that the local work opportunities for men (the socioeconomic local conditions) created a street culture where physicality, racism and sexualised comments became the dominant form of masculinity (the valued capitals) which were then used by the children (Connolly, 1998). Connolly counters the

notion of deterministic socialisation, carving out a middle ground which acknowledges children's agentic contribution to the (re)production of social identities:

if we are fully to understand how young children develop their sense of identity then we have to avoid the belief that they simply, almost robotically, copy and reflect what they are taught, while simultaneously avoiding the opposite idea that they are thus free to think and act in any way they want. (Connolly, 1998, p. 17)

Here, Connolly (1998) seems to be in agreement with Corsaro (2015) that children do not simply re-produce but also creatively rework and adapt existing discourses.

Thorne (1993) also challenges this idea that children only *re-produce* structures and meanings through exploring how they “actively come together to help create, and sometimes challenge, gender structures and meanings” (Thorne, 1993, p.4). In her ethnographic work in the US across the 1970s and 1980s, Thorne (1993) observed 5-11-year-old children's interactions in two elementary schools to understand how they (re)produce their gender identities. Like Corsaro (2020), Thorne (1993) takes issue with the theory of socialisation and how it reduces children's early experiences to one-directional (adult to child) and as the process of creating “adults-in-the-making” (p. 3). Whilst she recognises that theorists have come to acknowledge children's role in socialisation, she contends that children's actions are always considered as a response to adults (Thorne, 1993). This preserves the notion that children are “incomplete” (Thorne, 1993 p. 3) as they still need to be developed, albeit allowing them more agency than previous deterministic models.

Instead, Thorne (1993) completely overhauls this model through an emphasis on *production*, positing that “[c]hildren's interactions are not preparation for life; *they are life itself*” (p. 3, my emphasis). This phrase eloquently summarises the crux of what this chapter hangs upon; the discourses of childhood that overlook the immediacy of children's day-to-day lives in favour of their future as adults (Burman, 2008). This counters hierarchical notions and binary dualisms between adult/child, replacing them with a focus on the here-and-now of children's lives (Prout and James, 2015). Rather than seeking universal explanations that fix essentialist definitions, Thorne (1993) encourages researchers to ask “which boys or girls, where, when, under which circumstances?” (p. 108). As will be discussed, this is interlinked with the emphasis that



existing research into young children's social identities places on how specific contexts shape how identities emerge, favouring local settings over universal structures (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005).

Elsewhere, Barron (2007) critiqued the lack of research into how children are agentic in giving meaning to their social identities in everyday situations. Using ethnographic methods, he studied 3-4-year-olds' sense of ethnic identity as a social practice in their nursery, rather than as a process of cognitive development (Barron, 2007). Similarly, Barley (2013) utilised ethnographic and participatory methods to understand 5-6-year-olds' experiences of their ethnic identities at an English primary school. She posits identity as "performative, situated and dialectical" (Barley, 2013, p. 2) as a process of "(re)negotiation" (p. 2). Conceptualising identity as social practice arguably makes theoretical space for children to be agential in this work (see also Blaise, 2010; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b; Tembo, 2022). This seeks to challenge discourses of developmentalism which construct particularly young children as 'immature', instead showing how they can *actively* constitute their identities rather than simply reproduce adult ideas.

#### *2.4.1.4 Rooted in context*

As Thorne (1987) alludes to in the previous section, existing literature into young children's social identities also emphasises the importance of the particular over the universal (see also Pérez and Saavedra, 2017). This is because local contexts, material conditions and physical resources are suggested to shape the opportunities that children have to produce their identity (Konstantoni, 2012; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a). For example, in his later work, Connolly (2006) developed his theory to explain that children's agential work to create (gender) identities can "only be understood, and is actually only ever made possible, by the context within which it takes place." (p. 150). Through re-examining his original ethnographic work (Connolly, 1998), Connolly (2006) highlights the importance of how the particular settings in which gender identities are observed "mediate[s] and generate[s]" (p. 151) them. Danby and Baker (1998) echo this with their study of how boys enacted masculinity in the construction block area at their

school. Like Connolly (2006), they argued for a view of masculinity not as a fixed character trait but as a “configuration” (p. 169) of practice in specific situations.

More recently, researchers have built on these ideas of children as active in negotiating gendered/raced identities in specific settings, by including the materiality of such contexts as integral. For example, Lyttleton-Smith (2019b) adopts a posthumanist stance to explore how non-human objects can be involved in negotiating identities, producing gendered effects through their interactions with 3-4-year-old children. Similarly, Yoon (2020) explores how girls in kindergarten navigate their identities through gendered play with reference to specific classroom resources, (re)producing dominant gendered and racialised narratives. Also drawing from posthuman frameworks, Tembo (2022) explores children’s identities, conceptualised as subjectivities available within discourse, as distributed across the materiality of their outdoor nursery settings. Such studies stress the context in which young children’s social identities emerge, incorporating not only the discursive but the physical too (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b).

## 2.4.2 Summary

The *new paradigm for the sociology of childhood* and the UNCRC are integral in understanding shifts in the discourses surrounding the field of childhood studies (Prout and James, 2015). Perhaps best illustrated through the work of William Corsaro (2015), children are reconstructed as beings in their own right, respected as capable of *producing* their own peer cultures as a customised version of adults’. Studies set in this paradigm challenge existing discourses of childhood discussed in Section 2.3.1 that understood (young) children as ‘immature’ in terms of development (Burman, 2008).

Most notably, whilst research into particularly young children’s social identities has burgeoned as a result of this lens, this is primarily with reference to children’s gender, race and ethnic identities. This body of research illustrates how young children use their social identities as a resource for social belonging and friendships, usually through (re)producing stereotypical gender/race/ethnic enactments to establish norms (Barron, 2007; Blaise, 2014; Danby and Baker, 1998; Konstantoni, 2012; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Scott, 2002; Tembo, 2022; Yoon, 2020). What’s more, many of these studies also

provide evidence that children's social lives *do* include topics that were initially perceived as 'too adult' for their age, challenging discourses of 'innocence' and the moral imperative of childhood (James et al., 1998; Meyer, 2007; Wyness, 2019).

In doing so, this body of research relocates children ontologically and epistemologically in the here-and-now, as Thorne (1993) summarises "[c]hildren's interactions are not preparation for life; *they are life itself*" (p. 3, my emphasis). Challenging discourses of developmentalism, children are no longer "adults-in-the-making" (Thorne, 1993, p. 3) but creative producers in the present (Barley, 2013; Barron, 2007; Connolly, 1998; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2022). Such a focus on children's present contexts has led to an appreciation of how material conditions shape the opportunities that children have to produce their identity (Konstantoni, 2012; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2022; see also R. Butler, 2019; Stockstill, 2019; Wohlwend, 2009; Yoon, 2020). However, whilst these studies have effectively progressed the study of children's social experiences in the four areas outlined, this is predominantly at the exclusion of social class as an aspect of social differentiation (exceptions are discussed in the next section).

## 2.5 Young children's class experiences

### 2.5.1 Class and intersectionality

Whilst the studies in the previous section foreground gender, race or ethnicity in children's lives, some comment on their intersection with other elements of identity, including social class (Barron, 2007; Connolly, 1998; Scott, 2002; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993). For example, Barron (2007) refers to how higher levels of parental affluence intersect with families' religiosity to produce more or less Western home décor. He describes how children (re)produce discourses related to their *ethnic* identity, implicitly linking these to social class through levels of affluence in the home (Barron, 2007). Similarly, Connolly (1998) describes how few local work opportunities for men (the local socioeconomic conditions) creates a street culture where physicality, racism and sexualised comments become the dominant form of masculinity (the valued norms). Likewise, the sexualised comments observed by Walkerdine (1993) in a nursery are

suggested to be enabled by neoliberal economic conditions that produce sexist discourses.

These studies usefully emphasise the intersectional nature in how class intertwines with gender, race, ethnicity or other aspects of social difference. The study of intersectionality by black feminist scholars in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century offers a framework to understand “how power works in diffuse and differentiated ways through the creation and deployment of overlapping identity categories” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 797; see also Crenshaw, 1993; hooks, 2000). Indeed, intersectional frameworks may be gaining traction in childhood research (Alanen, 2016; Cuevas-Parra, 2022; Gillborn, 2015; Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017; Kustatscher, 2017; Scott, 2002). Konstantoni and Emejulu (2017) suggest that intersectional frameworks in childhood studies enable an exploration of the diverse and specific ways in which to be a child within “particular dynamics of race, age, gender, sexuality, class and disability ... shape the ways in which children think about themselves and how they encounter their social worlds” (p. 17). They also point out that younger children are often excluded from intersectional research (Konstantoni and Emejulu, 2017), supporting the idea that discourses of childhood shield particularly young children from topics historically perceived as too ‘adult’ (Burman, 2008; Wyness, 2019).

However, social class in these studies (Barron, 2007; Connolly, 1998; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993) may be considered secondary to, or harder to locate in, children’s day-to-day enactments in the same way as gendered and raced discourses. Whilst these studies usefully show the translation of socioeconomic conditions into valued norms, the ‘stuff’ making up the norms is identified as gendered or raced; they leave children’s (re)production of class discourses implicit in (adult) material conditions or through other identities. Whilst children’s *production* of gendered or raced discourses is accounted for, inherent in these conceptualisations of class is often a one-way, ‘top-down’ *re*-production where macro-economic conditions shape micro-interactions. This leaves the answer of how children agentially (re)create class discourses through day-to-day interactions at the periphery.

As Mazzoli Smith and Todd (2019) explain, “we are too quick to turn [poverty] into a *different language* of objective indices of material deprivation, over-looking the lived experiences of children too readily” (p. 9, my emphasis). Whilst the studies above do not overlook children’s lived experiences of gender, race and ethnicity, the focus for exploring class remains with macro-economic conditions rather than children’s day-to-day lives (R. Butler, 2019). This can be argued to preserve the notion of social class as an ‘adult’ concept, only available to children through the material conditions of their family lives (or through ‘more accessible’ gendered or raced discourses). As Kostet et al. (2022, p. 80) critique “[f]ar less attention has been paid to how children themselves define and construct differential class positions” (see also R. Butler, 2019; Ridge, 2002). As such, the discourses of class in children’s day-to-day lives remains largely absent. This is not to suggest that class can be studied in isolation from other discourses such as gender and race; this body of literature consistently demonstrates the overlapping and intersectional nature of identities in social life (Barley, 2013; Barron, 2007; Connolly, 1998; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993; see also Kustatscher, 2017). But rather, without grounding class ontologically and epistemologically in the same way as these studies have done with gender and race, it may remain reified by adult measures/content and absent of children’s agential work to *produce* it. For this reason, the following section highlights literature that foregrounds social class with young children.

### 2.5.2 Focusing on class

Nevertheless, there are some studies that have set out to explore young children’s agential (re)production of class. Such literature spans diverse conceptualisations of class conditions in their exploration of children’s lives, for example, as “less privileged”, “in poverty” or “socioeconomic difference”. However, through a common focus on lived experiences, the (re)construction of economic conditions within children’s *social* lives is always central, regardless of conceptualisations as purely economic markers. For this reason, I examine all such research but adopt the language used in the studies to reflect their relative standpoints. In addition, whilst there is literature which examines children’s lived experiences of their class positioning, such studies are less common

with children around 5-years-old, with this age group always being combined with much older children (Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011; see also Tiplady et al., 2022). Hence, the following section includes studies involving children across a wider age-range of up to 10-years-old<sup>7</sup>. The literature is divided into children's experiences of consumable goods and lifestyle experiences with the section summary drawing together key learnings from across both strands.

#### *2.5.2.1 Consumable goods*

Firstly, of the literature examined, many link class in children's everyday lives to their experiences of consumable goods, particularly highlighting their impact on children's friendships. In her review of 10-years of qualitative research exploring children's lived experiences of poverty in the UK, Ridge (2011) noted that "[c]onstrained access to material goods and childhood possessions, toys, bikes, games and appropriate clothing was a common experience." (Ridge, 2011, p. 75). Creating a norm in which specific consumable (often branded) goods are valued "meant that children [in poverty] were not only unable to keep up with the purchases and possessions of their peers but also often unable to replace lost, stolen or broken items" (Ridge, 2011, p. 75); see also Roper and La Niece (2009) for a similar discussion around lunch-box brands.

Indeed, Pugh (2011) eloquently summarises how "overlapping tastes make the teeth of inequality bite more fiercely, as those who do without struggle to manage the experience of cultural deprivation, and the social distance that it augurs" (p. 14). This echoes hooks (2000) who reflects on her own childhood experiences of being "a have-not in a world of haves" (p. 34). In her ethnographic research with 5-9-year-olds, Pugh (2011) found that children used bought goods to connect with peers, as well as to mark difference between them, for example:

Thelma ... brings out her GameBoy Advance. "Whose is that?" I ask. "Mine," she says. "My mother gave it to me, I'm getting some new games for Christmas." "I have a Game Boy," said Curtis. "I have a GameBoy," said Lamont. Marlaine didn't say anything." (Pugh, 2011, p. 8)

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<sup>7</sup> With the exception of one study (Sutton et al., 2007) that explores the views of children between 8-13-years-old. This study is still included due to its significance in the literature around constructing class from children's viewpoints.

In her analysis, she questions this pattern of interactions where children add their claim to be, in this case, the owner of a GameBoy, commenting on the oppositional threads of belonging and exclusion (Pugh, 2011). By adding their claim, Pugh (2011) suggests that the children are asserting their desire to belong to a certain group, “those of us with GameBoys” (p. 8). However, in doing so, this creates an ‘other’ counter-group, those who are excluded by not owning a GameBoy (i.e. Marlaine in the extract above); echoing the Bourdieusian discussions of symbolic violence discussed in Section 2.3.2.2.2. Across her fieldwork, Pugh (2011) discerned that, despite the specificity in the case of valued possessions such as GameBoys or bicycles, “children appeared to be reaching to be a part of something, a larger group that they wanted to join” (p. 8); those who are able to consume certain goods, constructed as the desirable norm.

R. Butler (2019) describes a comparable dynamic in her exploration of children’s classed identities in rural Australia. Adopting an ethnographic approach, she utilises participant observation, interviews and visual and digital methods to reflect the identities produced by 10-year-olds<sup>8</sup> across school and home settings. In a similar way to Pugh (2011), she notes how children’s claims to own consumable products facilitate children’s “sense of belonging and inclusion” (R. Butler, 2019, p. 53) with their peers; items such as “a PS3” (digital games console) (p. 61), “DSs” (handheld digital games device) (p. 61) or an “iPod touch” (digital music player) (p. 53). She observes how “[c]onsumerism, in the forms of objects, symbols and signs, thus provides children with a social currency they interpret, rework, and put to use in a range of ways to make connections with and disconnections from others” (p. 29), becoming the ‘stuff’ of friendships and childhood culture.

Specifically, R. Butler (2019) observes the same pattern in children’s school interactions as Pugh (2011) above, where children add their individual claim to own a particular valued item to a cumulative collective. Like the silence of Marlaine in Pugh’s (2011, p. 8) observation, R. Butler (2019) highlights how children who do not have access to valued possessions are pushed to the margins of the desirable group, thus reinforcing

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<sup>8</sup> R. Butler’s (2019) book covers an age range from 8-13-years-old, but in the specific examples outlined here only 10-year-olds were mentioned.

collective norms around neoliberal ownership and consumption (Baudrillard, 2016; Sims, 2017). R. Butler (2019) goes on to describe a variety of coping practices whereby children invoked “moral worth” (p. 80) to foster emotional solidarity or justifications that ran counter to the established norms. For example, “going without” (R. Butler, 2019, p. 62) describes a strategy adopted by children who did not own valued possessions, who redefined ‘appropriate’ levels of consumption by reframing the ownership of these goods as indulgent. Thus, as R. Butler (2019) shows, children’s relationships with their peers are tangled with their consumption of valued goods, through which their classed identities are produced.

Yanık and Yasar (2018) found a similar emphasis on branded goods for Turkish pre-schoolers classroom relationships. Although the focus of their study was on peer culture more broadly rather than class specifically, they reflect on the identities that are valued between peers in social contexts, similar to Connolly (1998). Their participants, children aged 5-6-years-old, were able to bring toys from home among which “Ben Ten watches” (p. 493) or Spiderman outfits were particularly valued. From this, classroom tales emerged of girls being in love with boys in Spiderman outfits. Thus, through their work, Yanık and Yasar (2018) illustrated exactly *how* branded goods matter for children’s day-to-day lives, and how the children have agency in creating these conditions by *producing* discourses. Such discourses can be intertwined with notions of heteronormative romance (girls in love with boys), similar to the sexualised discourses observed in the work of Walkerdine (1993) and Connolly (1998) which also (re)produce certain gendered identities (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a).

Kustatscher (2015, 2017) observed a similar dynamic in her ethnographic study with children in a Scottish primary school. She explores how 5–7-year-olds’ “perform” (Kustatscher, 2015, p. 64) their intersectional social identities (social class, gender and ethnicity) through everyday interactions with peers. Alongside interviews with the children, she offers observations of how a certain brand of coat along with specific clothes, lunchboxes, foods, pencil boxes, shoes and toys all carry “high symbolic values” for the children (p. 174). She concludes that “[t]he ways in which children draw attention to, and invest such objects with meanings and values, are deeply relational and have implications for friendship groupings and the children’s status within their



respective groups” (p. 180). As such, social class as rooted in socioeconomic material conditions takes effect in young children’s lives through the *differential valuing* of consumable goods, particularly in school settings; this shifts the focus from class as an (inherited) family dynamic to class as *produced by children*.

For example, she details a playground conversation at snack-time between herself and two girls, Eleanor and Laura, that constructs a certain premium yoghurt brand as ‘healthy’ and therefore desirable:

On the school playground during the morning break, I join Laura and Eleanor on a wooden bench where they eat their snacks.

Laura has a yogurt in a plastic cup in the shape of a football.

I say: Oh wow, is that a yogurt?

Laura nods and smiles proudly.

Eleanor, sitting next to us, says in a strict tone: Actually that yogurt is not good for children because it doesn’t have the good milk in it!

I assume she is right, since the yogurt looks quite cheap – as usual, Laura’s snacks consist of ASDA’s branded crisps and yogurt. I wonder if Eleanor’s parents (who are both doctors, as she often mentions) told her in the supermarket that this wasn’t healthy.

Eleanor starts to eat her carrot sticks.

I have the impression that Laura is now eyeing her yogurt with less enthusiasm.

[Excerpt from fieldnotes, 17 May 2012] (Kustatscher, 2015, pp. 174-175)

The interaction not only constructs the premium yoghurt as a desirable norm but enabled the owner of it (Eleanor from a more affluent background) to gain the power associated with it, devaluing the other girl’s social standing in the process (Kustatscher, 2015). Like the other valued goods, Kustatscher (2015) explains that this “illustrates how classed identities are performed through tastes and values” (p. 175), also noted in relation to food brands by Pugh (2011). Here, it is possible to see how children (re)create valued norms through certain branded goods with effects on their relationships in terms of status in the classroom.

Similarly, Iqbal et al., (2017) explore 8-9-year-old children’s friendships in relation to social class and ethnic diversity across three London primary schools. For the children interviewed in their study, they found that “[s]ymbolic markers such as particular

material possessions (e.g. branded goods) can provide a sense of belonging or familiarity and thus facilitate social relationships” (p. 137); items such as “an iPod” “a laptop” or an “X box” (p. 137). Crucially, they identified an “understanding or ‘seeing’ of difference based on materiality was the mode in which social class and ethnic diversity was most recurrent in children’s accounts” (Iqbal et al., 2017, p. 137). Through this, they suggested that children learn to “‘define’ themselves in different ways in different contexts” (p. 140) through branded goods, but this can only ever be partial as such processes are constructed relationally with their peers, parents and teachers.

#### *2.5.2.2 Lifestyle experiences*

Existing literature also highlights children’s access to certain lifestyle experiences as part of the ‘stuff’ of class constituting their everyday lives. Namely, it is through the translation of economic circumstances into cultural practices through which social class appears in children’s lived experiences, with corollary effects on their friendships (as explored with consumable items above). Ridge’s (2011) review of 10-years of qualitative research pointed to children’s participation in leisure activities and clubs as part of their lived experience of poverty in the UK. Children from poor backgrounds associated feeling “better off” (Ridge, 2011, p. 77) alongside an increase in opportunities to attend leisure clubs and activities. Although the children identified advantages associated with these activities, they also expressed anxiety over the related costs for their families (Ridge, 2011). In a similar way to consumable goods in Section 2.5.2.1, such discourses create norms in which a specific lifestyle practice – attendance at leisure clubs/activities – is valued amongst the children (Ridge, 2011). In doing so, socioeconomic differences (translated into social practices) take on an importance for children in their day-to-day lives.

Similarly, research by Sutton et al. (2007) also highlighted the emphasis children place on how they spend their free-time. Using participatory methods with 8-13-year-olds, Sutton et al. (2007) aimed to explore a “child’s-eye view of social difference” (p. vii). Their research interviewed 42 children from different backgrounds, one group from a British council estate (where families earned 60 per cent of the national median income) and one from a fee-paying private school. Among other things, children explained the

importance of their free-time and described the ways that they spent it. The private schoolchildren reported participating in a wider and more expensive range of “organised activities” (p. 25) than the estate children; for example, “riding” “fishing” “shooting” and “gymnastics” lessons (p. 26). The “estate children” (Sutton et al., 2007, p. 27) commented that they did not attend (as many) after-school activities, reflecting on their cost (i.e. lessons or equipment required) or difficulties getting home afterwards (see also, Ridge, 2002). Such findings further illustrate the importance of free-time activities in children’s lives and how, particularly for more affluent children, this may take the form of paid-for organised activities (Lareau, 2011).

In her comprehensive review of class in education, Diane Reay (2017) draws together over 500 interviews to explore children’s class identities and educational experiences. She presents working-class children’s emotional accounts of how they struggle to gain positive learning experiences from English primary schools up to university. Specifically, children and young adults talk about their fantasies and anxieties in the quest to be ‘socially mobile’ through educational achievement – arguably a middle-class fable that rests on the myth of meritocracy and devalues working-class starting points as somewhere to progress *from* (Reay, 2017, 2022). Thus, Reay explores children’s constructions of education, schools, ability and learning that she suggests marginalise working-class pupils.

Although many of the interviews relate to young adults, Reay (2017) offers some insights that not only suggest that younger children are acutely aware of subtle class differences, but that these impact their classroom experiences. For example, an interview with 9-year-old Frankie (a middle-class student) reveals a discursive slip between ability and background: “if you are posh you are more clever” (Reay, 2017, p. 144). Like Kustatscher (2015), Reay’s (2017) focus on children’s views enable us to see the micro-impacts of classed parenting practices (Lareau, 2011) for children’s day-to-day social lives. Reay (2017) explains how Frankie constructs a common belief that working-class pupils are less intelligent than their peers (p. 145) and goes on to link this to the support they get from their parents.

Reay (2017) explores how these constructions link to the classroom practice of “setting and streaming” (p. 79), where children work in groups according to their ability perceived by teachers. These groups are usually given innocuous names in an attempt to disguise their function as a marker of ability. Reay’s (2017) interviews with primary school children (up to 11-years-old) reveal the emotional impacts of this practice and how ability sets offer a resource which is valued in the classroom context amongst peers. Notably, she presents an extract from an interview with a 6-year-old who – despite their supposed disguises – explains the social implications of ability sets:

They [the Lions] think they are better than us. They think they are good at every single thing and the second group, Tigers, there are some people that think they are good and more important than us. And one of the boys in Giraffes he was horrible to me and he said “get lost slow tortoise” but my group are Monkeys and we are only second to bottom. (Reay, 2017, p. 79)

Reay (2017) reflects on the discursive distinctions between animals, such as the “slow tortoise” (p. 79), which clearly have not escaped the children’s purview. Moreover, they are used as an identifying feature between peers, in this case, to insult. The child describes a social hierarchy which rests on these ability groups. This provides a resource which the child draws on when constructing their own identity, distinguishing themselves as “Monkeys” (p. 79) which are “second to bottom” (p. 79) rather than tortoises which are implied as the bottom grouping.

Reay (2017) suggests that the bottom sets are usually made up of working-class and ethnically diverse pupils and that their experiences of ability groupings are infused with “feelings of futility, unfairness and humiliation” (p. 79); reinforcing the emotional ontology of class discussed in Section 2.2.3.2 (R. Butler, 2019; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Walkerdine et al., 2001). This echoes notions of the teachers’ and parents’ ‘ideal middle-class learner’ (Bradbury, 2013; Cushing, 2020; 2021; 2022; Nightingale, 2020). Although limited, Reay’s (2017) attention to children’s viewpoints shifts the focus from adult conceptions to show us how such discourses, beliefs and identities are experienced and (re)produced by children.

Other aspects of cultural practices can take on symbolic traction for children with their peers. In her ethnographic research with 5-9-year-olds, Pugh (2011) illustrated how children utilised aspects of culture such as movies, birthday parties and holidays to form

their peer culture. However, like branded goods, these valued experiences are not accessible to all in the same way. For example:

... two girls talked about their birthday parties, the first girl recounting the complex treasure hunt her mother created, the second girl recalling a birthday soccer game at the indoor commercial site the Bladium. Both refrained from explicit comparison as they recounted their parties to an audience of interested peers, an omission that speaks to the stakes involved—*not besting the other, but joining the other*. The primary issue was not whose birthday party was cooler, or whose parents loved them more, or even who had more friends or money, but rather, *whose birthday party was of the same caliber to warrant even talking about it*. The surrounding children whose birthday parties were presumably of the more ordinary variety—pizza, games and cake in the park or at home—were *silent*. (Pugh, 2011, p. 8, my emphases)

Deliberately quoted at length, this extract incorporates interesting factors related to how children experience class differences through a specific cultural practice; the birthday party. Pugh (2011) considers this interaction to be marking birthday parties “of the same caliber [*sic*]” (p. 8) which she understands as one with a “treasure hunt” or a “birthday soccer game at the Bladium” (p. 8). These birthdays are ones that are ‘worth talking about’, thus creating a classroom norm in which certain birthday parties are recognised. She interprets the children’s interactions as distinguishing a “complex treasure hunt” (p. 8) or hiring a commercial venue from other “ordinary” (p. 8) parties that do not require the same financial resources. She conceptualises this as “not besting the other, but joining the other” (Pugh, 2011, p. 8), a process that creates a desired group and corollary (middle-class) norms (see Section 2.2.4). As with her example where the children staked their claim to own a GameBoy (Pugh, 2011), this establishes a valued norm at the expense of those who are excluded as the ‘other’, those who are “silent” (p. 8).

As such, it appears that when viewed through the lens of children’s (re)constructions in a social context, cultural practices – such as birthday parties - can form part of their experience of social class. As hinted at in the extract above, this has implications for children’s relationships in the classroom, echoing the literature around consumable goods (Section 2.5.2.1) and gender, race and ethnicity for social identities (Section 2.4.1.1). Using observations from her Scottish ethnography, Kustatscher (2015) presents evidence for how 5-7-year-old children’s experience of play visits with friends

(organised by parents/guardians) as well as birthday parties impact on their friendships. She observed how being able to host a party becomes a desirable identity for young children, not only for its immediate benefits (being the birthday child), but also for what it offers in the future (further invites to other parties) (Kustatscher, 2015). She suggests that birthday parties/invitations therefore operate as a “currency” (Kustatscher, 2015, p. 178) for children’s friendships. However, due to different access to socioeconomic resources, not all children can participate in this norm.

Kustatscher (2015) conceptualises class in this case as more than economic, drawing on literature that links increased parental involvement with middle-class parenting styles (Lareau, 2011; Vincent and Ball, 2007). Relatedly, she observed children in her study bonding over extra-curricular activities that they had in common which she also interpreted as symptomatic of these classed parenting practices (Kustatscher, 2015). Whilst she draws on literature relating to class parenting practices (Lareau, 2011), Kustatscher’s focus on children’s *production* of class is exceptional in its challenge to developmental discourses of childhood and top-down conceptualisations of class socialisation.

### 2.5.3 Summary

Existing literature usefully highlights the overlapping and intersectional nature of social identities for particularly young children, including social class (Barron, 2007; Connolly, 1998; Scott, 2002; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993). However, as will be discussed further in the next chapter, such frameworks retain class as ontologically and epistemologically “adult-centric” (Punch, 2020, p. 129) in comparison to gender, race and ethnicity.

Other literature reviewed in this section illustrates that consumable products and certain lifestyle experiences can form part of children’s lived experiences of socioeconomic conditions. This is through their construction as valued items *by children*, particularly in classroom contexts, establishing (middle-class) norms about what it means to be a child. Children’s consumption of bought goods can be used as a resource to inform their identities as well as their classroom relationships through the use of branding (R. Butler, 2019; Kustatscher, 2015; Iqbal et al., 2017; Ridge, 2011; Yanık and Yasar, 2018), food

products (Kustascher, 2015; Pugh, 2011) or more generally, through valued toys, such as bikes (Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011).

Children's lifestyle experiences, such as how they spend their free-time, birthday parties and their experience of school, operate in a similar way; through constructing (middle-class) norms that can be used to negotiate social identities and relationships with peers (Kustascher, 2015; Reay, 2017; Ridge, 2011; Sutton et al., 2007). Thus, it is possible to see how consumerism takes effect in children's day-to-day social lives through discourses and norms, reinforcing class experiences as economically rooted but *lived out through symbolic and cultural social experiences* (R. Butler, 2019). Across this literature, there are three further convergences that offer useful insights when exploring children's experiences of social class and socioeconomic difference.

#### *2.5.3.1 Children's agential work (revisited)*

Firstly, the studies reviewed in this section add to the literature examined in the previous section (Connolly, 1998; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993; Yoon, 2020; Tembo, 2022) by demonstrating children's agential work in (re)constructing discourses and social norms. Here, children are primarily acknowledged as *producers* by challenging discourses of childhood that prioritise children's futures over their presents (James et al., 1998; Steinberg, 2011). In her own work, R. Butler (2019) emphasises how we must "take children's work to produce their identities, in their own terms, and on their own grounds, seriously" (p. 129). In doing so, children's lives can be considered in and of themselves, as Thorne (1993) pithily encapsulates: "[c]hildren's interactions are not preparation for life; *they are life itself*" (p. 3, my emphasis).

This compliments a challenge to the structural view of class, whereby it is suggested that macro-structures determine class experiences in a 'top-down' arrangement (Murphy, 2021). By exploring children's agential work in producing classed discourses, agential production from the 'bottom-up' is also considered (Lawler, 2005). As Reay (2004) suggests "[c]lass inequalities can no longer be conceived simply in structural terms. They are made and remade at the micro level, in and through innumerable everyday practices" (p. 1019). Whilst a bottom-up view of social life retains a hierarchal

notion of macro- and micro-levels, Section 3.5 summarises how considering children's agential contributions to social life can challenge this perspective further.

#### *2.5.3.2 Distinction, similarities and friendships*

Secondly, this literature highlights how consumable products and certain lifestyle experiences can be integral in forming children's relationships in the classroom. Primarily this is through the intertwining of distinction with social status, for example, when children separate out a premium yoghurt brand (Kustatscher, 2015), educational ability (Reay, 2017) or hosts of birthday parties (Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011). Symbiotic with this is the notion of sameness as a precursor to friendships (R. Butler, 2019; Iqbal et al., 2017; Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011), where children use valued items and experiences as a resource to bond over. As the literature suggests, these valued items are often expensive consumables or classed lifestyle practices demonstrating how socioeconomic difference matters in the classroom.

Across these notions of distinction and sameness, it is suggested that children are "reaching to be a part of something, a larger group that they [want] to join" (Pugh, 2011, p. 8), 'children that *have*' versus those who 'have-not' (see also hooks, 2000). Whilst children may seek sameness, this simultaneously produces an 'other' marginalised group who are distinguished (Pugh, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015; Reay, 2017; Ridge, 2011; Sutton et al., 2007); the "outside" of the "in crowd" (hooks, 2000, p. 27). Those children that can consume – in a capitalist sense – are able to claim a certain social status in specific moments through the creation of a relational "other" (Reay, 2007, p. 1042). This desirability reinforces ideals of consumerism and ownership that serve capitalist economic interests, that is, that we express ourselves through what we consume (Bradley, 2015; Braidotti, 2011; hooks, 2000; Massumi, 2015); this will be discussed further from a theoretical lens in Section 3.4.4. Whilst children are not direct consumers in the same way as adults (using wages to buy products), focusing on children's social action to produce desirable norms illustrates if/how consumable goods matter in their lives (see Section 2.2.2).



### 2.5.3.3 Emotional experiences

Thirdly, children's experiences presented throughout this literature are often entwined with their emotions, playing out through specific social and material settings. The emphasis on the emotional impacts of class (re)production echoes broader research into how social class is *felt* (Reay, 2017; Skeggs, 2012; Tyler, 2013; Walkerdine, 2016), discussed in Section 2.2.3.2. Children regularly expressed fears or demonstrated anxieties over being left out or marginalised through their exclusion from social norms via branded goods or certain experiences (R. Butler, 2019; Iqbal et al., 2015; Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Reay, 2017; Ridge, 2011). For example, from Kustatscher's (2015) work it is possible to see how the interaction between the two girls over the yoghurts is infused with pride, dissatisfaction and moral authority. Similarly, Iqbal et al. (2017) document the discomfort and "weird" (p. 136) feelings that children explain when experiencing socioeconomic difference in their day-to-day lives.

### 2.5.4 Beyond the literature

Nevertheless, these studies predominantly focus on children above the age of 7-years-old, often combining children under this age with older children; for example, 5-9-year-olds (Pugh, 2011) or 5-7-year-olds (Kustatscher, 2015). Whilst Yanik and Yasar (2018) presented observations of 5-6-year-olds, the focus of this study was on peer culture through play, rather than class specifically. This arguably makes their findings incidental rather than a challenge to the dominant discourse that excludes children from research into constructions of social class. Whilst we can use these studies to predict the classed experiences of particularly young children, it is difficult to discern what their specific experiences may be, as they are either subsumed with older children's or left theoretically absent.

Moreover, these events do not happen in isolation but emerge in part through their surrounding social and material arrangements. As R. Butler (2019) summarises, "class identities arise from a co-constitution of experiences in *specific circumstances*, which are always being made, formed, contested and negotiated *within specific relations*" (p. 24, my emphases). Notably, peer interactions in the studies above mostly take place in school settings (R. Butler, 2019; Iqbal et al., 2017; Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011;

Yanik and Yasar, 2018) as does much of the research considered by Ridge (2011). These findings are inextricably linked to these contexts, not least because schools bring together groups of children in ways that make these comparisons and conversations possible.

More specifically, as in the yoghurt-based interaction observed by Kustatscher (2015), the school organisation of snack-time creates a specific time where the foods that children bring from home are foregrounded. Throughout these studies, the materiality of consumable goods is integral to their status as an item to be owned (R. Butler, 2019; Kustatscher, 2015; Iqbal et al., 2017; Pugh, 2011), sometimes conspicuous in their physicality in the classroom (Yanik and Yasar, 2018). Despite the centrality of physical possessions in these studies, how the materiality of these goods co-constructs children's experiences is often theoretically overlooked in favour of a focus on language (discussed further in Section 3.2.3).

## 2.6 Conclusion

In reviewing literature surrounding children's social class, I followed a series of threads that have become tangled in this thesis, punctuated as four summaries throughout this section. Research into social class with adults illustrates how understandings of class have shifted into the social domain, with an emphasis on how economic conditions are lived out on a symbolic and cultural level (Bradley, 2015; R. Butler, 2019). Within this, the growing prevalence of neoliberal ideals symbiotically entwine self-expression with capitalist consumerism in contemporary societies (R. Butler, 2019; Savage, 2003; Saltmarsh, 2007). Here, it is class at the micro-level, as "innumerable everyday practices" (Reay, 2004, p. 1019), that enables us to "trac[e] the print of class in areas where it is faintly written" (Savage, 2003, pp. 536-537). Individuals are suggested to draw on available discourses to inform social judgements that (re)make middle-class norms as valuable, simultaneously constructing those who are working-class as 'deficient' (Reay, 2004; Savage, 2003). These processes of symbolic and cultural distinction construct class as ontologically emotional; we cannot know class without recourse to how it is felt (R. Butler, 2019; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

However, Marxist frameworks for conceptualising and understanding class has led to a fierce debate, and I suggest a theoretical paucity, in how children can be known through capitalism; echoing original feminist critiques of the theory (Crompton, 1998). Whilst a focus on lived experiences of class more broadly has shifted attention from ‘objective’ measures of class (Skeggs, 2004), research into *children’s* social class experiences continues to be defined by adult-centric measures that are inherently ‘objective’ and pre-empt adult discourses of class (Kustatscher, 2015). I suggest that discourses of developmentalism and innocence in childhood have fundamentally shaped young children’s involvement in class research (Burman, 2017), leading to a continued focus on developmental outcomes and the exclusion of particularly young children more generally.

Despite this critique, much can be learned from existing research into children’s social class from across different paradigms. Whilst inferences for children’s social lives are problematic (Burman, 2017; Dweck, 2013), developmental psychology-based research indicates that children as young as 4-years-old understand ideas associated with social class (Howard et al., 2018; Horwitz et al., 2014; Paulus and Essler, 2020; Rauscher et al., 2017; Shutts et al., 2013; Shutts et al., 2016). Although approaching class from a more contextual and social perspective, prominent research has been critiqued for determinism, denigrating working-class culture and normative middle-class definitions of capitals into children’s social class. Despite this, the work of Bernstein (1975/2003), Bourdieu (1984/2010) and Lareau (2011) have been reworked to suggest how children’s social class can be reconceptualised beyond purely adult measures, according to what is valued by children in their social contexts where economic capital may not be directly present (Alanen and Siisiäinen, 2011; Hadley, 2009; Pugh, 2011; Stockstill, 2021).

Indeed, the *new paradigm for the sociology of childhood* and the UNCRC are suggested to be landmarks in understanding shifts in the ontology of children and the discourses surrounding the field of childhood studies (Prout and James, 2015). Studies set in this paradigm challenge constructions of children as developmentally-immature and innocent, often illustrating their role as producers of culture (Corsaro, 2015; Steinberg, 2011). Whilst research into young children’s social identities has burgeoned because of

this lens, this focuses on children's gender, race and ethnic identities rather than social class.

Nevertheless, through this body of research it is possible to see how particularly young children: use their identities as a resource for social belonging and friendships; discuss topics initially perceived as 'too adult' for their age; creatively produce social understandings (cultural norms); and negotiate material conditions to produce experiences read as identity. Whilst these studies usefully highlight the intersectional nature of particularly young children's social identities (Barron, 2007; Connolly, 1998; Scott, 2002; Thorne, 1993; Walkerdine, 1993), social class continues to be known in ways that I suggest are ontologically and epistemologically "adult-centric" (Punch, 2020, p. 129) in comparison to gender, race and ethnicity.

Yet, there are studies which examine children's lived experiences of their class positioning, albeit they are less common with children under 7-years-old with this age-group often been submerged into older age brackets (Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011; see also Tiplady et al., 2022). These studies suggest that consumable products and certain lifestyle experiences can form part of children's lived experiences of socioeconomic conditions lived out through symbolic and cultural practices (Bradley, 2015). Echoing research into young children's social identities, these aspects are used as a resource when negotiating class identities and classroom relationships (Kustascher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011) to creatively construct children's peer cultures (Corsaro, 2015).

Thus, children's agential work in the social domain constructs certain aspects of life as valuable, often reinforcing (middle-class) norms about what it means to be a child. These interactions are unavoidably affective, echoing existing research into class as ontologically emotional (R. Butler, 2019; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Despite the centrality of physical possessions in these studies, the materiality of these goods is often theoretically overlooked in favour of language. This framing has ontological and epistemological implications for how we come to know class that will be explored further in Section 3.3; inherent in this is an invitation for how we can potentially know class *differently*, particularly with such a young age group.

## 3 Chapter Three: Theoretical framework

### 3.1 Introduction

The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 led to interesting convergences in the theoretical study of young children's social class that are now explored further through this chapter. Although sometimes referred to as 'gaps' in existing research, these avenues are purposefully not named as such here. This is an attempt to acknowledge that academic research is not a chronological and linear unfolding of ideas, where gaps are filled jigsaw-like by studies over time. Instead, I consider existing academic research to be like a mass of threads interweaving to produce "invitations" (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 499) which are the knots or 'gaps' for further work to spring from.

These threads tangle to produce knots which are summarised in the *middle* of this chapter (in the spirit of Barad and Deleuze and Guattari), along with the theoretical invitations they usefully imply for my study. The chapter begins with a journey through these knots, exploring the ontology of class (Section 3.2.1), as 'being', 'having' and 'doing' through a poststructural lens, before considering the way in which subject-centred epistemologies have shaped the ways we have come to know class (Section 3.2.2). In Section 3.3, the resulting theoretical invitations are outlined, tying the first half of this chapter to the latter. This is the platform from which I introduce and outline a Baradian posthuman performativity framework (Barad, 2007) via sociomaterialism, along with the Deleuzian notions of assemblage and affect which I have found to be compatible (Section 3.4). Section 3.5 explains how the application of a Baradian framework can usefully expand from, and circle back to, the theoretical invitations previously presented. Before this chapter concludes, the research questions are introduced (Section 3.5.2.1).

### 3.2 Theoretical invitations

#### 3.2.1 Ontology of class

The literature demonstrates that social class as a concept has transformed, and continues to change, as it interacts with wider social, economic and scientific contexts

that circulate and frame its study (Devine et al., 2005; Savage, 2003). Indeed, its metamorphosis has made it a critically debated topic within sociological, psychological and anthropological circles, one which has struggled to retain a substance or stable concept (Bradley, 2015). As such, class has been described as “fractured” (Bradley, 2015, p. 278), a “zombie” (Reay, 2006, p. 288), a “whisper” (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 19), an “uncool subject” (hooks, 2000, p. vii), “displaced” (Skeggs, 2003, p. 60) and “incrementally emptied of meaning” (Tyler, 2008, p. 20).

### 3.2.1.1 *Social class as ‘being’*

Conceptualised as divisions in occupational and wage-labour systems by Marx (1888/2008) with his colleague Engels, social class was defined in economic and material terms as the relation between groups (originally men) to the capitalist mode of production (see also Callinicos, 2019). Adopting a historical materialist stance, Marx’s analysis of the social relations of capitalism described how individuals - as well as other matter, such as raw materials or money – were entangled in the social, economic and political structures that underpin it (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 503). Max Weber critiqued Marx’s reliance on structures as materially one-sided (Bradley, 2015), instead drawing on individuals’ motivations towards capitalism, originally through his analysis of the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1992). Whilst Marx gave class a material core, Weber gave the concept a *social* emphasis which later served essentialist arguments for a naturally ‘deficient’ or ‘degenerate’ working-class (Hendrick, 2015; Mahalingam, 2003). Ontologically speaking, class was *being*, something that people *were* through their position within the capitalist mode of production.

### 3.2.1.2 *Social class as ‘having’*

With the cultural turn in sociology, this definition expanded to include a much broader range of social relationships, such as lifestyle choices (Devine et al., 2005; Bourdieu, 1984/2010; Bradley, 2014). The work of Bourdieu into cultural distinctions extends Weber’s social emphasis, with further implications for the way class as a concept could be understood (Bradley, 2015; Fox and Alldred, 2022). In ontological terms, for Bourdieu, class may be seen as no longer something which people *are* but something which people *have*, ‘objective’ differences, and these differences are defined through

the social meanings constructed by wider society (Bourdieu, 1987; see also Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 505). This prompted a wealth of research into the symbolic domain of classed relations, or what resources are considered legitimate or valued (e.g. R. Butler, 2019; Reay et al., 2007; Skeggs, 2003).

Bourdieuian approaches to class have usefully underscored the *relational* ontology of class, that is, how the meaning of what people *have* can be formed through dynamic interaction between actors and contexts (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). This relational ontology refers to the bundle of dispositions (*habitus*), resources (*capitals*) and context (*field*) that constitutes social reality - Bourdieu's (1984/2010, p. 95) "practice" (see Section 2.3.2.2.2). Yet, class is still conceptualised as something which individuals *possess*, a power endowed by their relative social positioning, which is reproduced because of its existing value in the field (Bourdieu, 1984/2010; Skeggs, 2004). A Bourdieusian framework therefore usefully highlights the interaction between individuals and contexts or social settings, but this may be read as a deterministic relationship where structures of current social positions dominate what is reproduced rather than the actions within the contexts (J. Butler, 1996; Holt et al, 2013).

### 3.2.1.3 *The poststructural influence: subjectivity and performativity*

Conversely, the influence of poststructuralism on theories of social difference can be suggested to have been instrumental in deconstructing the traditional binary of structure/individual and subsequently reconceptualising agency (Wyness, 2019). Notably, the work of Michel Foucault on subjectivity, discourse and power (Foucault, 1980) and Judith Butler's theory of performativity (J. Butler, 1996) offer insights into how the ontology of class can be rethought of as something that individuals *do*, rather than *have* or *be*.

This theorising of phenomena as *doing* is encapsulated in J. Butler's theory of performativity, originally in explanation of how sex/gender/sexuality are constructed through human sociality (J. Butler, 1996). Performativity can be considered the "discursive constitution of the subject" (J. Butler, 1996, p. 37) and describes the way that social categories do not exist *beyond* their doing and as such, are not essential but fluid. Despite focusing on gender, interestingly in J. Butler's 1996 chapter

“Performativity’s Social Magic”, they<sup>9</sup> directly critiqued Bourdieu’s class concepts for locating power within the *positions* that authorise language, rather than the language itself. Individuals do not just ascribe meaning to differences, *they bring the differences into being* through their language and action (J. Butler, 1996, p. 36; Mulcahy, 2012). The former implies a ‘social’ society behind the act, but for J. Butler these acts constitute social society (J. Butler, 1996).

But this is not to imply “a kind of theatrical performance conducted by a willful subject who would choose” their social identity (Barad, 2007, p. 62; see also Lenz Taguchi, 2009, p. 22). Indeed, performativity is made possible through available discourses, but individuals are also subject to the limits of discourse and their identity cannot exist outside of them (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984). Here, subjects are considered agentic as these discourses only exist because individuals bring them into being through their action: As Mac Naughton (2005) summarises, “we are able to unmask the regimes of truth that govern us precisely because it is we who hold them in place and reproduce them” (p. 29). Walshaw (2007, p. 44) suggests that individuals can never be reduced to *just* the discursive positions on offer, there is always space for agency. Yet, as *doing* is discursive and centred around the subject, in this framework, so too is agency; a point that will be returned to in the latter half of this chapter.

Kustatscher (2015) adapted a Foucauldian framework using J. Butler’s performativity to explore young children’s intersectional identities in Scotland. Kustatscher (2015) described how children produced their social class identities through drawing on the discourses of consumption and the norms of ‘healthy’ eating as a particular branded yoghurt at snack-time on the playground (see Section 2.5.2.1). She demonstrates how these norms of social class were (re)produced whilst also enabling the child to constitute their sense of self as ‘healthy’. This demonstrates power as a productive force (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984); the children are attracted by the power of certain identities which are upheld by norms, a violence towards that which it excludes (Bradley, 2015).

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler’s preferred pronouns are they/them.



However, as explored in Section 2.3.2.3, it is possible to see how certain subjectivities are not materially accessible to all children; most notably, the child who is, or is not, able to have and consume certain goods. As highlighted in Section 2.4.1.4, there are strong spatial and temporal components (i.e. snack-time / playground) that affect how this norm is performed. Almost in full circle, this *reintroduces* a strong relational material component, not completely unlike Marx's materialism, back into the *doing* of class (Fox and Alldred, 2022). This speaks to Walkerdine et al.'s (2001) critique that there is a "stubborn unwillingness" (p. 32) to appreciate the constraints on who can and cannot consume (see also Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 506; Reay, 1998); like hooks' (2000) unfulfilled "material longings" (p. 20) as a "have-not in a world of haves" (p. 34). Skeggs concurs, explaining how the concept of performativity is not universal:

whereas postmodernist theories imply that there can be a voluntary free fall through the social positions that are available to people to inhabit...restriction on access is central to subjective constructions. Economic positions, institutional positions, subject positions and discursive positions are not equally accessible. (Skeggs, 2012, p. 12)

Although her work focused on the subjectivity of working-class women, it is possible to draw and extend these theoretical ideas to consider how they may apply to class experiences with young children. The discursive class positions (re)produced by children may not be open to all in the same way. For example, children without access to branded products (R. Butler, 2019; Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Yanik and Yasar, 2018), certain classroom items (Dyson, 2020; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b; Tembo, 2022) or children who are from minority backgrounds (Connolly, 1998). As Skeggs (2012) posits, there is arguably a *material* aspect to social class identities as discursive identities are co-constructed in negotiation with structural positions.

### 3.2.2 Subject-focused epistemologies

The 'subject' at the centre of subjectification has been the focus of much debate in terms of how such a theory over-emphasises humans at the expense of the material or non-human worlds (Barad, 2007; Fenwick et al., 2011; Latour, 2005). As Tembo (2022) explains, "these approaches may underplay the significance of ontological and ontogenetic *matters* that contribute toward the formation of subjectivity" (p. ii, my

emphasis). In other words, a focus on human individuals may overlook all the other aspects that go into an event which constitutes phenomena as lived (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003; Barad, 2007). This “subject-focused epistemology”, Lyttleton-Smith (2019a) suggests, “struggles to capture the complex reciprocity of social relations with space, place and objects” (p. 658). This has consequences for how we come to know class through such theories – as a primarily human experience – which therefore also locates agency and interventions within the domain of the human (Fenwick et al., 2011, 2015; Tembo, 2022).

Existing literature that aims to understand classed subjectivities (Walkerdine, 2016; 2021; Walkerdine et al., 2001) or the performatives of class (Kustatscher, 2015) have adopted subject-focused epistemologies which necessarily centre the individual as the site of cultural (re)production. Such approaches have been instrumental for understanding individuals’ agential *doings* in constructing class as well as the affective and “fleshy” aspects of its existence (Chadwick, 2016, p. 2; see also Francombe-Webb and Silk, 2016). Whilst Kustatscher (2015) sensitively explored young children’s intersectional identities through her subject-centred performative framework, it is also possible to see traces of class as material, spatial and temporal poking through; a tribute to her detailed description and analysis. In the example of the branded yoghurt at snack-time (see Section 2.5.2.1), the discourse of ‘healthy eating’ was performed as temporally-bound within the school’s snack-time and spatially-located on the school playground. However, by adopting a subject-centred epistemology, these were conceptualised as context to each event, rather than a constituting part.

This focuses on the “being’ behind the doing’ (Nietzsche, 1969, quoted in J. Butler, 1996, p. 34), the person behind the action, rather than the action itself. As such, agency (enabled or constrained) is again solely a human possession, situated within the structure/individual binary (Barad, 2007; Tembo, 2022), rather than as a convergence enabled by the constituting parts of phenomena. Instead, Willis highlights how these contexts must enter into our understandings of events, rather than simply situating them (see also Broadfoot and Pascal, 2020; Fenwick et al., 2011):

Too often ‘context’ is seen as a kind of passive framing of a still enclosed human picture, a kind of flat but necessary chore of construction for mounting in the

institutions of sociological display. But this ‘framing’ *invades* the picture internally at every brush stroke! (Willis, 2018, p. 582, my emphasis)

Indeed, in Kustatscher’s work, this context was not just invading the events but *in-forming* them (MacLure, 2013; Massumi, 2015). I suggest that the temporal activity of snack-time in the school day is an inseparable part of how a certain brand of yoghurt came to be constituted as a norm within the classed discourse of ‘healthy’ eating. The playground had benches which organised the children, and the researcher, so that they were sat in a way that brought forth the conversation which produced this discourse linguistically. The spatial, material and temporal aspects are not just the backdrop for the performative events to occur on top of, they are part of the performative events themselves (Barad, 2007; Hall, 2020; Latour, 2005).

### 3.2.3 Subjectivity, performativity and language

Existing studies which use subjectivity or performativity frameworks may be critiqued for not just privileging the human experience (of class), but for centralising language through discourse (Blaise, 2014; Landri, 2023; Lenz Taguchi, 2009; Mulcahy, 2012).

Robinson and Jones Diaz summarise how these concepts come together:

Discourses are constituted in language, and if discourses constitute subjectivity, it follows that language is a critical site in terms of the construction of subjectivity. The person you are, your experience, your identity, your perceptions and knowledge, your ways of being in the world are all the effects of language. (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2005, p. 9)

In this understanding, language is an inseparable aspect of discourse, both internally and externally, and so approaches which explore subjectivity and (J. Butler’s) performativity tend to focus on linguistic forms of knowing, through what children say (e.g. Kustatscher, 2015). Historically, linguistic forms of knowing have been afforded a “self-evident higher position above other matter” (Tummons and Beach, 2020, p. 3; see also Coole and Frost, 2010) which can be traced back to the Cartesian split between body and mind (Massumi, 2015); discussed in more detail in the latter half of this chapter. This excludes the myriad of ways in which we can understand events through material (Danby and Baker, 1998; Connolly, 1998), spatial and temporal (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2022) and emotional and affectual (R. Butler, 2019; Mazzoli

Smith and Todd, 2019; Tembo, 2022) ways of knowing; invitations highlighted through the literature review in Section 2.6).

Poststructural approaches contest that language is a representation of reality and as such cannot be bridged by other means to 'access' reality (MacLure, 2013; Rosiek, 2018). This is not just a tension for discourse-based studies of young children, but for any methods which rely on children's linguistic ways of communicating (Murray, 2019). Arguably, the idea that children are 'inexperienced' is rooted in developmental discourses which view children as growing in biological competencies as they get older (Blaise, 2016; Burman, 2008; Iqbal et al., 2017). Although they often rely on the representationalism which poststructuralism rejects, pluralistic and creative ways of 'accessing' particularly young children's knowledge and understanding are an attempt to bridge this linguistic dependency (Spyrou, 2011), such as the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) or the "hundred languages of children" encouraged by the Reggio Emilian philosophy (Rinaldi, 2006).

The collusion of discourse and language is an aporia which resides at the convergence between accounts of particularly young children's subjectivities or discursive constructions (R. Butler, 2019; Bennett and Sani, 2008; Blaise, 2016; Lenz Taguchi, 2009). This creates an onto-epistemological tension: How can we know children's subjectivities or performative acts without recourse to language? Instead, by de-centring the subject and allowing materiality, spatiality and temporality to come into the aggregation of performative events, language can take on a collaborative role rather than a defining one (Barad, 2007; see also Broadfoot and Pascal, 2020; Cameron et al., 2019). For example, there is a wealth of research which demonstrates young children as skilled communicators through non-verbal behaviours, such as gestures, facial expressions and body language (Anderson, 2018; Flewitt, 2005; Horner, 2022; Houen and Danby, 2021; Lowe, 2012). This ontological expansion suggests potential to re-fit this previous epistemological scruple when working with young children's discursive constructions (Blaise, 2016; Renold and Mellor, 2013).

### 3.3 Knots in the landscape

To summarise, tangling with the invitations from Chapter 2, the theoretical literature presents three overarching convergences which further inform the rationale for this thesis; point 2 presented in Section 2.1. Firstly, research into social class now considers experience or identity to form part of our understanding of class as a concept. The poststructural paradigm suggests how class can be remade at the ‘micro’ level of everyday practices (Foucault, 1980; Reay, 2004), but such work may have only just begun to build on the ontological insights of performativity and its framing of agency and context. Secondly and relatedly, research into class as identity adopts subject-centred epistemologies that prioritise *human* productions of class. Such methodologies often appeal to discursive (re)productions which do not theoretically bring into view the contributions of other matter in constituting class as a performative event (also discussed in Section 2.5.4). Finally, despite Foucauldian origins, subject-centred frameworks’ reliance on discourse via language have coalesced with discourses of development to problematise the agential work of particularly young children in discursive constructions. This prime concern with language narrows the focus of children’s agency to the linguistic domain, theoretically excluding not just their contributions as ‘inexperienced linguists’ but the contributions of other matter in the relational construction of agency.

To conclude the first half of this chapter and further my entanglement with these three converging knots, a framework which responds to the invitations above would need to:

- inter-connect with the insights of performativity to consider the ontology of class as *doing*;
- epistemologically de-centre the subject to appreciate how materiality, spatiality and temporality may construct class;
- allow space for children’s agential contributions to the production of class, avoiding a reduction of discourse to language.

### 3.4 Introducing a sociomaterial framework

The important thing to remember is that every theory is simply a lens. Just as an optical lens improves our sight, in a similar way theories improve our insight...But much as we would want to think to the contrary, *no theory can bring everything into focus all at once*. (Walshaw, 2007, p. 1, my emphasis)

This quote by Margaret Walshaw has appeared, motif-like, throughout my journey on the PhD, perhaps because, in true Foucauldian fashion, it dislodges theories from their monolithic truth-like perch. To continue the lens metaphor, whilst the preceding part of this chapter pointed to certain avenues to explore in the existing literature, these were not weaknesses but rather just out of focus under the chosen theoretical lenses. As such, I do not wish to poke holes in existing theories to validate my own, this thesis owes as much to those studies as it does to the sociomaterialism that it adopts more wholesale. Instead, I hope that this thesis can contribute to further knots in the web, expanding the knowledge base from the middle outwards (Lenz Taguchi, 2009) and extending more “invitations” (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 499) to other researchers and readers.

To this end, the application of a sociomaterial framework is intended to bring ‘into focus’ aspects which were perhaps blurred in the existing literature: *class* as a material-discursive, spatial and temporal phenomenon. This thesis utilises Karen Barad’s (2007) “agential realism” (p. 139) which includes their<sup>10</sup> framework for “posthuman performativity” (p. 66) to build on the insights of existing performative research (J. Butler, 1996; Kustatscher, 2015) by including other matters in how class comes to be constituted (Fox and Alldred, 2022). The remaining part of this chapter will introduce Barad’s ideas by way of sociomaterialism and consider how they can be applied to the study of young children’s *doing* of class, along with influences from other theorists (Braidotti, 2013; Latour, 2005). In particular, I will put forward an argument for utilising the concept of affect as a force for mobilising performative events (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003; Massumi, 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> Karen Barad’s preferred pronouns are they/them/their/theirs/themself.

### 3.4.1 Sociomaterialism

Sociomaterialism belongs to the body of approaches that have a focus on materiality or matter, in the physical sense, emerging in part from across sociological, feminist, Indigenous, philosophical and scientific knowledge bases (Lenz Taguchi, 2009; Rosiek, 2018). The ‘sociomaterial’ aspect of this approach can also be referred to as “nonhuman” (Latour, 2005, p. 78), “posthuman” (Barad, 2007, p. 66; see also Braidotti, 2013) and “more-than-human” (Blaise, 2016, p. 625), reflecting their respective emphases. Although sometimes referred to as ‘new materialism’ (Rogowska-Stangret et al., 2020), this moniker appears to be increasingly rejected for its Western/Eurocentric assumptions (Fox and Alldred, 2022; Tembo, 2022). That is, materialism is only ‘new’ to Western academia in contrast to Marx’s ‘old’ historical materialism (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 501), as it has a celebrated history in Indigenous and North American philosophies, ontologies, methodologies and ethics (see also Deloria, 2012; Rosiek, 2018).

Very broadly, sociomaterialism refers to a “methodology of situating material-discursive practices that form specific socio-cultural phenomena via a relational ontology” (Rogowska-Stangret et al., 2020, p. 2). In other words, how all parts of an event (matter, discourse, bodies) are tangled to produce a phenomenon, such as class. Within this framework, these ‘parts’ are *not* discrete objects with “independently determinate boundaries and properties” (Barad, 2007, p. 26) that come together, they are “always already” (p. 153) together and it is in this entanglement that they come to matter. As such, sociomaterial approaches may be characterised by three features: a rejection of anthropocentrism, the notion of entanglement through performativity, and a “monist ontology” (Landri, 2023, p. 63; see also Coole and Frost, 2010; Fenwick et al., 2011). Such an ontology usually necessitates a methodological focus on everyday practices, to examine the “micropolitical movements of power” (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 511), echoing Reay’s (2004, p. 1019) “innumerable everyday practices” that constitute class (see Section 2.2.3).

### 3.4.2 Situating Barad

Karen Barad's (2003, 2007) theory of agential realism can be considered as a sociomaterial approach which adopts these three features. Transdisciplinary in nature, Barad's theory is inspired by the work of quantum physicist Niels Bohr and proposes posthuman performativity as an expansion of feminist philosopher J. Butler's (1996, 2004) work outlined earlier (see Section 3.2.1.3). The addition of "posthuman" (Barad, 2007, p. 66) refers to Barad's rejection of anthropocentrism to recentre *all* matter that matters.

This play on the word matter is crucial to Barad's theory: Material-discursive entanglements come to matter (in terms of meaning something) which forms the separations between matters in the process (Barad, 2007, p. 140). The relationality of these entanglements is what produces Barad's "phenomena" (Barad, 2007, p. 237). In the example taken from Kustatscher's (2015) work (Section 2.5.2.1), the yoghurt brand came to mean something through its merging with snack-time, the playground, the children and the researcher in the event; it was through the relations between these "things-in-phenomena" (Barad, 2007, p. 140) that they become distinct but connected 'parts' of the phenomena. This separation through formation is what Barad terms "agential cuts" (Barad, 2007, p. 140).

#### 3.4.2.1 Rejecting anthropocentrism

Although humans form part of these things-in-phenomena, for Barad (2007), they are not the centre. Barad (2007) draws on the work of Steve Shavero to illustrate how misguided a subject-centred approach is to understanding the world that we are 'of':

Where did we ever get the strange idea that nature-as opposed to culture-is ahistorical and timeless? We are far too impressed by our own cleverness and self-consciousness....We need to stop telling ourselves *the same old anthropocentric bedtime stories*. (1997, cited in Barad, 2007, p. 132, my emphasis)

Barad (2007) usefully builds on Shavero by suggesting that this historical over-emphasis on human activity is a result of epistemological representationalism, a "Cartesian byproduct" (p. 48) which divides the human body/mind along the lines of the "knowing subject" (p. 48) (see also Niemimaa, 2014). Representationalism refers to the gap



between an object and the practices employed to represent it, reifying the independence and separation of binaries such as object/subject and nature/culture (Deloria, 2012; Rosiek, 2018).

Coole and Frost (2010) explain how this ontological split has roots in the 17<sup>th</sup> century work of René Descartes who “defined matter...as corporeal substance constituted of length, breadth, and thickness; as extended, uniform, and inert” (p. 7). As such, nature became quantifiable, measurable and bounded (Coole and Frost, 2010). The notion of bounded entities brought into being corollary ideas of their limits, such as the dualistic separation (the ‘cut’) between internal (the mind) and external (the body) (Henriques et al., 1998; Landri, 2023). Cartesian approaches privilege the internal mind as the motif of their humanity distinguishing them from other animal forms, captured in Descartes’ famous aphorism *cogito ergo sum* (“I think therefore I am”) (Murphy, 2021). In reducing matter to the passive object of human thinking, Cartesian approaches provide the basis for the “same old anthropocentric bedtime stories” (Shaviro, 1997, cited in Barad, 2007, p. 132) which Barad critiques.

Whilst poststructuralists attempted to dissolve the nature/culture binary encapsulated by representationalism, Barad (2007) posits that it did little to challenge the anthropocentrism of Cartesian approaches (see also MacLure, 2013). Rosiek (2018) explains how Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theory provided the “fundamental ontological premises” (p. 407) for poststructural challenges to representationalism. Saussure suggested that the association between words (signifiers) and their meanings/referents (signified) was largely due to the relation between words, or the structure of language, rather than their relation to what they signify (Rosiek, 2018, p. 407). This paved the way for poststructural theorists who contested that language does not sit outside and represent ‘real’ things in what it signifies, it operates through relations and is therefore inseparable from that which it represents (Rosiek, 2018; see also MacLure, 2013). Earlier in this chapter, this was alluded to as the distinction between language representing structures as our ‘access’ or ‘bridge’ to reality (Section 3.2.3), as opposed to language being *of* structures in symbiosis with discourse.

Whilst poststructuralists attempt to dissolve the material/discursive binary, Barad (2007) suggests that they still over-emphasise the *human* contribution to meaning construction through language and discourse, as opposed to matter (see also Landri, 2023; MacLure, 2013; Niemimaa, 2014). For poststructuralists, matter is given meaning through human-produced discourses; this inadvertently maintains matter as passive, bounded and dominated by the active subject (Landri, 2023, p. 66). Barad argues that this continues to promote Cartesian “anthropocentric bedtime stories” (Shaviro, 1997, cited in Barad, 2007, p. 132) which exclude the contribution of other matter in the formation of phenomena:

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every “thing”—even materiality—is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural *representation*...Language matters. Discourses matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that doesn’t seem to matter anymore is matter. (Barad, 2007, p. 132, my emphasis)

Instead, Barad’s rejection of anthropocentrism is reciprocated by the inclusion of other matter into their theory of posthuman performativity. Barad (2007) disrupts representational anthropocentric epistemologies and replaces them with interdependent entities of *all* matters, which “decentres the knowing subject...[and] also unseats idealizations [*sic*] of enterprising, autonomous knowers” (Fenwick et al., 2015, p. 16). Barad (2007) suggests that, further to Foucault and J. Butler’s *subject*-within-discourse, matter also does not pre-exist the discourses or phenomena through which it is constituted, nor can the individual be ‘made’ without reference to other matter. Furthermore, as outlined previously, matter is not merely a backdrop through which discourse inscribes meaning upon; it “invades” (Willis, 2018, p. 582) phenomena, constituting their formation through its interaction (Massumi, 2015) (Section 3.2.2).

#### 3.4.2.2 Matter

This opening invites the question: but what is matter? Drawing on poststructural insights into subjectification and semiotic linguistics, Barad (2007) outlines that matter, in the sense of that which is physical or material, is not separable from its meaning. Just like a subject exists only within discourse (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984), so does matter (Barad, 2007). To be able to frame matter, in its materiality, requires discourse(s)

because “matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together” (Barad, 2007, p. 3).

The work of Latour (2005) is also useful here: He explains that the social and material only make sense in their *relation* to each other, rather than as separate entities. This is the rationale behind Barad’s use of the blended term “material-discursive” (Barad, 2007, p. 153); as they explain that physical matter is “always already material-discursive—*that is what it means to matter*” (Barad, 2007, p. 153, emphasis original). By way of its mattering (existence in discourse), materiality is always already social; it is therefore not a question of discourse inscribing matter, but *how* certain material-discursive practices come to matter through enacted phenomena (Dennis and Huf, 2020).

This is the crux of Barad’s critique on J. Butler’s theory of gender performativity, as well as Foucault’s historical theorising. Whilst Barad (2007, p. 61) acknowledges J. Butler’s attempt to include the body as material in their theory, Barad suggests that it is a site of “iterative citationality” (p. 184) where “discourse produces the effects that it names” (J. Butler, 1996, cited in Barad, 2007, p. 64). In doing so, it cannot account for the materiality of the sexed body (Barad, 2007; see also Lenz Taguchi, pp. 55-56). As a result, Barad (2007) contests that the body’s (materiality) remains a “passive product of discursive practices rather than as an active agent participating in the very process of materialization [*sic*]” (p. 151).

In the same vein, Barad critiques Foucault for failing to account for how the material conditions of discursive practices actively contribute to their meaning (Barad, 2007, pp. 64-65). Due to its very mattering, materiality is already material-discursive. As Fox and Alldred (2022, p. 507) exemplify, jobs such as a company executive are not simply discursively produced as middle-class. Their physical existence – as occurring in spacious offices which are well-served and comfortable – constitutes the way in which such jobs are materially *and* discursively performed as middle-class. Fox and Alldred (2022) compare the fictional company executive to a factory worker; the latter’s direct interaction with raw materials makes their work physically demanding and sometimes dangerous in ways that a company executive does not encounter. As a result, it is not

enough only to speak of discourse, materiality must be attended to as well (Barad, 2007; Deloria, 2012).

All material-discursive matters constitute the “posthuman” element of Barad’s (2007, p. 66) theory. This is in recognition of the posthumanist movement which refused the taken-for-granted divisions between nature and culture (matter and meaning), instead calling into question how these boundaries are actively (re)configured (Barad, 2007, p. 136). Barad (2007) insists that this is not meant as the “death of” or the “next stage” (p. 136) of humans, but rather as “taking issue with human exceptionalism while being accountable for the role we play in the differential constitution and differential positioning of the human among other creatures (both living and nonliving)” (p. 136). Hence, despite Barad’s rejection of anthropocentrism, they retain “human” within the adjoined word to illustrate our unavoidable involvement with matter and meaning.

However, Tembo (2022) prefers the term sociomaterial as it is “uncuffed from any latent initial association with the human as *a priori*” (p. 12, emphasis original). He explains that

it is through the social (in terms of epistemology) and the material (through processes of ontogenesis) that the subject, or the human, then emerges, in contrast to the position that there is the human from which we then become ‘more-than’ or ‘post-’. (Tembo, 2022, p. 12)

As Tembo (2022) recognises, although sometimes hyphenated, the united term ‘sociomaterial’ suggests “the entanglement of both relations together” (p. 13; see also Niemimaa, 2014). For this reason, I will also adopt the term sociomaterial to denote the processes through which phenomena *become*, although not at the mutual exclusion of “more-than-human” and “posthuman”. Although I wish to decentre the human individual, I do not propose to write them out completely; instead, I prefer to remain closer to Barad’s original conception which acknowledges the inseparability of humans as part of sociomaterial entanglements (see also Cameron et al., 2019).

### 3.4.2.3 Agency

Thus, Coole and Frost (2010) conclude that “matter becomes” through “cosmic forces assembling and disintegrating” in “choreographies of becoming” (p. 10). Matter is “dynamic” (Fenwick et al., 2011, p. 168), not bounded or static but as constituents and effects of entanglements. Yet, even as constituents, Barad (2007) does not consider

individual matters agentic in the sense that they possess the capacity to change something. This is a break from other materialist scholars, like Latour, who have been critiqued for anthropomorphising objects by giving them agency too akin to human conceptions of a choosing subject. Instead, Barad (2007) redefines agency in relational terms; it is only *through* sociomaterial assemblages that agency, as possibilities of change (p. 178), is produced (see also Fenwick et al., 2011; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022); also Latour's (2005) stance. Thus, agency becomes through materiality and discourse but only in their relationality, their performative enactments, rather than as an essential property of single matters (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a, p. 659; see also Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022; Tembo, 2022).

This prises agency out of the purely human domain, as identified above in previous theories (J. Butler, 1996; Foucault, 1980) and locates it as “doing” (Barad, 2007, p. 178) which flows through sociomaterial processes. Rather than abstracting agency and making it elusive, such a conceptualisation “actually expand[s] the possibilities for the practice of agency by refusing to generalize [*sic*], and abstract it from the materialities within which it is enacted.” (Fenwick et al., 2015, p. 174; see also Chesworth, 2018; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). Not only can agency now be recognised in a myriad of matters other than the human, it is also possible to observe the *empirical* ways that agency comes into being through intra-acting bodies (human and sociomaterial) (Chesworth, 2018, p. 857); that is, how it is enacted (Kleinman and Barad, 2012). Lenz Taguchi (2009, p. 36) explains that all performative agents have different potentialities but some cannot engage as easily or smoothly as others; for example, an immovable brick wall versus a transgressed cultural norm. The ease at which we can conceptualise agency in the latter perhaps illustrates why the cultural turn was so prolific in isolating human discursive agency (discussed in Section 3.2.2).

#### 3.4.2.4 *Intra-action*

Matter, and thus agency, has no “fixed substance”, its an “*intra-active becoming-not a thing but a doing*” (Barad, 2007, p. 151, emphasis original). Both Latour (2005) and Barad (2007) neither privilege materiality nor discourse, instead allowing them to *emerge through* performative events. As such, they both advocate for the middle of

things, *in media res* (Latour, 2005, p. 206), as our only starting point to witness phenomena in-formation (see also Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 25). Barad's neologism 'intra-action' refers to this process through which matter becomes, or "*the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*" (Barad, 2007, p. 33, emphasis original). Contra to *inter*-action which assumes separate entities that pre-exist their entanglement (the Cartesian distinction), *intra*-action suggests that the boundaries of these entities only emerge *through* their entanglement (Barad, 2007, p. 33; see also Niemimaa, 2014).

Latour (2005, p. 27) adopts the former, his "things" inter-act as intermediaries within a network, like a metal chain. However, Barad's (2007) 'things' are only agentially separated through their intra-action. Barad's approach can be likened to the Kanisza Triangle (see Figure 1) (Massumi, 2015, p. 186), where "something happens *between* the circles...as an expression of their separation" (p. 186). As Massumi (2015, p. 187) explains, you can attend to the circles in the Kanisza Triangle, but it is only through appreciating them in their intra-action that we are able to experience the fullness of the "pop-out" condition; like the absent triangle, "life lives in the gaps" (Massumi, 2015, p. 183).

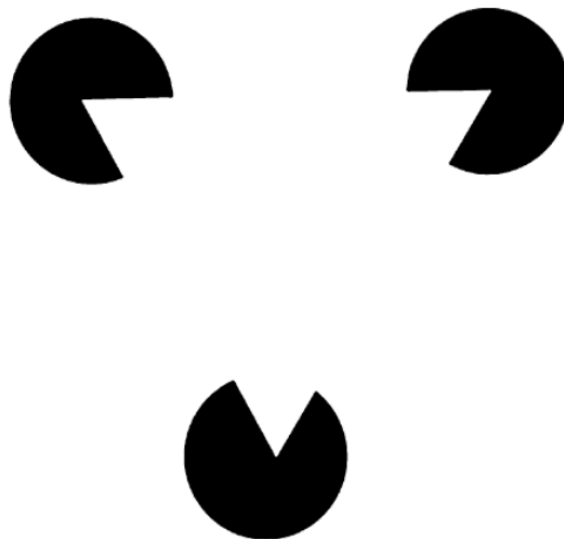


Figure 1. The Kanisza Triangle (Massumi, 2015, p. 186)

Intra-action therefore rewrites the familiar logics of 'cause' and 'effect' (Deloria, 2012; Kleinman and Barad, 2012). The three black partial-circles did not pre-exist their coming

together in the Kanisza Triangle, they are not the cause of the absent triangle in a Cartesian sense. This would suggest properties inherent in the circles which produce the triangle. Rather, it is through the partial-circles' intra-action, their “causal enactment[s]” (Barad, 2007, p. 179), that the triangle was able to be seen. Like the triangle, Barad (2007) rejects the humanist proposition that subjects are *effects* of structures, instead following poststructuralism in positing them as inseparable from these structures; they are *of* rather than *in* structures, always in intra-action.

So, Barad (2007) does propose some form of causality but this is through intra-action rather than the Cartesian notion of discrete and pre-existing bounded objects (see also Deloria, 2012). This notion of causal enactments through intra-action is what underpins Barad's (2007, p. 179) “re(con)figuring of space, time and matter”, as they explain:

Intra-actions are nonarbitrary, nondeterministic causal enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is iteratively enfolded into its ongoing differential materialization. Such a dynamics is not marked by an exterior parameter called time, nor does it take place in a container called space. Rather, *iterative intra-actions are the dynamics through which temporality and spatiality are produced and iteratively reconfigured in the materialization of phenomena...* (Barad, 2007, p.179, emphasis original)

Barad (2007) found wanting the idea that space and time formed a backdrop for intra-actions to unfold against. Following Einstein, Barad agreed that these properties are relative to how they are measured (epistemology). However, whereas Einstein presumes that measurement can be separated from the property to be measured, Barad (2007) counters with Bohr's claim (from the field of quantum mechanics) that these are not separate states (p. 437).

Counter to representationalism, this is the poststructural “ontological inseparability” of Barad's phenomena (Kleinman and Barad, 2012, p. 77; see also Niemimaa, 2014). As such, spatiality and temporality are produced by intra-acting material-discursive entanglements, as “spacetime-matterings” (Kleinman and Barad, 2012, p. 77). To return yet again to the example of the branded yoghurt from Kustatscher's (2015) work (Section 2.5.2.1), agential cuts produced snack-time as a specific temporality of the school day due to intra-acting material-discursive practices. It is as much what these

practices constitute (the yoghurt as desirable), as what they exclude from mattering - "the constitutive outside" (Barad, 2007, p. 64) of phenomena.

#### 3.4.2.5 *Onto-epistemology*

This production through intra-action underpins the Baradian concept of "onto-epistemology", or the inseparable nature of what things are and how we come to know them (Barad, 2007, p. 44; Kleinman and Barad, 2012). We cannot know the Kanisza Triangle (Section 3.4.2.4) without attempting to interpret it through forms of discourse, be they mathematical, artistic or philosophical; it exists in the physical sense that it is on the page, but it has no meaning until we intra-act with it, producing it as a 'thing' and us as an observer in the process. This reaffirms Barad's post-representational stance by dissolving the line between signifier and signified (MacLure, 2013). There is no view from above or outside as in representational approaches (Deloria, 2012; Haraway, 1988; Walshaw, 2007), there is only knowing through intra-action (Barad, 2007, p. 149). As Lenz Taguchi (2009) elegantly summarises: "There is nothing to get out of to observe from the outside, and there is no inside that we are forever stuck within. The inside is the outside..." (p. 56). This is the "Möbius strip" of meaning (Deleuze, 2004, cited in MacLure, 2013, p. 658), two sides of the same coin; we are not *in* the world but *of* the world (Barad, 2007, p. 184).

Like Spinoza, Nietzsche and Deleuze and Guattari, Barad (2007), along with other sociomaterialists, abandons transcendentalism in favour of a monist ontology (Lenz Taguchi, 2009). An ontology of transcendence invites beings to look at the world 'from the outside', by using higher-order thinking (such as philosophy) to move beyond the physical world. Inherent in this are the Cartesian dualisms of interior/exterior and body/mind which have already been eschewed, as well as Barad's extension of Shaviri's anthropocentric bedtime stories. Instead, monist ontology posits a one-ness of existence, an inter-dependent unity through relations, which dissolves such binaries along with representationalism (Landri, 2023; Lenz Taguchi, 2009). We can only know (epistemologically) the world that we are entangled with because we are 'of' it (Fenwick et al., 2015, p. 15); Barad's "onto-epistemology" (Barad, 2007, p. 44).



This is linked to “flat” ontology (Latour, 2005, p. 165) which emphasises the “flattening” (p. 192) of hierarchical thinking, not just in terms of ‘transcending’ the everyday world, but in terms of ontological distinctions which privilege meaning and language over matter (Barad, 2007; Landri, 2023; Niemimaa, 2014). There is no ‘other level’ beyond the everyday world (Fox and Alldred, 2023, p. 501). Monism can also be likened to ontologies of immanence, where all matter is situated on a common “plane of immanence” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 254), as Lenz Taguchi explains

There is no hierarchical relationship between different organisms (human and non-human) and the material world around us, when we think in terms of immanence. We are all in a state and relationship of inter-dependence and interconnection with each other as human or non-human performative agents. (Lenz Taguchi, 2009, p. 15)

This performative relationship is Barad’s (2007, p.179) “phenomena”, Deleuze and Guattari’s (2003, p. 4) “assemblages” and Massumi’s (2015, p. 148) “immediation”, all of which draw attention to the “primary unit of the real” (p. 148) as the event. In the event is the tangling of that which is always already together, where *relata* transcend the subject/object divide to show how all these things are transversing different boundaries in their intra-action (Deloria, 2012). The energetic nature of this has led some to prefer the term *ontogenesis* (Massumi, 2015; Tembo, 2022) which emphasises ‘being’ through formation (*genesis*<sup>11</sup>) rather than essences represented by language (*ontology* from the Greek *logos*<sup>12</sup>) (see also Oksala, 2010). Nevertheless, “ontology” has been used to good effect to represent alternative notions of being, for example, “monist ontology” (Landri, 2023, p. 63), “flat” ontology (Latour, 2005, p. 165), “onto-epistemology” (Barad, 2007, p. 44), “ontology of immanence” (Lenz Taguchi, 2009, p. 16), “intra-relational ontology” (Dennis and Huf, 2020, p. 456) and “relational ontology” (Rogowska-Stangret et al., 2020, p. 2).

Barad (2007) – along with other materialist academics – has been critiqued for this non-hierarchical approach to human and sociomaterial bodies. By situating all bodies on the same plane of immanence, materialists are accused of marginalising the politics of

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/genesis>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/logos>

unequal power distributions that constitute their capacities to act (their agency) by assuming for example, that children enter a performative event 'on the same grounds' as adults, ignoring their constrained choices (Oswell, 2016). However, as Fenwick et al. (2015) counter, although "relations of power and difference may be analysed in surprising ways, ...they are certainly not absent" (p. 177) in sociomaterial research. Like poststructuralists, sociomaterialism's focus on the 'micro' level does not preclude the considerations of more sedimented 'macro' power structures, such as laws; it refuses this binary by allowing materialities of all scales to be active in constituting phenomena (Fox and Alldred, 2022), much like Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005). Additionally, because power can be considered an *outcome* of intra-action, Barad (2007) actually offers a framework which is arguably more sensitive to the unequal distribution of power by opening up potential sites for resistance as *preventative of* power, rather than in response to it (Tembo, 2022, p. 62); discussed further in the next section.

### 3.4.3 Assemblages

Whilst these different ontologies emphasise slightly different facets of materialist approaches, an especial line of flight for Barad is their ontogenesis through intra-action; this can be considered their monist ontology although they did not refer to it as such. Here, I find it useful to draw on Deleuze and Guattari's (2003) ideas of assemblage and affect (see also Massumi, 2015) to consider the forces at play within Barad's notion of intra-action. Like Tembo (2022), Lyttleton-Smith (2019a) and Lenz Taguchi (2009), I found the work of Deleuze and Guattari to contribute to a more productive reading of Barad. This can be likened to Barad's (2007) own "diffractive" (p. 25) approach where insights from different areas of study (for them, quantum physics and poststructuralist theory among others) are read *through* one another in a constructive rather than antagonistic way.

Drawing on an ontology of immanence, Deleuze and Guattari (2003, p. 4) put forward their notion of "assemblage" to describe the way in which phenomena are irreducible to their inter-relating parts. They also use the term "rhizome" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 8), the name for a mass of plant roots, which conjures up web-like imagery that is

ever-expanding. In their work, the rhizome is not the sum of its parts (one) or the separation of its parts (multiple), it

is reducible neither to the One nor the multiple. It is not the One that becomes Two or even directly three, four, five, etc. It is not a multiple derived from the One, or to which One is added ( $n + 1$ ). It is composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion. It had neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 21, emphasis original)

Assemblages therefore consist of “multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 4) which are always in relation to other matters: past and future events, physical objects, emotions and humans among other endless possibilities. Again, the middle of things is our only entry (Section 3.4.2.4). As Deleuze and Guattari quip in the opening chapter of their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004): “The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd.” (p. 3). Like a pattern on a fabric, the authors, although singular in physical body, cannot be distilled to any singular thread of their identity, such as their education, their motives for writing the book, their tools for doing so or their socioeconomic status or gender. These ‘strands’ are multiplicities in themselves which are always already intra-acting as they in-form any assemblage or phenomena.

Nevertheless, Lyttleton-Smith (2019a, p. 50) suggests that assemblages are anti-monistic as they imply heterogeneous material and discursive elements that are in relation, rather than plurality (intra-acting entanglements) through unity (phenomena) as Barad (2007) does. This illustrates that an ontology of immanence is not necessarily monistic by nature, arguably also Latour’s (2005) stance. Still, Tembo (2021, 2022) suggests that because – monistic or immanent – assemblages are ontogenetic, constitutive of the world rather than existing *in* the world, they are congenial with Barad’s intra-acting phenomena. Specifically, he explains that assemblages usefully resituate agency as prior to the exercise of power, as does Barad, but develops this through the notion of affect (Tembo, 2022, pp. 61-63). This expands possible sites for intervention, not just beyond the discursive or human-centred domains, but also “prior to the sedimentation of [power]” (Tembo, 2022, p. 62).

### 3.4.4 Affect

The concept of affect has proved a fruitful line of enquiry for sociomaterial studies, particularly those which draw on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2003): For example, “affective assemblages” (Mulcahy, 2012, p. 9) and “affective flows” in assemblages (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 502); as well as specifically in research with young children – “affective affordances” (Broadfoot and Pascal, 2020, p. 460), “affective assemblages” (Renold and Mellor, 2013, p. 24) and “affective sociomaterialisation” (Tembo, 2022, p. 70). Massumi (2015, p. 148) posits that affect is a way to account for experience in its in-forming, as an ontogenetic force. An attraction of this concept is the simplicity of its definition, taken from the work of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch philosopher Spinoza: “to affect and be affected” (Massumi, 2015, p. ix; see also Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. x). Understanding agency in this way, as Latour’s (2005, p. 13) “actors” does, affect becomes a key process through which we can explore how *all* matters come to shape phenomena-in-information. As Massumi explains

The Spinozist definition hinges affect on encounter. It is thoroughly eventful, *it derives structure from event*. The two sides between which the encounter passes cannot simply be characterized as passive or active. The affective event does not presuppose a passivity on one side and an activity on the other. It involves a differential of modes and degrees of activity that is eventfully resolved, to *structuring effect*. (Massumi, 2015, p. 92, my emphasis)

Massumi’s description highlights the dual nature of affect as an ontogenetic energy: as structured by phenomena-in-information but also as a structuring force. This echoes poststructural processes of subjectification and is also conducive with Foucauldian conceptions of power which consider it to be a consequence of different forces in interaction (Massumi, 2015).

Indeed, affect within assemblages can be used to bring together “materialities of seemingly disparate ‘scales’” (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 506), countering the critique that all bodies enter events on the same terms, as in flat or immanent ontologies. As Latour (2005) contends, if ‘macro’ structures have agency (an affective quality) in a performative event, they can be drawn into an assemblage in the same way that materiality and humans can. However, as Tembo (2022, p. 62) identified above, affect

comes before power as it *produces* the distinction between matters which constitute power inequalities (see also Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b).

Fox and Alldred (2022) adopted a materialist framework with Deleuze's concepts of affect and assemblage in their exploration of "sociomaterial dis/advantage" (p. 511); how affect flows within assemblages to ontogenetically produce social class inequalities. With this framework, Fox and Alldred (2022) re-read Paul Willis' book *Learning to Labour*, which explored the different experiences of working-class and middle-class boys in school in 1970s England. Willis (1977) explored the cultural reproduction of the boys' social positioning through materially symbolic patterns of human discourses. However, Fox and Alldred (2022) were able to capitalise on Willis' detailed analysis to reinterpret his findings through a sociomaterial lens. They suggest that through addressing non-human affect, in addition to Willis' original focus on human subjectivity, a wider web of sociomaterial and affective channels can be accounted for. For example, one boy became disaffected by the non-human matter of his parents' middle-class lifestyle, such as their car and mortgage, which made him reject school and a conventional career path in favour of a nomadic life of travel (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 510).

Fox and Alldred (2022) suggest that affect in assemblages produces aggregated "capacities" (p. 502) that enable or constrain what a body can do, and these in turn create class. Arguably, this responds to the "stubborn unwillingness" (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p. 32) to acknowledge the accessibility of subject positions that Skeggs (2012) and Reay (1998) critiqued in discursive accounts of subjectivity (see also hooks, 2000; Section 2.3.2.3). Instead, with the concept of affect, a sociomaterial lens "supplies a theoretical and empirical focus upon how everyday events, actions and interactions produce and reproduce social divisions and inequalities" (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 506). Counter to Marxist structuralism, Fox and Alldred (2022) suggest that this is supported by a monist ontology which usefully replaces the transcendental idealisms of 'another level' of the social system to allow us to see the "thousand tiny dis/advantages" (p. 511) that constitute sociomaterial dis/advantage. Thus, it is possible to see how values *emerge* rather than how they are socially-ascribed (Bourdieu, 1984/2010); they

circulate through affective assemblages which include materiality in their formation (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 511).

Coole and Frost (2010) suggest that whilst “critical materialisms are not synonymous with a revival of Marxism”, Marxist theory usefully “orients an ongoing critical analysis of emergent economic and geopolitical structures” (p. 30). Here, the notion of affect also presents a useful lens. Massumi (2015) contends that capitalism “hijacks affect” (p. 20), by becoming an “ontopower” that “augments the powers of existence” (p. 110) (see also Braidotti, 2011). Rejecting the traditional top-down Marxist flow of power, Massumi (2015) posits that “oppressive structures (like the state) can only bear down from above *because they have first risen up from below*” (p. 101, my emphasis). This is because capitalism has “fed its operations back into the field of emergence of bare activity so integrally as to *become-immanent* to it” (p. 108, my emphasis). Hence, it is an ontopower that has produced the conditions for its continued (re)emergence. As Braidotti (2011), explains, even “identities turn into commodified products repackaged as acts of self-expression and liberation” (p. 285; see also Walkerdine, 2017).

Similar to Gramsci’s concept of *hegemony* and Althusser’s *Ideological State Apparatus* (Murphy, 2021), subjects under a capitalist affective register appear to be complicit in their own domination (Massumi, 2015). The former theories posit a social structure that is ‘behind’ social doing and thus adhere to a cultural representationalism that invokes Cartesian duality. Instead, Massumi (2015) utilises affect with an ontology of immanence and so it is possible to retain all the advantages of a sociomaterial framework: a rejection of anthropocentrism, an engagement with all matters; a distribution of agency; and an onto-epistemology. Although retaining the complicity of subjects, Massumi (2015) emphasises how, due to an affective register, subjects’ interests *are* capitalist interests meaning that these are enacted with a genuine “passion” or desire (p. 85; see also Colebrook, 2002; Walkerdine, 2017); Braidotti’s (2011, p. 285) commodified “acts of self-expression and liberation”.

Barad’s (2007) notion of intra-action appears complimentary with this notion of affect. Through sociomaterial intra-actions, or monistic assemblages, the constituting parts of phenomena become separated – the process of “agential cuts” (Barad, 2007, p. 140).

These separations are formed by matters that are affecting and affected in the phenomena-in-information. Through these separations, matters “become distinct and power relation relations produced” (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a, p. 99) through that which they exclude, “the constitutive outside” (Barad, 2007, p. 64). It is *through* affect that intra-acting matters are structured (made distinct) but also structuring (by producing power relations). Thus, the inclusion of the Deleuzian concepts of assemblage and affect allows us to consider the mechanisms through which matter comes to matter, beyond Barad’s (2007) intra-action, particularly with reference to capitalism (Massumi, 2015).

### 3.5 Applying a sociomaterial framework

To summarise, Barad’s (2007) agential realist framework offers a productive theoretical lens with the potential to bring into focus the contribution of other matters in the performative enactments of class as a phenomenon. Their monist onto-epistemology uses the concept of “intra-action” (Barad, 2007, p. 33) to describe how what comes to matter is a process of entanglement, through which “agential-cuts” (p. 140) are the touchstones simultaneously separating what matters. Within this framework, agency is always in-information, distributed across material-discursive matters, rather than residing within individuals as subject-centred epistemologies imply (Barad, 2007).

To return to the knots in the landscape outlined in the middle of this chapter (Section 3.3), the invitations were to:

- build on J. Butler’s performativity to consider the ontogenesis of class as *doing*;
- epistemologically de-centre the subject to bring all matters into focus;
- and to allow theoretical space for young children’s agential contributions to the production of class by avoiding an overreliance on language.

Barad’s theory of posthuman performativity usefully expands J. Butler’s subject-centred theory by accounting for how all matters shape discourse, rather than reinscribing them as passive objects for discursive constructions (Fenwick et al., 2015). This untethers agency from the human-domain, as poststructural accounts of subjectivity have struggled to do, enabling it to take non-linguistic forms (Barad, 2007). This accepts the

call for theoretical space for young children's agency: By inviting all matters into phenomena, they are an irremovable and equal part of sociomaterial phenomena and agency, rather than actors who struggle to demonstrate their agency linguistically.

Whilst this addresses the latter two knots, the ontogenesis of class as a phenomenon is only partially dealt with through Barad's agential realist framework. Through agential realism, it is possible to frame agential cuts within phenomena-in-information that contribute to the distinction of matter resulting in power relations (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2021). Here, the notion of affect usefully builds on Barad's (2007) framework through two avenues. Firstly, framing phenomena-in-information through affect allows us to attend to it as a force through which particular material-discursive matters come to matter. Beyond Barad's (2007) intra-action, Tembo (2022) explains, such a lens demonstrates "how particular affects connect thoughts together with bodies and things, in particular spaces, and what capacities they enable (augment) or constrain (diminish)..." (p. 66; see also Colebrook, 2002).

Secondly, following the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2003), Massumi's (2015) insights into affect offer a possible explanation for how capitalism, via commodification (Braidotti, 2011), enters the frame as an ontogenetic force through its translation into an affective register (Colebrook, 2002). To revisit the branded yoghurt at snack-time in Kustatscher's (2015) work, affect offers a lens which elaborates on the intra-action of the yoghurt, children, playground and snack-time. Through the intra-action of these matters, the middle-class norm of healthy eating emerged and the distinction between the children, as having or not having the yoghurt on the playground at snack-time (Kustatscher, 2015). Yet, I would contend that it was *via an affective register*, as the yoghurt affected the children through being desirable that the distinction was produced (Colebrook, 2002). Conversely, Fox and Alldred (2022) demonstrated how a lack of affective power, in the example of the middle-class boy alienated by his parents' car and mortgage (Section 3.4.4), resulted in his rejection of a conventional lifestyle. As such, affect will be used as an analytical lens to locate and magnify ontogenesis through intra-action.



Although to the best of my reading Barad (2007) has not been applied to the exploration of young children's experience of *class* as a phenomenon, elsewhere their theory and concepts have supported insightful investigations into the materialist ontogenesis of young children's subjectivities (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b; Hall, 2020; Tembo, 2022). In these frameworks, the concept of 'identity' (and to a lesser extent, *subjectivity*) may be considered problematic as it unnecessarily recentres the individual human subject (Renold and Mellor, 2013), albeit whilst including matters other than discourse within its formation. Instead, operationalising class as a posthuman phenomenon-in-information, similar to a Deleuzian assemblage or Latourian actor-network, maintains a focus on its ontogenesis within settings or contexts that humans are a part of (Renold and Mellor, 2013). Although this could be likened to 'discourses of class' which simply incorporate material items, a Baradian (2007) framework enables us to analytically distinguish how materiality constitutes phenomena rather than being inscribed by discourse, more akin to experience "as a transient material-discursive term" (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a, p. 23; see also Colebrook, 2002, p. 89).

### 3.5.1 Conceptualising power within a sociomaterial framework

This thesis adopts a poststructural Foucauldian conceptualisation of power. In this framework, power is not as something which is endowed to individuals by their place in society or structures, but as something which operates throughout a multitude of practices which make up social reality (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984). Power is employed and exercised rather than owned, circulating through this network (Foucault, 1980; see also Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). It is not only the repression of that which is not wanted, but also the encouragement of that which is:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and *produces* things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. (Foucault, 1984, p. 61, my emphasis)

Drawing striking similarities with the concept of assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003), through a network analogy Foucault (1980) arguably decentres *human* individuals, referring to them as "vehicles of power, not its points of application" (p. 98). Here, it is the weaving of power *through* human activity that I consider to be congruent

with Barad's (2007) conception of humans, as an inseparable yet not central part of phenomena (see also Tembo 2021).

This net-like spread gives power an everywhere yet nowhere (Bradley, 2015, p. 45; Savage et al., 2005, p. 939) quality that I find to be productive when diffracted through sociomaterial frameworks as well as modern conceptions of social class (see Section 2.2.3). In keeping with sociomaterial assemblages and their monist ontology, a phenomenon such as social class is not inherent in one aspect of its web, such as notions of healthy eating or school practices (Kustatscher, 2015). It is the joining, the intra-acting, the weaving of these parts in motion, as vehicles always in transit that spin together phenomena moment-by-moment. Thus, when I refer to power in this thesis, I am drawing on the ideas outlined above; that power circulates as a productive and a repressive force, woven through moments as knowledge that enables certain possibilities of being.

### 3.5.2 This study

This study will bring together these lenses to explore affective posthuman class performatives within an English classroom setting (Barad, 2007). Maintaining a focus on class as 'doing', I consider the ontogenesis of class through events, a becoming "in the middle of the thickness of the actual present with all its multiplicities" (Lenz Taguchi, 2009, p. 61).

In keeping with Barad (2007), I think about what material-discursive matters *come to matter* within the patterns of the classroom peer culture during my six-month ethnographic entanglement. I investigate how these differences are (re)made (Kleinman and Barad, 2012), and whether they are ontogenetically constitutive of class phenomena distinctions. Through the notion of affect via Massumi (2015), I analyse if socioeconomic differences have been translated into an affective register and whether that produces power inequalities within the classroom. Such power inequalities are the result of Barad's (2007, p. 140) "agential cuts" enacted within-phenomena, through which classed affects (re)emerge.

Although humans are an inseparable part of this sociomaterial enquiry, they are epistemologically de-centred to allow materiality, spatiality and temporality to enter the

frame. Humans such as young children, myself as the researcher and other adult staff members, along with other matters such as classroom furniture, the school building, daily routines, clothing, language, sounds, future prospects and cultural events, are all considered as intra-acting bodies with the potential to affect each other (Tembo, 2021) and contribute to the ‘doing’ of class-in-formation. Together as an entangled phenomenon, these are the Baradian “spacetime-matterings” (Kleinman and Barad, 2012, p. 77) of classed differences.

This shifts the focus to *how* classed relations are produced, rather than *why* (Deloria, 2012; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2022). This *how* is continual and repeated becomings, moments of unfolding, that are patterned but never in the same way (Barad, 2007; Deleuze and Guattari, 2003; Massumi, 2015). They are unstable but ontogenetically foremost, class becomes through relations rather than as symbolic meanings invested in already existing matters (Barad, 2007). As Lyttleton-Smith (2019a) summarises, objects are not inherently classed – or in Lyttleton-Smith's case, gendered – they become entangled in intra-activity which results in classed effects, or socioeconomic distinctions. Barad (2007) explains that because meanings are not possessed or represented by objects, practical implications should not be to include/remove them but instead focus on the processes in which they are entangled, for example, as used to exclude (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a, p. 35).

### *3.5.2.1 Research questions*

These aspects form the basis for my sociomaterial enquiry into how young children experience class in their peer culture. In this exploration, I hope to respond to the invitations laid out in the middle of this chapter through two research questions:

1. What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?
2. In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented the various theoretical threads that I have re-tangled in an attempt to know social class *otherwise*, particularly with young children. Utilising sociomaterial (Barad, 2007) and affective (Massumi, 2015) lines of enquiry offer potential responses to the knots in the literary landscape as outlined in the middle of this chapter. In doing so, I aim to make theoretical space for children – and all other matters – to enter the frame in the ‘doing’ of class through everyday life, challenging traditional structure-agency binaries (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2003). This is an onto-epistemological endeavour: by de-centring the subject and allowing all matters (materiality, spatiality and temporality) to be agentic in performative events, it is no longer necessary to rely on knowing class through recourse to language (Broadfoot and Pascal, 2020; Cameron et al., 2019). This inseparability of what things are and how we come to know them, Barad’s (2007, p. 44) “onto-epistemology” (Barad, 2007, p. 44) necessarily involves certain methodological considerations, as will be explored in the next chapter.

## 4 Chapter Four: Methodology and methods

### 4.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, I outlined the purpose of this research: To explore how class is constructed through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom at Parkside Primary. The theoretical framework for this draws on Barad's (2007) posthuman performativity, reshaped as a sociomaterial enquiry working through the forces of affect (Massumi, 2015). Through affective sociomaterial intra-actions, in this PhD I explore the economic distinctions, or agential cuts, that matter through moments constructed through children's peer culture unfolding in daily life. This is situated within a wider relational ontological and epistemological framework as discussed in Chapter 3.

Given the invitations in the substantive literature and theoretical framing in the previous chapters, I engaged in a six-month ethnography to explore how sociomaterial distinctions unfold in a classroom as part of young children's lives, in a school pseudonymised as Parkside Primary. This ethnographic approach included the integration of participant observation and daily interpretation sessions between myself and the participants, intended to involve other perspectives in the ongoing interpretation of events. The participants were also invited to complete collaborative projects where they were able to choose the format to respond to a prompt that had been informed by observations.

This chapter will outline the methodology and methods involved in co-constructing this thesis. Section 4.2 begins by discussing my ethnographic methodology, followed by the approach to the interpretation sessions and collaborative projects. The fieldsite and research participants are then introduced (Section 4.3). After this, the ethical considerations and procedures are presented in detail in Section 4.4 as an attempt to address the relative absence of *practical* information when undertaking research with young children (Moore et al., 2018). Table 1 gives an overview of the ethical procedures and data collection activities that spanned my time in Parkside Primary School.

Table 1. Overview of fieldwork activities

		Sept 2023	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan 2024	Feb	Mar-Jun	Jul
Ethical procedures	Familiarisation period (3 weeks)								
	Children’s information and initial assent session	Co-design assent tool session	Ongoing assent is sought and monitored						
	Parent information form and consent letter sent home								
Methods			Participant observation and daily interpretation sessions						Discussion of findings session
			Collaborative projects 1		Collaborative projects 2				

Although interwoven throughout the other sections of the chapter, the concept of reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Delamont and Atkinson, 2021; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) is introduced in Section 4.5 and explored further with reference to my ethnographic approach and positionality. Finally, this chapter then considers the process of analysing and re-presenting my fieldnotes through writing (Section 4.6) before concluding in Section 4.7.

## 4.2 An ethnographic entanglement

To explore the unfolding of social class in everyday moments, an ethnographic methodological approach seemed most appropriate. This is because of ethnography's definition as the study of culture (Delamont and Akinson, 2021), an approach which adopts methods that usually involve the researcher participating in people's daily lives for an extended duration (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 3; see also Tummons and Beach, 2020). Notably, it is also the specified methodology of Prout and James (2015, p. 7) in their exposition of the *new paradigm for the sociology of childhood* (see Section 2.4). However, ethnography's historical emphasis on culture via *human* interaction queries whether it can be used productively within a sociomaterial framework.

Indeed, ethnography's traditional focus on *human* participants' culture can be suggested to oppose the rejection of anthropocentrism in sociomaterial frameworks (Cameron et al, 2019). However, Fenwick et al. (2015) suggest that ethnographic approaches have always incorporated objects, or that which is more-than-human (see also Cameron et al., 2019). Thus, as a methodological approach, ethnography still offers productive methods which can usefully be re-fit within sociomaterialism, emphasising the material alongside the social. Materiality is reframed to understand how it interacts or *intra*-acts (Barad, 2007) with human participants, rather than seeing it as a passive vessel for human cultural understandings (Fenwick et al., 2015; Neimimaa, 2014).

What's more, the study of *culture* arguably presupposes a Cartesian split between nature/culture that leads to representationalism which monist ontologies seek to overcome (see Section 3.4.2.5). Here exists a tension in that "the primary ontological principle [of ethnography] is that a scenario exists *independently* of the researcher" (MacLeod et al., 2019, p. 180, my emphasis). MacLeod et al. posit that in applying sociomaterial frameworks (in their case, Actor-network theory) to ethnography, this dualism becomes aporic:

The ethnographer him/herself is...part of the assemblage under study. *This means that a situation is only brought about through intermingling of particular social and material elements, of which the researcher is a productive part.* In other words, no assemblage exists independently of the researcher. Positioning

the researcher within the phenomenon means that researchers actually (re)configure the world under study. (MacLeod et al., 2019, p. 180, my emphasis)

As such, sociomaterial monist ontologies build on feminist and poststructural critiques of ethnography which rejected the “ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively” (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). In line with a Baradian (2007) approach, I consider my role throughout as inseparable in producing events-in-information (see also Niemimaa, 2014; Tummons, 2024). They<sup>13</sup> encourage researchers to accept “responsibility for the role that we play in the world’s differential becoming” (Barad, 2007, p. 396). This is Barad’s (2007, p. 185) “ethico-onto-epistem-ology” whereby ethical considerations are intertwined with knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology). By participating in a certain setting, researchers are contributing to the agential cuts that will be enacted between what matters (for better or worse) (Barad, 2007). Thus, the “becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter” (Barad, 2007, p. 185), a process that we are inextricably a part of (Tembo, 2021).

Consequently, sociomaterial approaches can be argued to be compatible with ethnography as a methodology (Dennis and Huf, 2020; Neimimma, 2014) and have been used to good effect elsewhere with young children (R. Butler, 2019; Fenwick et al., 2015; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b; Renold and Mellor, 2013; Tembo, 2022). A further strength lies in ethnographic methods that are capable of dynamically mapping intra-acting, messy, fluid and overlapping matters in action (R. Butler, 2019; Dennis and Huf, 2020; Renold and Mellor, 2013). I employed participant observation to honour this emphasis on engagement, entanglement and being *of* the world (Barad, 2007, p. 184), rather than ‘outside’ or ‘above’ it (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Haraway, 1988; Tembo, 2021).

From my reading of the literature, I interacted with two lines of thinking that influenced my approach to engaging ethnographically at Parkside; the importance of capturing emotions and “tuning in” (Plum, 2018, p. 214) to sensory information in the field. Firstly, as detailed in Sections 2.2.3.2 and 2.5.3.3, emotions are an integral component constituting the lived experiences of class (Reay, 2005; 2006, 2017; Skeggs, 2004,

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<sup>13</sup> Karen Barad’s preferred pronouns are they/them/their/theirs/themself.



2012; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 2015, 2016). I draw on the notion of affect throughout this thesis, considering affect to be ontologically prior to emotions (Nayak, 2010; Tembo, 2021, 2022). Nevertheless, as Tembo (2021) comments, there is “a level of porosity between the two” (p. 3). As explored in Section 2.2.3.2, these feelings are an onto-epistemological tool, inseparable from how we can ‘know’ the world around us (Lanas, 2011; Nayak, 2010; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). This formed an important part of my participant observation as I wanted to explore all feelings performed within the field, those that are collective, my own and (speculation about) the children’s. As such, this is a thread which is woven throughout my fieldwork; in my reflective diary, in my fieldnotes and beyond when I revisited data to analyse and re-present them.

Secondly, to participate in a material environment is to engage with it on a physical level, which requires discovery through the senses (Drysdale and Wong, 2013; Pink, 2011; 2015). Pink (2015) outlines how the senses as a tool have been historically overlooked in Western research due to the dominance of positivist rationality from the Enlightenment period (see also Burman, 2008). In the same way as emotions, this is due to their subjective, experiential nature that was viewed through a positivist lens as not scientific (Lanas, 2011). In so-called ‘traditional’ models of ethnography, feminism and poststructuralism deconstructed the link between ‘male rationality’ and logic as objectively scientific, allowing space for alternative ways of knowing (Pink, 2015). Again, I interpret this as an onto-epistemological concern in that understanding requires “being of the world” (Barad, 2007, p. 184; see also Tembo, 2021); *feeling* in both senses of the word – through affective and sensory perceptions.

Sanderud’s (2020) sensory ethnography of children’s play spaces outlines how embodiment is critical to exploring lived experiences, not just observing the children’s actions but *feeling* what it is to be tired, to climb or to be cold at school. This is not to suggest that by doing what the children do, I will understand or think exactly how they do; that is not the aim. Sensory ethnography seeks to participate in *how knowledge is created through the senses*, by constantly being (re)made (Pink, 2015). Notably, sensorial ways of knowing are embodied (although representations of it through language are verbal) which can displace the overreliance on language via discourse

that can plague research with young children (Bennett and Sani, 2008; Blaise, 2016; Lenz Taguchi, 2009) (discussed in Section 3.2.3).

It can also be suggested that sensory ethnography is complimentary with a sociomaterial approach to ethnographic methods. My position as an intra-acting element within ethnography must be accounted for and this extends to the process of sensory (and emotional) engagement in the field. As Pink (2015) points out “it is crucial to recognise the constructedness of the modern western sensorium and the importance of understanding other people’s worlds through their (sensory) categories” (p. 22). She explains that the traditional five senses (see, hear, smell, taste, touch) are rooted in Western biological understandings which often sideline cross-sensory awareness or Indigenous knowledges (Pink, 2015, p. 11; see also Deloria, 2012; Rosiek, 2018). Ergo, tuning in to senses and affect/emotions in the field is only part of the task; being reflective about their construction and my interpretation of them is another (Pink, 2015).

Thus, reflexivity is a crucial tool within ethnographic entanglements not just to reflect sensory construction (Pink, 2015), but affective engagement and interpretation more generally (Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015; Nayak, 2010; Skeggs, 2003; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Reflexivity is a concept that has been posited to offer an alternative to positivist notions of objectivity where researchers observe ‘from above’ and control for ‘confounding’ factors. Instead, being reflexive invites researchers to account for these ‘confounding’ aspects rather than attempt to remove them (Russell and Barley, 2020). As Spyrou explains in relation to documenting children’s voices in research, “critical, reflective researchers need to move beyond claims of authenticity and account for the complexity behind children’s voices by exploring their messy, multi-layered and non-normative character” (Spyrou, 2011, p. 151).

Consequently, being reflexive is fundamental to undertaking an ethnographic entanglement sensitive to feeling in the field. More than this, it was critical in interpreting how certain ‘voices’ (verbal and non-verbal) are produced in the field (Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022) and to take responsibility for my part in this – a Baradian (2007, p. 185) “ethico-onto-epistem-ological” approach (discussed further in Section 4.5.1.2.2). As Spyrou (2011) notes, conceptualising and reflecting on power is a central tenet when

being reflexive and will be discussed in more detail throughout the Ethical considerations and Reflexivity sections.

For these reasons, I chose an ethnographic methodological approach which is entangled with affective/emotional and sensory knowledge bases. Reflexivity is a core tool within this and underpins many of the decisions I made regarding the implementation of my methods. From September 2023 – February 2024, I attended the Reception class at Parkside Primary school two days per week. Whilst my attendance at school was largely confined to this period, as my methodological approach suggests, extensive critical thinking preceded and followed it. My ethnographic approach involved six months of participant observation, daily interpretation sessions and a series of collaborative projects with the children. Table 2 maps these methods to the data constructed.

*Table 2 Methods of data collection with additional details mapped against the data constructed*

Method	Details	Data constructed
Participant observation	Tuesdays and Thursdays	Field notes Photographs
Daily interpretation sessions	Tuesdays and Thursdays Groups of 2–4 children <5 minutes	Field notes Audio recordings
Collaborative projects	November 2023 and January 2024 Groups of 3–4 children <30 minutes across three sessions	Field notes Audio recordings Photographs of models, drawings or selected books
Discussion of findings session	July 2024 Groups of 3–4 children <5 minutes	Field notes Audio recordings Photographs of children's notes

### 4.2.1 Participant observation

I intentionally began attending Parkside Primary in September 2023 at the beginning of the first term and the school year. Schools are characterised by their own temporal routines, of which the start of the school year is an important one (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). In this vein, I timed the end of my fieldwork with the end of term in February when the children broke up from school for a week's holiday. Each Tuesday and Thursday I attended school, arriving before the children did on a morning and leaving after they had gone home at the end of each day. Generally, I took part in all school routines that occurred across the school: in the classroom - carpet time, lessons, snack-time, washing hands, free-flow play; in the hall - lunchtime and rehearsals; and outdoor playtimes. The classroom and the school day are (re)constructed in more detail in Chapter Five: Locating Parkside.

Through participating in these activities, I set-out to position myself as an “unusual” adult (Christensen, 2004, p. 174; Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015). This is an adult who occupied contradictory roles: I was sometimes obliged to step in to keep children safe, but I also endeavoured to avoid the power exercised by teachers (Connolly, 2006; Kirby, 2020), for example by not reprimanding disruptive behaviour. Whilst it is useful to prefigure a role to enter the field, Konstantoni and Kustatscher (2015) describe how this will always be subject to children's interactions with the research(er), meaning the role was negotiated, or co-constructed, on an ongoing basis (see also Dennis and Huf, 2020; Epstein, 1998). Reflections on my positioning during the fieldwork are discussed in Section 4.5.1.2.

Observations from my participation were handwritten in a fieldnotes journal. This was a spiral-bound notebook that I always kept with me at school. To facilitate this, I created a strap for the notebook which enabled it to hang across my body like a bag (see Figure 2). This made it extremely portable and freed up my hands for participating in activities with the children. I felt that it also maintained transparency, serving as a reminder (to adults, children and myself) of my intentions in the school (see also Truscott, 2020). The children were able to look in my notebook, often flicking through it and asking me to read notes. As Tummons (2024) suggests, this fosters a “relational curiosity” (p. 2) in

which an ethnographer also acts as part of the inquiry as much as the participants. These notes were very brief as they were usually scribbled down quickly after certain moments or alongside unfolding events. At the end of each school day, I would expand these from memory and type them up in more detail (see Section 4.6).



*Figure 2. My fieldnotes journal*

I also kept an additional typed reflexive journal where I collated reflections on my time in the field (Luttrell, 2000; Spyrou, 2011). This is not to suggest that ‘being reflexive’ was something that I only did when typing in this journal, but rather it was a useful way to collate reflective thoughts from across the research process. When reviewing my fieldnotes for analysis, I found evaluative and questioning statements littered throughout my general notes but often reiterated or expanded on these in my reflexive journal.

#### 4.2.2 Daily interpretation sessions

Throughout my time in the field, I also implemented daily interpretation sessions: I gathered observations throughout the morning and then in the afternoons, I presented this information back to a group of children for a short discussion. The children would usually be in groups of around two to four, in one case rising to five due to a pact between the children to participate together. Before each session, I explained what the session involved and invite the children to participate (even if they had assented to the research previously). Essentially interviews, these discussions lasted around five minutes and enabled the children to chat relatively freely after my initial prompt, much like Connolly’s (1998) interviews with 5–6-year-olds (see also Barley, 2013; Christensen, 2004). They also increased the transparency of the research process in

the sense that I indicated what I had noticed about the children that morning, for example when some party invites were handed out, and invited the children to suggest their reading of this situation (Thomson, 2008).

During these sessions, I would jot down notes on what the children were saying or doing. These sessions were also audio-recorded providing all children in the session had provided consent from their legal guardian and their own assent to participate. Like the fieldnotes produced from my participant observation, these notes and transcripts were typed up on the same day they were collected. This enabled me to expand from memory with relative clarity where handwritten notes may have been brief.

Despite their anthropocentric focus on human voices, even ethnographic methods such as interviewing can still be considered tools within a sociomaterial framework (Cameron et al., 2019). This is because interviews enable researchers to “explore peoples’ perceptions of and responses to their everyday...practice” (Cameron et al., 2019, p. 9) which can include perceptions of material resources. This is part of materials’ discursive mattering which, as explained in Section 3.4.2.2, makes them inseparable from humans, albeit decentring them in a sociomaterial approach (Fenwick et al., 2015). Thus, interviews are just another tool in the ethnographer’s toolkit enabling them to build up a collage reflecting their experience in the field, all of which re-presents only a partial view or specific entanglement (Crang and Cook, 2007; Haraway, 1988).

The inclusion of this method was largely driven by my effort to make my project more ‘participatory’ by offering more ownership over data production and analysis to the children (Graham et al., 2016; Lundy et al., 2011; Prout and James, 2015). Whilst participant observation is suggested to be “naturally ‘participatory’” (Raitilla and Vuorisalo, 2021, p. 369) as participants are involved in the sense-making process, this can still be seen as separate from the ‘analysis proper’ after time spent in the field (see also Kustatscher, 2015). Like Templeton (2018), I wanted to de-compartmentalise data analysis as a research ‘stage’, making it a deliberately integrated and iterative process which involves participants (see also Graham et al., 2016). This approach attempts to disrupt my sole adult interpretation of classroom events (Dockett et al., 2009; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2021; Thomson, 2008). To avoid children’s voices being ‘seen but not

heard' (Spyrou, 2011), such activities must be considered reflexively within the context of research relationships, power relations and knowledge production (Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022), discussed throughout this chapter. Yet undeniably, ultimate responsibility will always rest with me, the researcher, as the "filter" (Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022, p. 357) of the information which constitutes this thesis.

### 4.2.3 Collaborative projects

For similar reasons, I also included collaborative projects in November-December 2023 and January-February 2024 as a way of involving the children more directly in the data collection and interpretation (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023). These projects were inspired by literature around the "Mosaic approach" (Clark and Moss, 2011) where young children are invited to choose from a variety of mediums to convey their response to the research, such as acting, painting, drawing or dancing (see also Rinaldi, 2006). These collaborative projects were named as such because they are "less a data collection exercise" and more "a shared conversation through which new ways of knowing are produced" (Pink, 2011, p. 271).

These projects were usually done in groups of three to four children (depending on those who had consent and assent and were also involved in the initial observations). The children were asked if they would like to participate and then we gathered around a table or on the carpet. I presented behaviour that I had observed – such as children inviting friends to their house – and encouraged the children's responses. I would usually suggest a couple of mediums that the children were familiar with, such as role-play or drawing, as I found this to be more productive for generating information (inspired by Lundy et al., 2011). The children would then choose their activity – usually in pairs – and spend 5-10 minutes completing it. After this, we reformed as a group for a discussion session where the children would share what they had been working on.

Throughout the sessions, I would handwrite notes on what the children were saying and doing and audio-recorded where I had consent for, and assent from, the child. Where the children produced physical pieces of work, I asked for their permission to photograph these and the child would keep the original. Like the interpretation sessions, this was intended to disrupt sole adult interpretations by inviting children to suggest how

their work could be read (Dockett et al., 2009; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2021; Thomson, 2008). In doing so, I hoped to “construct more critical ethnographic accounts of spatiality and materiality” (Cameron et al., 2019, p. 5) in line with a sociomaterial framework. Within such a framework, participation can be rethought of as “the coproduction of data between researcher and research participants” (Cameron et al., 2020, p. 5); “doing with” rather than simply being in the field (Dennis and Huf, 2020, p. 458).

Whilst this research has already set an agenda in terms of the overarching research interest (Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022; Tummons, 2022), these activities are intended to broaden the scope of children’s participation (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). Yet, this comes with important ethical implications. Involving children in the analysis of information that they did not set out to produce (for example, about social class) has the potential to introduce concepts that may not be appropriate or relevant to their lives (Graham et al., 2016; McMellon and Tisdall, 2020; Palaiologou, 2014; Sime, 2008). As such, I aimed to reserve the remit of these collaborative projects to the children’s interpretation of their behaviour or words, rather than impressing my adult reading that may involve understandings of class. I maintained ownership over the latter aspect of the analysis which I believe is ethically-appropriate given that I was the one who constructed it as a research question.

#### 4.2.4 Discussion of findings sessions

In July 2024, I returned to Parkside to share my interpretation of the findings and invite the children’s views of these. These sessions were delivered in small groups to the children who had assented and whose guardians had consented. In the sessions, I introduced the themes I had identified, using photos as prompts, and invited the children’s interpretations of these findings. This was not a member checking exercise where the children are assumed to be ‘privileged commentators’ on their actions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 3). Instead, through tangling all actors’ “partial views” (Crang and Cook, 2007, p. 127), it becomes an exercise in co-construction through which “new ways of knowing are produced” (Pink, 2011, p. 271). Importantly, there is no ‘absolute truth’ that can be accessed through overlapping enough partial



views (including my own), only the *interaction of different perspectives* which creates new framings (Murphy, 2021; Walshaw, 2007).

## 4.3 Participants

### 4.3.1 Recruitment

The selection of the school for this study was, as Lyttleton-Smith (2019a) summarises “a combination of design and chance” (p. 105). I planned to use only one site for my ethnography and this was required to be easily accessible for me in terms of travel to avoid additional time or financial burdens as a self-funded PhD student. I was also aware of the challenges of recruiting schools to voluntary projects from research (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a) and my professional and academic experiences. In May 2023, I approached two schools that I had existing personal relations with to take part in the study.

A school which served a predominantly affluent demographic<sup>14</sup> was selected for two main reasons. Firstly, as discussed in Section 2.2.3, I was captured by ideas of “unpicking” and “exposing” (Savage, 2003, p. 537) pervasive middle-classness that has seeped into societal norms and values (Skeggs, 2003; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 2015). Indeed, Russell and Barley (2022) suggest that working-class communities are often over-studied, when more could perhaps be learnt from those who maintain advantage; their relational “other” (Reay, 2007, p. 1042; Walkerdine, 2020). Secondly, I felt conscious of my positioning as a PhD university student which can be perceived as middle-class (discussed in Section 4.5.1.2.1). Walkerdine (2020, 2021) outlines this power imbalance in the information produced about working-class communities which are largely studied by middle-class academics. I also wanted to avoid implications of adhering to a middle-class discourse of ‘fixing’ *disadvantage* (Cushing, 2020, 2022; Hendrick, 2015; Nightingale, 2020). This was my attempt to be sensitive to the ethical responsibility I have when producing information as an academic (a historically middle-class role), and the “agential cuts” (Barad, 2007, p. 140) I help to enact through my time in the field and re-presentation through my thesis.

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<sup>14</sup> Identified by the percentage of children eligible for free-school meals (GOV.UK, 2024)

### 4.3.2 The school

The chosen school, pseudonymised as Parkside Primary, is a multi-form entry primary school in the North of England. It is state-funded and voluntary-controlled by the Church of England. Parkside provides places for children aged 4–11-years-old and had 313 children in total during the academic year 2023-2024. The children are divided into the nationally-recognised year groups for England: Reception (4-5-years-old); Year 1 (5-6-years-old); Year 2 (6-7-years-old); Year 3 (7-8-years-old); Year 4 (8-9-years-old); Year 5 (9-10-years-old); Year 6 (10-11-years-old). There are usually two classes per year group.

The two Reception classes, also referred to as the “Early Years”, each have a dedicated teacher<sup>15</sup> and there are three teaching assistants who alternate between the classes. The school and a sociomaterial introduction to the Reception classroom and the school day are explored in more detail in Chapter Five: Locating Parkside.

### 4.3.3 The children

In September 2023, two classes of 4–5-year-old children started at Parkside Primary; 45 children in total. All children across both classes were invited to participate in the study through a dual process of seeking informed consent from their parents/guardians, as well as assent from the children, resulting in 14 children taking part in the project.

### 4.3.4 The staff

Six staff members (three teachers and three teaching-assistants) who regularly worked across both classrooms were also invited to participate. They were given physical information letters and opt-in consent forms (see Appendix 1) which explained that, although they were not the focus of this study, they may be captured in the research notes. Five of them returned the forms indicating that they were happy to participate and the unreturned form was treated as a decision to opt-out.

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<sup>15</sup> One of the classes has two teachers who share the working week.

## 4.4 Ethical considerations

The ethical considerations outlined in this section refer to a variety of processes; both those which formed part of the ethical approval process as well as those implemented as part of the ongoing fieldwork (Tummons, 2022). Consequently, this section constitutes a relatively large portion of the methodology chapter. This is deliberate in the hope that it demonstrates the breadth and depth of the ethical considerations involved throughout this project. Not only this, but it is also hoped that by detailing these procedures, this section can overcome the shortage of information surrounding how ethical considerations can be implemented in practice, particularly with younger children (Moore et al., 2018).

Prior to commencing fieldwork, this project received initial ethical approval in May 2023 from the Ethics Committee at Durham University (BERA, 2024). A revision to seek informed consent from staff members was submitted and approved in September 2023.

### 4.4.1 Agreements to participate

The British Education Research Association (BERA) (2024) states the requirement that “informed consent” (p. 13) should be sought from participants who are involved in a study. Informed consent is understood to be “the condition by which participants understand and agree to their participation, and the terms and practicalities of it, without any duress...[and] they can withdraw at any point without needing to provide an explanation” (BERA, 2024, p. 13). As such, to give informed consent, participants must: be adequately informed of the research and have the ‘capacity’ or understanding to consent; make an explicit decision to participate; give their decision voluntarily; and be able to change this throughout a study (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p. 93; see also Horowicz and Stalford, 2023).

In the UK, children may not be able to legally give their informed consent on the basis that their age “may limit the extent to which they can be expected to understand or agree voluntarily” (BERA, 2024, p. 18). Thus, a child’s informed consent is lawfully defaulted to their parent or guardian (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; BERA, 2024). This is on the grounds that, as adults, legal guardians have the understanding and capacity to

consent on their child's behalf and will act in their child's "best interests" (BERA, 2024, p. 18). In theory, these frameworks retain that children have the *potential* to be able to consent "commensurate with their age and maturity" (BERA, 2024, p.18) or dependent on their "evolving capacities" in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF, 1989, Article 5 and 14.2).

However, Wyness (2019) states that such developmental milestones are conflated with age, particularly in Western models of child development (p. 207), meaning that often, children are unable to give their legal consent to participate in research (see also Burman, 2008). Alderson and Morrow (2011) point out that in English law, the *Gillick* competency scale means that children of any age are able to give consent if they are deemed to be able to make 'informed' and 'wise' decisions (p. 103). Terms such as 'wise' again usually implicate adult-based developmental assumptions making it particularly difficult for young children to meet this threshold (Conroy and Harcourt, 2009; Hill and Tisdall, 2014). This underpins Alderson and Morrow's (2011) decision to refer to children's consent rather than their assent.

This illuminates tensions between institutional Research Ethics Committees (RECs) and studies which ascribe to the ontology of children as competent actors, particularly in ethnographic studies (Hill and Tisdall, 2014; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022; Yanar et al., 2016). RECs require researchers to make decisions on their ethical processes prior to starting fieldwork, adhering to universal frameworks which assume children's capacities in advance (Russell and Barley, 2022). Researchers have to decide, presumably on age-related adult assumptions, whether their young participants are able to consent to their research possibly prior to ever meeting them (Conroy and Harcourt, 2009; Hill and Tisdall, 2014). This also undermines the idea that participants' decisions to be involved in research, particularly young children's, should be grounded in established relationships between researchers and participants (BERA, 2024; Flewitt, 2005; Templeton, 2018).

Given these institutional factors, I sought to incorporate a dual process of seeking legal *informed consent* from my participants' guardians, whilst also seeking initial and

ongoing informed *assent* from the children (Barley, 2013; Street, 2021; Templeton, 2018).

#### 4.4.1.1 *Informed assent*

Assent “describes an expression of a willingness to participate in an activity or study by persons who are deemed unable to give legal consent on their own behalf” (Horowicz and Stalford, 2023, p. 5; see also Dockett et al., 2012). Due to the legal status of consent, children’s agreement to participate can only be sought *in addition*, introducing “*another layer* of decision-making where children’s choices can be respected” (Dockett et al., 2013, p. 804, my emphasis). However, this is not to suggest that children’s assent is not required. Children did not participate in this study unless they had assented in addition to the consent given by their guardians (Alderson and Morrow, 2020).

The children’s assent to participate in this study was undertaken on the same grounds as their consent to participate would be. As above with consent, to give assent, children should be adequately informed to make an explicit and voluntary choice to participate which can be changed throughout the study (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Horowicz and Stalford, 2023). Assent is considered as Alderson and Morrow (2011) view consent: as a “process” through which children “negotiate” their participation in the research, dependent on their “growing knowledge” of the project and a “two-way exchange of information” (p. 111). This is embedded within the relations between myself as a researcher, the children as participants and the wider social settings (Graham et al., 2016; Meloni et al., 2015).

As such, the children’s decisions to participate are supported by four processes in this study: a familiarisation period; an information and discussion session; a session in which the children recorded their initial assent; and mechanisms to support their decision to assent or dissent on an ongoing basis (see Table 4.1 Overview of fieldwork activities). The children’s first decision to participate in the study is referred to as “initial assent” as it is a choice which is renegotiable throughout the project as the children learn more about what participation involves (Conroy and Harcourt, 2009). This is akin to “provisional” decisions to participate in research (Barley, 2013, p. 72; Flewitt, 2005, p.

4), and hence why their *ongoing* decision to participate must be sought (Truscott et al., 2019).

#### 4.4.1.1.1 Becoming entangled: a familiarisation period

Alderson and Morrow (2011) outline how decisions to participate are underpinned by the quality of interpersonal relationships between a researcher and their participants (p. 120; see also Barley and Bath, 2014; Dockett et al., 2012). Other researchers working with young children have also emphasised periods of familiarisation to give young children the opportunity to form safe and trusting relationships with them in order to support decisions to participate (Barley, 2022; Flewitt, 2005; Huser et al., 2022; Templeton, 2018; see also BERA, 2024, p. 14).

Hence, I initially planned a two-week familiarisation period at the start of September to build in space for the children and I to negotiate roles as I became entangled in the setting. This was a period where the focus was on building relationships with the children and to enable me to become more familiar with the field (Barley and Bath, 2014). After the planned two weeks had elapsed, I felt that I had begun to build positive relationships with one of the two classes in the school. However, I felt that my presence was not well established in the other classroom as some of the children were still unsure of my name or were surprised when I joined in some of the classroom activities. As a result, I extended this period by another week with a focus on developing my relationships across both classrooms. By the start of my fourth week visiting the school, children across both classes knew my name and involved me to differing extents in their activities.

Whilst a “familiarisation period” may suggest a discrete timeframe in which children can get to know me, “becoming entangled” emphasises how this process is only the start of this process and is constantly subject to (re)negotiation throughout the fieldwork (Russell and Barley, 2022; Tummons, 2024). This supports a view of consent as a “two-way exchange of information” (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p. 111) over time, where children’s decisions to participate must be continually revisited along with a reminder of their right to change their mind.

#### 4.4.1.1.2 Information and discussion session

In September 2023, I facilitated two sessions designed to inform the children about the research project and seek their initial assent to participate. The first session shared relevant information about the project and the second, a couple of days later, re-capped this information and invited them to record their initial decision to participate, as well as their pseudonym (see Section 4.4.2). These sessions were followed by a third session in which the children were invited to co-design a tool to record their ongoing decision to participate (see Section 4.4.1.1.4.3).

I delivered an information session on the research project to each class. Each session was around 10-15 minutes long and was a discussion in which both the children and I could learn more about each other's understandings of research and what it could involve (Dockett et al., 2012). This session was supported by a pictorial information booklet (see Appendix 2) (Alderson and Morrow, 2020) that I had designed to support the children's understanding of the key points which comprise the research project, such as what my role is, what I will do whilst I am in school and what their involvement entails.

To deliver the session, I asked the children to sit in a circle rather than in the three rows facing the front of the classroom that they usually sit in to listen to teaching input. This was an attempt to further disrupt the adult power that is embedded in the organisation of classrooms (Mandell, 1988; Wyness, 2019). In this case, through spatial organisation, the teacher is placed at the front to oversee the children whilst they are directed to focus on the teacher (James, 2007). In addition to interrupting this spatial organisation, sitting in a circle also had the benefit of being an unusual arrangement for the children. Thus, although I had initiated the discussion topic for this information session, the activity did not follow their 'normal' classroom conventions, promoting my positioning as different from other practitioners (discussed in Section 4.5.1.2.1) (Spryou, 2011).

During the session, we discussed what is meant by a "research project", and whilst the children did not seem sure about what 'research' is, they could speak about other project work they had done. From the images on page 2 (Appendix 2) (see Figure 3) the children immediately grasped, without explanation, that I was "thinking" about "children

playing” as part of my research project. I explained that later that week I would ask them to choose “Yes” (thumbs up) or “No” (thumbs down) or “Not sure” (confused face). At the end of the session, I invited questions from the children to which Rapunzel<sup>16</sup> put up her hand and said:

*Rapunzel: [smiling] I want to join in*

*TP<sup>17</sup>: Why do you want to join in?*

*Rapunzel: [small pause] because I want to know more about school*

[Fieldnotes, 26<sup>th</sup> September 2023]



Figure 3. Page 2 of the children's information booklet

<sup>16</sup> All children are pseudonymised (see Section 4.4.2).

<sup>17</sup> TP refers to myself (Tara Paxman).



Flower asked, “what are you actually doing when you come into school?” to which I explained that I would be in the classroom, and if the children said yes, I would be watching them playing and writing about it in my notebook. Another child asked why I need to watch the children playing, to which I revisited the front page of my booklet to explain that it is for my work at Durham University (a “school for adults”). Later in the school day, I asked some children if they understood why I was in school. Responses were: “you are thinking about children playing to write a book”; “you want to learn what children do”; “I’m going to do a thumbs up...but some children might do a thumbs down, like (Name)”. The child referenced in the last statement had shared at the end of the information session that they would be putting their thumb down, to which I smiled and reinforced that this was an “ok” decision too.

Taken together, these questions and comments illustrate that some children were able to understand and enquire about my involvement in school life. Whilst the children did not initially have an awareness of research as a term, even if they did, the definition is widely variable depending on the project content. As such, this is just one part of ethical agreements to participate with young children: as they learn more about what I say and do, the children’s knowledge grows over time as part of a “two-way exchange of information” (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p. 111) about what constitutes *this* research project.

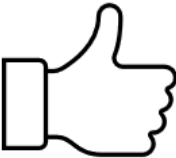

#### 4.4.1.1.3 Initial assent session


Two days later, I delivered the second session to seek the children’s initial decision on whether to participate in the research project. In small groups, I revisited key information points, such as: what their participation would involve; that any of the three decisions were valid; that they could change their mind at any point after the session; and that their participation required their parents/guardians to also return a letter. After this, I invited them to circle, tick or otherwise indicate their initial decision on the back page of

the information booklet (as in Dockett et al., 2013, p. 821) (see Figure 4, see also Appendix 2); Table 3 shows the children's initial decisions to participate.

My name is:

---



You can call me:

---

Figure 4. Page 4 of the children's information booklet

Table 3. Children's initial decisions to participate

Decision to participate	Number of children
Yes	28
No	5
Not sure	7
Did not decide*	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>

\*Children who were absent from school or who did not want to complete the activity. This was treated as a decision to opt-out.

Children who had parental consent *and* had agreed to be involved in the project, became active participants; I began involving them in the study activities. Children who selected “no”, regardless of whether they had consent from their families, were not the focus of observations. Nevertheless, these children were unavoidably still present in the classroom and I still interacted/played with them if they requested to avoid feelings of exclusion (Lundy et al., 2011) and therefore a pressure to opt-in. Children’s “not sure” decisions were treated as a decision to opt-out (BERA, 2024) unless the children indicated otherwise. I decided not to ask the children to explain their decision to avoid the implication that I may be looking for a specific answer, or that it may be the ‘wrong’ decision.

#### 4.4.1.1.4 Mechanisms for ongoing assent

The emphasis of this initial decision was on its tentative nature, as “provisional” assent to participate in the research project (Barley, 2013, p. 71; Flewitt, 2005 p. 4). Children’s decisions to participate were viewed as a “process”, rather than as a static, one-off event, shaped by their “growing knowledge” of the research as it progresses (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p. 111; see also Conroy and Harcourt, 2009). This is fundamental to open-ended and longer-term research, such as ethnography, where it is not clear at the outset what direction the study may take (Alderson and Morrow, 2011). Thus, the children’s decision to participate in the research was sought on a day-to-day as well as an activity-by-activity basis as their knowledge of the project increased (Flewitt, 2005). This was done through three main mechanisms: being sensitive to signs of verbal or non-verbal assent/dissent; explicitly checking decisions to participate at the start of discrete collaborative sessions; and through an assent tool that the children could use to change their decision to participate (the third assent session in the series).

##### 4.4.1.1.4.1 Indicators of assent and dissent

In research across all ages, monitoring participants for non-direct indicators of assent or dissent is an effective way to ensure researchers are sensitive to the needs of their participants (Dockett et al., 2012; Hendry et al., 2024). Specifically, this usually refers to where a participant may wish to stop their involvement during an activity but may not feel comfortable saying so (Truscott et al., 2019). This practice is particularly important

in schools, where existing power differentials between adults and children may affect children's agency (Dockett et al., 2013; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022) (see Section 4.5.1.2).

For example, in my research, during free-flow play periods in the classroom, children would be regularly called away from play activities by an adult to take part in smaller group work sessions. I also utilised these free-flow play periods to conduct small group sessions for my research project. On a few occasions when I initially asked children to join activities, they almost automatically agreed, but then looked uncomfortable by putting their head down or attempting to stow away what they had been playing with in a panic. After I reminded them that they could say no to my activities and/or change their mind at a later point, some chose to opt-out to continue playing. This illustrates how I had to be vigilant to ensure that pre-existing power differentials related to adult/child group work at Parkside did not impinge on the children's agreement to participate voluntarily.

Monitoring indicators of assent and dissent is also an established common practice in research with young children (Barley, 2013; Flewitt, 2005; Street, 2021; Templeton, 2018; Tembo, 2022; Truscott, 2020). Yet, this process is not a universal experience for all children: children choose to assent or dissent for different reasons, such as to be with friends or to do the activity the researcher is offering (Dockett et al., 2012).

Furthermore, children express their decisions in many different ways, including verbal responses, disengagement, invitations to play or through body gestures (Dockett et al., 2009, 2012; see also Graham et al., 2016). Indeed, the extracts from fieldnotes below illustrate three events where children expressed their assent/dissent via disengagement [1], an invitation to play [2], or deflection [3]:

*[1] I am sitting at a classroom table whilst Monkey is drawing on his own nearby. Whilst I am drawing, I smile at him, but he appears to avoid eye contact. Perhaps in error, I want to build a relationship so comment positively on his drawing. Monkey doesn't respond. I smile again and he avoids my gaze again. I take this as an indication that he does not want to interact with me and do not bother him further.*

[Fieldnotes, 21<sup>st</sup> September 2023]

*[2] A group of children are playing with wooden planks/boxes and poles in the outdoor area. I hang to the side when Sausage invites me, 'are you going to help me?' and hands me a pole. I nod and Sausage continues 'I'll pass them to you - you put them in [stood up in the bricks]'.*

*[Fieldnotes, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023]*

*[3] I sit down by TJ on the carpet where he is doing puzzles. Seemingly in response, he looks at Ben who is completing a game nearby on the interactive whiteboard.*

*TJ asks me what Ben's name is and I reply.*

*TJ: I want you to sit next to [Ben] over there.*

*I take this as a clear sign that TJ does not want me to sit by him while he is playing and I move away to another area.*

*[Fieldnotes, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023]*

These signals can sometimes appear contradictory (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Dockett et al., 2012; Barley, 2022). In the fieldnotes below, I recount a time where this expression was confused, but then clarified:

*[4] Whilst I am writing in my notebook, Ariel comes over to me:*

*Ariel: What's that? [pointing to my notebook]*

*TP: I am writing about children playing for my research project...like I wrote about your smoothie [that she had been making in the role play area]*

*Ariel: No!*

*TP: Do you not want me to write about your smoothie? I'll cross it out [I moved my pencil over the writing]*

*Ariel: No! I do [want you to write about it!] [moving towards me to stop me crossing out the information]*

*[Fieldnotes, 12<sup>th</sup> October 2023]*

Across all of these examples, my response was a reflection of the children's behaviour as well as my emerging knowledge of each child (Graham et al., 2016). For example, in the fourth example, I was aware of Ariel's knowledge of the research project from the information sessions, as well as her initial decision to participate, which prompted me to further clarify our communication.

#### *4.4.1.1.4.2 Explicitly asking children during sessions*

I also explicitly checked children's decisions to assent prior to discrete sessions, such as the daily interpretation sessions or the collaborative projects. This was useful in

marking out specific research activities, so it was transparent to the children that involvement in certain activities meant involvement in the project (Dockett et al., 2012). The fieldnotes below show how, despite Belle's request to be involved with an audio-recording, I made it transparent that this was part of the research project by guiding her to the assent tool (discussed in Section 4.4.1.1.4.3):

*Whilst I am chatting to two children as part of an audio-recorded collaborative session, Belle starts watching what we are doing. After a few moments, she walks over and enquires:*

*Belle: Can I do this?*

*TP: Yes sure, you can join us now...*

*... but before you do, can you go over to where I have stuck up your photos to check you are still happy with your decision to take part in the research?*

*Belle: [walks over to the tool, finds her photo and smiles] yes, I do  
She walks back over and joins in with the recording activity.*

[Fieldnotes, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

#### *4.4.1.1.4.3 Ongoing assent tool*

Yet, whilst children may want to change their decision to participate, using the methods above they were unable to do so without interacting with me in-person. As before, this perhaps exacerbates the adult/child power differentials in a school setting for children who may not feel as confident interacting with an adult, particularly if they would like to opt-out (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015; Spyrou, 2011).

Inspired by the work of Kustatscher (2014, 2015) who also cites Gallagher (2009), I chose to adopt the use of a physical, visual tool that the children could use to indicate their ongoing decisions to participate. Children in Kustatscher's (2014) study could amend their decision to participate by moving a magnet with their photo on to an opt-in or opt-out area of a display, however she reflected on how the children brought diverse meanings to the tool. By involving children in my study at the design stage, I hope to build on Kustatscher's (2014) work by involving children in co-constructing the meaning of the tool at an earlier point (Gray and Winter, 2011; Russell and Barley, 2020;). Two-weeks after the initial assent session, I carried out a 10-minute groupwork activity in which the children and I discussed how they might record their decisions to participate.

By co-designing this tool, I shared my ownership of the research and consent processes with the children (Russell and Barley, 2020). This was an effort to further shape the power relations between myself and the children, rebalancing a dynamic where the children could not only choose whether they participated, but how they did it (Lundy et al., 2011).

Here, the emphasis was on the collaborative nature of this activity, rather than expecting the children to come up with ideas ‘from scratch’. This meant that I provided some initial resources, such as coloured paper, and guided the discussion to ensure that the tool would be effective, accessible and ethical according to some pre-defined key criteria. Developed from the principles of consent (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; BERA, 2024), these were: a) each child should be separate and identifiable; b) there should be separate and clear options on participation; c) each child should be able to easily move their icon/photo/name between different participation options to indicate that their assent is not fixed; d) recording assent should be accessible for all, i.e. not requiring each child to write a sentence to show their assent/dissent. These criteria were supported by examples already in their school environment, such as a self-registration tool where the children could move a photo onto a board to show record their attendance that day.

During the session, I revisited the initial assent page of the information booklet (Figure 4) and explained that because I would not have these booklets with me all the time, and the children may want to change their mind, it would be a good idea to make something that helps them show their decisions. I explained that we would need something to show the “Yes”, “No” or “Not sure” decisions in the booklet and the children suggested that we use green paper for “Yes”, red paper for “No” and white paper for “Not sure”. Belle suggested that each child could “write their name” which I prompted may be a bit hard for children who may not be able to read/write their name (criterion (d) above). She then suggested “dots”, which I prompted would mean that the children were not identifiable as per criterion (a) to which she offered “dots with names” instead. Another child then suggested photographs. The teacher then suggested that the children could vote by putting their hands up, and photographs were chosen to represent each child.

I created the tool by adding the assent icons used in the information booklets to the coloured paper and creating small movable photographs stuck with Blue-Tak (see Figure 5 without photo cards for anonymity). When I returned to school the following week, I re-introduced the tool to the children and they could explain what the coloured papers represented. I stuck the tool at a low height in the shared corridor between the classes which all children were able to access during free-flow periods. I added a copy of my information booklet next to it so that this could serve as an accessible, visual reminder of the nature of the research project.



*Figure 5. The assent tool that the children co-designed, stuck on a bookshelf in the corridor.*



Throughout my time in the field, I used the tool to help communicate decisions to participate with the children. In the example in the previous section, I asked Belle if she was happy with her decision to participate which she confirmed by reference to the tool. Additionally, I observed different children revisiting the tool and looking through the information booklet throughout my time in the field. Although the children's decisions to participate were generally quite stable (changes are discussed in Section 4.4.1.1.5), these reflections perhaps demonstrate that in practice, the tool also served as a physical and accessible reminder of my role and purpose during my time in school.

#### 4.4.1.1.5 Changes in children's decisions to participate

These mechanisms captured changes in children's decisions to participate over the duration of my time in school, made through different channels; some children came to me unprompted and some children were asked directly in conversation. Across both classes, five children amended their decision to an agreement to participate, however only two of these children had informed consent from their parent/guardian. One child with informed consent changed their decision to opt-out. Noticeably, all these decisions occurred between 4-12 weeks after the children were initially approached for a decision (six weeks into the research). Arguably, this adds further weight to relationship building to support young children's decision-making, particularly in matters of assent (Barley, 2022; Flewitt, 2005; Templeton, 2018). It also underscores the importance of opportunities for children to revisit their decision to participate which is essential as part of their right to withdraw.

When asked at the start of collaborative projects, some children indicated that they did not want to take part at that moment. I interpreted this as a localised decision to opt-out, given the context, rather than indicative of their decision to opt-out of the project overall. This interpretation was supported by observations that these children: did not move their "Yes" decision on the assent tool; and usually indicated their assent later, for example, by asking me to take notes on their play.

#### 4.4.1.2 Informed consent

Informed consent to participate was sought on behalf of the children through letters sent home to their families. These physical letters were shown to the children as part of the

information sessions about the project; it was explained that the children would only be able to participate if their parents also agreed and returned the form. The letters were comprised of an information sheet and an opt-in consent form which enabled parents/guardians to consent separately to different parts of the projects, such as their child's involvement in the collaborative projects versus audio recording (see Appendix 3). After both documents were sent home, I made myself available at the end of each school day that I was in the school, as I explained in the information letter, in case parents/guardians wanted to ask me questions. No parents approached me during these times.

I received 18 returned consent forms from parents/guardians; 16 opted-in to all activities in the project and 2 opted-out. In 2 cases where parents/guardians gave their consent but the child did not give their assent, I honoured the child's decision in recognition of their autonomy (Alderson and Morrow, 2020). This resulted in a sample of 14 children who had their guardians' consent to participate and had also given their assent. However, due to the legal nature of parental consent, I was not able to include the children who assented but whose parents opted-out.

#### *4.4.1.3 Challenges*

Overall, this approach to seeking children and their guardians' agreements to participate created three tensions for the research project. Firstly, the use of opt-in processes for children's guardians resulted in a relatively small number of children participating, in comparison to studies using opt-out procedures (Barley, 2013; Kustatscher, 2015; see also Sime, 2008). The use of opt-in processes can also inadvertently create bias in research samples due to the nature of some participants who may be more likely to agree to projects or return forms (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; BERA, 2024). I purposefully did not collect demographic information about the families in the school to prioritise children's standpoints and it is therefore difficult to say with certainty whether this was an issue. However, if this bias was in favour of families from more affluent backgrounds, as more involved with institutions and therefore more accessible (Skeggs, 2003; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016), this would support the project's focus on the "unacknowledged normality of the middle class" (Reay, 2004, p. 1019).

When considering participation in my fieldwork and reflecting on my findings, it emerged that gender may be an axis of differentiation to note to readers of this thesis. There were eleven girls and five boys whose guardians returned consent forms agreeing for them to participate. For this purpose, gender was defined by how the children identified themselves during classroom practices that called for 'girls' or 'boys', reflecting a contextualised view of gender as enacted rather than as a static property assigned to the children (Kustatscher, 2015; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b). Whilst unbalanced, this mirrors the overall composition in favour of girls across the two classes. Nevertheless, this is perhaps reflected in the findings of this study which include cultural references discursively framed as 'feminine', for example like Disney princesses. This is discussed further as part of the conclusion to this thesis (Section 8.4.1)

A second challenge which arose from this approach to participation was the tension created by my legal obligation to default consent to participate to children's guardians. All children were informed and invited to make a decision about their participation in the study, regardless of whether their adult had consented on their behalf. At the time, it was explained to the children that in order to be involved their parents/guardians would also need to return a consent form. Throughout the fieldwork, I found this to be in conflict with my ontological position in respect of the children's autonomy (Palaiologou, 2014; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). For example, four children whose parents had not returned the consent forms, attempted to join the research project, with two being particularly persistent in making their wishes clear. In these cases, I explained again that I also needed the children's parents to return the form for them to be able to be involved. Despite this, I was uncomfortable as some of the children were clearly frustrated that the decision did not fully belong to them.

As outlined, this aporia is often suggested to reside at the heart of collaborative methods with young children (under 5-years-old) where ontologically they are considered as "beings" in their own right (Prout and James, 2015, p. 18; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). This is where institutional legal requirements, such as those set by Research Ethics Committees, make it difficult for researchers to respect children's decisions in practice (Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015; Palaiologou, 2014). As a

result, whilst being transparent with young children about the limits of their autonomy is important, this may still result in understandable frustrations on their part.

Thirdly, Russell and Barley (2022) outline how the processes of consent must be “thought about differently when doing ethnography with children” (p. 33). They explain that trusting relationships between researchers and participants are formed differently when “participants are involved with the research as a collective as well as on an individual basis” (Russell and Barley, 2022, p. 33). This was a challenge for my study as the focus on peer culture is collective by nature (Corsaro, 2015), however without agreements to participate from individuals, the peer culture cannot be explored (as an inter-relational concept). For example, there were cases where children who had agreed to participate would interact with children without consent or who had not assented, reducing the observations I was able to collect.

Fortunately, throughout initial observations, it emerged that I had received enough agreements to participate from children and their families to be able to observe pockets of peer culture in the classroom. For example, Elsa, Unicorn and Ariel often played together, sometimes interacting with Belle; all these children had agreed to participate and had their families’ consent. This necessarily focused observations on certain friendship groups. As the fieldwork progressed, I found this spotlighting to be a useful tool as a way into children’s peer culture (as in the work of Connolly, 1998; Raitilla and Vuorisalo, 2021; Thorne, 1993). In a research framework that acknowledges only partial and contingent truths, or multiple views from different standpoints, this does not threaten the integrity of the findings because there is no “unitary, authentic account of children’s lives to be found” (Connolly, 2017, p. 115).

#### 4.4.2 Pseudonyms

As part of their initial decision to participate, the children were invited to choose a pseudonym for which they could be known by in the research; as in the work of Epstein (1998), Mac Naughton and Davis (2009), Tatham-Fashanu (2023) and Truscott (2020). During the initial assent session, I explained to the children that I would be writing a “book” about them and as such, they could choose a “pretend name” to keep their real name private. Alternatively, I offered to choose a pretend name for them if they needed

help or did not want to. Konstantoni and Kustatscher (2015) suggest that allowing children to choose their own pseudonyms increases children's involvement in the research process, making a project more democratic by displacing a choice – albeit a small one – from the researcher to participants (see also Russell and Barley, 2020). In addition, they also point to the potential of this child-guided process to improve the transparency of research with children (Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015).

Allowing children to choose their own pseudonyms is also a process which can make research more engaging and enjoyable for children (Truscott, 2020; see also, Epstein, 1998). This resonated in my study as the children giggled excitedly as they considered possible names. Dockett et al., (2013) caution that young children may not fully understand the process of anonymising research. Although the children did not request to be identified by their real names in this study, there are important implications for anonymity and confidentiality in these cases; see Conroy and Harcourt (2009) for a useful overview.

Giving children the scope to choose a pseudonym forefronts their viewpoint and can be suggested to provide insights into their likes (Blaise, 2014). For example, Blaise (2014) points out how children's pseudonym choices, such as Barbie, reflected “how they aligned their identities to idealized [*sic*] norms of femininity and western beauty” (p. 122). Indeed, in this study, pseudonyms such as princesses within the Disney franchise were a popular choice, for example, “Ariel” “Belle” “Rapunzel” and “Elsa”, as were other labels that may be discursively framed as female such as “Flower” or “Unicorn”. Whilst some of these names were gendered, others such as “Walking Table” were not.

As outlined before, not only does this reverse the process by which the adult researcher chooses how the children are known, but it also disrupts the insights or assumptions that *adult* readers infer based on pseudonyms. Llewellyn (2009) describes how by choosing gender-neutral names and omitting pronouns in her work, she attempts to “force open and debate the gender of the situation” (p. 423). In a similar way, I hope that by disrupting the cultural assumptions attached to family-given names which usually operate in the interests of the adult reader, the focus is shifted. I also hope they convey

the perspectives and playfulness of the children to the eventual reader of this thesis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Pink, 2015).

#### 4.4.3 Confidentiality

To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of participants' data (BERA, 2024), digital and physical information was stored securely according to the Data Protection Act 1998. Digital information, such as fieldwork notes or audio files, were stored in secure Cloud-based storage on a password-protected computer only accessed by myself. Physical notes, such as my fieldwork notebook and completed consent forms, were stored securely at my home whilst not in use throughout the research. Whilst in the field, my physical notebook was always on my person, attached by a strap. Any physical notes were anonymised using pseudonyms when they were typed up into NVivo (Lumivero, 2024). All audio files were transcribed using pseudonyms and were deleted within two weeks of being recorded. All physical notes and files for analysis will be kept for 10 years after the research is completed (i.e. publication of the thesis) and then deleted, as per Durham University's Research Data Management Policy.

Although no instances occurred during this project, both children and their families were notified that their rights to confidentiality would be waived in the event of any safeguarding concerns. This was part of the discussion during the information session with children and was also covered in the information letter to parents/guardians (see Appendix 3). In accordance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU, 2016) and Durham University's guidance, the University's general privacy notice was shared with parents/guardians of participants. The GDPR lawful basis (Article 6, GDPR, 2016) for collecting personal information for this project was under "Public Task" (research). The separate conditions (Article 9, GDPR, 2016) for processing special category data were "explicit consent" - as this was sought from parents/guardians - and "research in the public interest" (as stated in the Data Protection Act 2018).

#### 4.4.4 Dissemination

Disseminating findings is considered to be part of ethical and responsible research (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015; Lundy et al., 2011). This takes on especial

importance when working with young children as they are often overlooked in this process (Flewitt, 2005; Gray and Winter, 2011; Truscott, 2020). This may be due to developmental norms of what is ‘appropriate’ for children to know about (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Burman, 2008; Wyness, 2019). Indeed, there are ethical considerations when sharing information that may have been provided by an adult-defined agenda (discussed in Section 4.2.3). More generally, dissemination may also be overlooked due to practical pressures in the research process in terms of budget and time available to share findings in meaningful ways (Berg and Seeber, 2016).

I critically evaluated my motivations for sharing the findings from this study, to understand whether my intention was motivated by adult-defined, institutionalised and possibly positivist notion of ‘impactful’ research (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Johansson, 2011; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). With an emphasis on co-construction and respect, I wanted to share what we had produced *together* as a result of the research entanglement; the children had contributed the empirical content which had converged with my developing research skills (Christensen, 2004; Truscott, 2020). This was not the dissemination of a ‘finished product’, but a further entangling in which new ways of knowledge are always being produced (Pink, 2011). These inter-weavings continue to come about in different ways, including through the different interpretations by readers of this thesis beyond its written creation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019) (see Section 8.4).

Thus, I returned to the Parkside Primary in March 2025 to visit the children who participated in the study. It had been 8 months since I last saw the children to discuss emerging themes (Section 4.2.4), and over a year since I completed my initial data collection (February 2024). Now in Year 1 (aged 5-6-years-old), the children from Reception are split between three classes (combined Year 1/2 year groups) which I visited individually, convening a session around 10-15 minutes long. In each session, I re-introduced the context of the study using the children’s information booklet as a reminder (see Appendix 2). I shared the findings from the study by talking through a dissemination leaflet (see Appendix 4) that the children could take home. I also showed the children the dissemination leaflet created for adults (see Appendix 5) which they

could also take home, explaining that it had more detail in as adults had not been involved in the same way as the children.

It was an enjoyable experience to speak to the children about what they remembered; for example, “working on the iPad” and “drawing pictures”. When sharing the specific findings, the children seemed engaged and shared additional stories about why they thought aspects, such as water bottles or swimming classes, mattered in their classroom (and still matter now in Year 1). I emphasised that I wanted to share with them this information that we had created together, but that they could decide what to do with it next. I offered space for comments or questions and highlighted that if they had any further queries that they could ask an adult to contact me using my email address included in the leaflet.

## 4.5 Reflexivity

Across different fields, reflexivity varies in its different iterations and as such, must be adopted with caution (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). Rather than seeking separability in the pursuit of objectivity, reflexivity accounts for the “situated, subjective and context-specific” nature of the research entanglement (Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015, p. 11); thus, it is often suggested to be integral to claims of quality and legitimacy in qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Luttrell, 2000; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017).

Although sometimes used synonymously, Bolton and Delderfield (2018) explain a clear distinction between reflection and reflexivity. Whereas reflection implies a static, mirror-image review of an event or action that happened, reflexivity goes much deeper to question the epistemological, ontological and axiomatic construction of an event (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018; see also Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). It is more a frame-of-mind which goes beyond identifying, for example, that I may have missed certain observations in the field (reflection). Instead, the reflexive researcher must perform a “contortion” (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018, p. 14) by turning the tools of reflection back on their mind itself; it is looking “through-the-mirror” rather than in it (p. 11; see also Berger, 2015).



Yet, ironically, looking through-the-mirror at reflexivity itself has led to a critique of the reflexive self as the ideal, middle-class “figure of late modernity” (Skeggs, 2003, p. 133). Skeggs (2003) suggests that there is a denial of the access to cultural resources that enable or legitimise reflexive thought, “hiding the conditions of its production” (p. 134). Those who are not middle-class are “forced to tell in ways not of their own making” (Skeggs, 2003, p. 134). Indeed, Konstantoni and Kustatscher (2015) outline how reflexivity has led to accusations of “navel-gazing, self-indulgence and narcissism...as privileged academics worrying over unimportant representational issues” (p. 11). Likewise, Delamont and Atkinson (2021) have critiqued the “self-congratulation” replete in claims to be a particular type of person or embracing a particular standpoint (p. 4). Consequently in this section, I attempt to be reflexive with the specific purpose of accounting for critical aspects of the research production, without collapsing into an endless spiral of inward evaluation.

As mentioned in the methods subsections, ‘being reflexive’ was an integral part of the ongoing construction of my thesis. This was not something that was confined to my fieldwork, but a “self-reflective tool of enquiry” (Barley, 2013, p. 85) that was woven into the literature I chose to read, the interpretation of my fieldnotes and my re-presentation of them through writing (see Section 4.6). In the previous section, I have considered my implementation of ethical considerations in practice, for example, where how I relate to the children may be underpinned by discourses of childhood development (Alderson and Morrow, 2020; Johansson, 2011). Elsewhere, I have also discussed the ontological and epistemological claims buttressing my thesis (Section 3.5). Hereafter, I consider how reflexivity was entangled with my fieldwork. Firstly, I explore the concepts of familiarity and strangeness in relation to specific methodological points raised in Section 4.2, such as engaging with senses and affect/emotions. Beyond this, I discuss my positionality with reference to negotiating roles within the classroom and enacting agential cuts.

#### 4.5.1 Fieldwork

Throughout this methodology chapter, I have outlined how my fieldwork has been shaped by my understanding of discourses of childhood and attempts to collaboratively

share decisions in the research process. Whilst much of this information was read and evaluated before I physically entered the field, seeing it play out in the children's actions continued to in-form my participation in the field. To support my ongoing reflexive engagement with my fieldnotes, I completed a weekly reflexive journal which began before I entered the field (recording any assumptions or biases as to what I might encounter) and continued alongside my analysis of the fieldnotes (documenting my decision-making). I approached this with a view to stepping 'through' my fieldnotes to explore the values, physicality, emotions and assumptions that shaped my actions and interpretations in the field (Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015; Raittila and Vuorisalo, 2021).

In addition, I also maintained a personal PhD journal which documented my experience of studying for my thesis, key decisions and encouraged reflection on aspects that may be considered more personal (see Barley, 2013 for another example). For example, how I felt about other commitments, worries and pressures that were happening in my life at the time that may have affected turns in my journey.

#### *4.5.1.1 Familiarity and strangeness*

Familiarity and strangeness are antonyms that underpin reflexive thought in ethnographic study (Berger, 2015; Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). To think reflexively 'through' what is observed, that which we are familiar with needs to be distanced to become "anthropologically strange" (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021, p. 16). This involves confronting my own standpoint as well as any entrenched assumptions that may threaten the rigor of my methods (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). Nevertheless, practically speaking, Delamont and Atkinson (2021) admit that "one cannot, of course, engage in radical doubt all of the time" or "suspend all of one's cherished or taken-for-granted cultural categories simultaneously" (p. 16). Instead, it is enough to engage in "the spirit" of strangeness that encourages researchers to "treat over-familiar categories and habits of thought with great caution" (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021, p. 16) through reflexivity.

I considered engaging with familiarity and strangeness to be a critical tool for my fieldwork given my personal history (Berger, 2015). As a previous teacher of Reception

children, albeit in a different school and city, I thought that I may struggle to look beyond the familiarities of classroom life that I had previously engaged in on a daily basis. In addition, I was concerned that my familiarity with Parkside – having volunteered there ten years prior – may obfuscate my questioning as everything appears ‘normal’ (Berger, 2015; Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015). As such, I engaged with three specific strategies to “make the familiar strange” (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021, p. xi).

Firstly, as Delamont and Atkinson (2021) suggest, I tried to document classroom life in as much detail as possible, rather than relying on catch-all labels (i.e. snack-time) that brush over the making of these moments. This involved dissecting the movements of adults, children and objects within the classroom space, for example, meticulously accounting for the position of bodies or the practices marking this time (such as hand-washing). When typing up my fieldnotes at the end of each day, this would afford me the opportunity to dig into the micro-moments that constitute classroom practices that I may have otherwise taken-for-granted.

Secondly, the use of reflexive and personal journals (Barley, 2013; Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015) enabled me to keep “audit trails” (Berger, 2015, p. 222) of my reasoning, interpretation and reactions in and after the field. This process created a record of my thought processes which served two purposes: in writing my reasoning I was forced to explicate it, rendering it visible and exposing any assumptions; and this record enabled me to revisit reasoning and review the interplay between my interpretations and my decision-making both in the field and beyond. At each break between school terms, I read through the previous trail of notes and picked apart the biases, assumptions and values that may underpin them. For example, in the earliest stages of my fieldwork, I noted myself feeling sorry for a child who was from a poorer socio-economic background than the other children. I challenged myself to consider whether this was motivated by a ‘deficit’ view of working-class culture in contest with middle-class parenting norms (Reay, 2006; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 2021).

Thirdly, participating sensorially and affectively in the field for an academic purpose (Pink, 2011, 2015; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 2015, 2016) was a new skill for me that

prompted an alternative line of engagement with an otherwise familiar environment. In a similar way to journalling, recording in detail the images, sounds, textures, tastes and bodily sensations that characterised my day brought a fresh perspective and a sense of strangeness to the school day. As Lenz Taguchi posits, this is a process of “becoming-other” through an “enlivened change in myself” (p. 174):

Contrary to taking a position of someone else, or trying to become the other, this is about re-installing yourself in the event to become different *in yourself*, that is, to put yourself in a process of *change and transformation* to be able to experience the event differently. (Lenz Taguchi, 2009, p. 172, emphasis original)

Reflexivity is an integral part of sensorial (and emotional) engagement (Pink, 2011, 2015; Sanderud, 2020) and so this process was also coupled with a deconstruction of such experiences. For example, each day in school when the children returned from outdoor play, there would be a sense of calm in the classroom as the teacher dimmed the main overhead lights, switched on some fairylights and put some relaxing music on. Although I found this time relaxing, in my personal life I also enjoy mindfulness and this no doubt affected my engagement (enjoyment) in this period. Alternatively, I interpreted some of the children’s fidgeting as indicative that they did not find this experience relaxing, although they may have done. This is perhaps because I associate these elements (low lighting, calm music) with physical stillness; the children may have still felt relaxed in themselves, but just not overtly shown it in the same way as myself. Hence, it is crucial to remain reflexively vigilant when interpreting emotions and sensory information as these are undoubtedly different for all participants.

#### 4.5.1.2 Positionality

This critical reflexivity, sensory and affective engagement with my research was part of the skillset I employed to consider my positionality in relation to the field. Positionality refers to “[a]n understanding of one’s own social position(s)...in a sustained comprehension of all aspects of research” (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021, p. 2). Although it should be crucial to any field of research, it is particularly pertinent to ethnographic work where a researcher is “so directly involved and engaged with the shaping of the research, the collection and construction of data, and their interpretation and representation” (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021, p. 2). Positionality goes beyond simply accounting for personal biography, instead also exploring “our academic

loyalties, preferences, lineages and apprenticeship” (Delamont and Atkinson, 2021, p. 2; see also Berger, 2015). The purpose of which is not to consider them as threats to validity but to account for how, like any other infinite combination of factors, they come to shape the research process (Cuevas-Parra, 2021; Luttrell, 2000).

As noted with regards to reflexivity, positionality is not a discrete part of my thesis but rather an inter-woven consideration that I have attempted to fit into the conventions of thesis writing. In Section 4.3.1, I discuss thinking critically about my position in researching class communities from an academic standpoint. Throughout Section 4.4, I consider how my positioning as an adult may have affected children’s decisions to participate and present my efforts to reshape power differentials; for example, through creating ways of recording dissent that can be done without talking directly to me (Section 4.4.1.1.4.3). In the Familiarity and strangeness section above, I exemplified how reflexive engagement with feeling in the field prompted questions about my interpretation of events. In what follows, I reflect further on my positionality through the way I attempt to negotiate my role(s) in the field. I also consider my positionality by analysing my responses to the children in the field, interpreting these as the “agential cuts” (Barad, 2007, p. 140) that I am responsible for.

#### 4.5.1.2.1 Negotiating roles

As introduced in the Section 4.2.1, I set-out to position myself as an “unusual” adult (Christensen, 2004, p. 174) who always safeguards the children but attempts to avoid the repressive power of teacher/student dynamics (Christensen, 2004; Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015). In practice, this was a dialectical process of co-construction, one which was subject to the physicality of the classroom, my interactions with the children and their roles in the research, as well as the positioning of other adults in the classroom (Dennis and Huf, 2020; Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015). As Massumi points out:

Don’t bring your thoughts you’ve already had and rehearse them to us as part of positioning yourself - bring everything else, your passions, your appetitions, your tools and abilities, your intensest procedures, and connect into the situation from that angle. Don’t perform yourself - co-catalyse a collective event with us. (Massumi, 2015, p. 171)

These roles were continually (re)negotiated throughout the research process, including before, during and after my time in the field (Christensen, 2004; Dennis and Huf, 2020). As such, they are not static, but multiple, fluid and dynamic; changing based on the context and events (Barley, 2013; Christensen, 2004; Tummons, 2024). Thus, rather than audit my social identity, in this section I reflect on the aspects that came to matter as part of the research process. Unavoidably, this comes with the caveat that this is *my* evaluation of my identity, an attempt to perform the reflexive “contortion” (Bolton and Delderfield, 2018, p. 14) that enables critical evaluation of the self. As such, it is my interpretation – as this entire thesis is – of what mattered in this process which can only ever be partial (Crang and Cook, 2007; Skeggs, 2003).

As is the standard in British mainstream schools, the Reception classroom at Parkside Primary was facilitated by teachers and teaching assistants. By facilitated, I mean that, as adults, they were largely in control of the school day, guiding the children through activities, giving them permission to go to the toilet or go outside and praising or reprimanding children based on their behaviour. Adults were usually spatially separated from the children, for example, sitting on a chair at the front of the class, leading a line of children or occupying areas meant only for them (the staffroom, the classroom cupboard or the adult toilet). This is not to say that the staff automatically had power because they were adults or educators, but that power was exercised through these actions associated with the teacher/student dynamic (Foucault, 1980; Wyness, 2019) (see Section 3.5.1).

Through micro-moments as well as wider considerations, I tried to renegotiate this understanding to not feed into the culture of obedience usually present in schools (Wyness, 2019). For example, most staff in British schools are usually referred to by a gendered pronoun and their last name, in my case, Miss/Ms Paxman. When I began my time at Parkside, I requested that all the children and the teachers call me “Tara” rather than Miss Paxman to position me as different to the other adults in the school who were all referred to as Mrs/Miss/Mr (last name) (also seen in R. Butler, 2019).

I also attempted to position myself as an “unusual” adult (Christensen, 2004, p. 174) through participating in the school day in as much the same way as the children as I

could. For example, in my first week in the field, I put my belongings in a cupboard at the back of the classroom which only the adults were able to access. I soon realized that I had to retrieve belongings from the cupboard throughout the day, such as my lunch, drawing attention to the fact that my bag and coat were not stored in the same way as the children's in the cloakroom. Instead, when I arrived (before school) each morning after this, I hung my coat and bag up in the cloakroom on a spare peg and put my water bottle in the same tray as the children's. At lunch, I lined up with the children and ate my lunch on the benches next to them in the hall, which other adults did not often do. I participated in the same lessons the children did, always sitting on the carpet next to them rather than on a chair like the teacher/teaching assistants. Finally, I only left the carpet, drank, ate or went to the toilet at the same opportunities as the children.

Whilst these were my attempts to shape my role(s) within the classroom, the other people (and classroom furniture) at Parkside also affected my positioning. When I began my time at Parkside as a 29-year-old I was assumed – by adults and children – to be a teacher/volunteer of some description. This was evident when I went out to the playground at lunchtime where children from all school years were outside together. Children who were not in the Reception class would tell me about other children's behaviour, asking me to tell peers off or solve the situation. Likewise, other adult supervisors would ask me about children's behaviour or to complete jobs. Here, I did not wish to dichotomise the adult/child dynamic (Alderson and Morrow, 2020). From my own observations, I have observed that children are rarely powerless in this dialectic, finding creative ways to exercise their own agency in situations.

In contrast, within the Reception classroom I was known to adults and children and we had worked to negotiate a more-informed shared understanding of what my role involved. Unavoidably, the adults would sometimes rely on me to support children's activities, sometimes using me as additional supervision in the classroom. For example, for the school Nativity play I was asked to help the children get changed into their costumes, much like the other staff. I was aware that more often than not, this adult support was seen by other children and likely positioned me as somewhere inbetween teachers and children. Although I wished to avoid being seen as an authoritative adult in the classroom hierarchy, I felt that it was completely necessary to help in this way to

maintain good relations with the staff as gatekeepers in allowing me to complete my research (Sime, 2008; Tummons, 2024).

Most overtly, my physical size positioned me within the classroom differently to the children. Whilst I lined up with the children for breaktimes and sat with them cross-legged on the carpet, I was too big for many of the classroom areas that were designed for small-sized children. For example, there was a teepee in the reading corner of each classroom which I was too big to climb into, like the one in Figure 6 (Talking Turtle, 2025). The teepees' position in the corner of the reading areas meant that it offered the children privacy when playing inside. The lack of space nearby also meant that I could not realistically observe children's interactions in this area without being overbearing.



*Figure 6. A teepee designed for children, similar to the one in the reading areas at Parkside.*

I also struggled to play at the sandpit for longer than five minutes because of its height. It was about two feet from the floor, allowing the children to stand at the side of it and play easily. As I am almost double the height of the average 5-year-old, I was too tall to stand at the sandpit and play meaning that I had to either kneel or crouch down or sit on a chair (but with no room for my legs under the sandpit). I could not sustain this for long without physical pain meaning that I also struggled to gather observations at the sandpit, except sat a short distance away. This contrasts with areas such as the writing



table where I was able to more comfortably sit on a chair at a desk (albeit a child-sized one) or the construction area where I could sit on the carpet.

My age and size were aspects often drawn on by the children, sometimes in conjunction with my adult status, to justify moments in the classroom. For example, the following extracts show some of my attempts to join in with the children's play that were rejected on account of my size/age:

*[1] The children are engaged in a game of 'the floor is lava' where everything – except the path they have constructed from planks and the climbing frame – is 'lava' and cannot be touched. The children take it in turns shouting "the floor is lava" and they all run to get to a safe area. A scream of "everyone get on the planks" rings out so, after hovering nearby, I jump on a nearby plank. The child nearest me, Sausage, responds "Not you - you're too big!" and pushes her hands in my direction. I take this as a clear sign of dissent and move away. Interestingly though, I think it demonstrates my positioning as they clearly felt confident enough to exclude me from play.*

[Fieldnotes, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023]

*[2] Whilst outside at lunchtime, I was playing on the log equipment with a group of children of different ages. I completed the balance columns and another balance beam but then when it got to a climbing net, a child said to me "You can't go on this - it's only for kids!" clearly marking me as an adult who, I think due to my size, was not supposed to play on the equipment.*

[Fieldnotes, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023]

Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, this was not a static construction of my role, and my status was subject to debate. The children sometimes used labels such as “mummy”, “teacher” or “grown-up” as a frame to understand my role in the classroom. For example, the following extract demonstrates how a label was tied to my behaviour in the classroom, indicative of my positioning by some of the children:

*Before snack, the children lined up to wash their hands and, although I have been lining up with them every other time previously, today they were shocked to see me lining up too. I stood in the line behind some children and when some more children came over to join the line, they ignored me and just lined up behind the child in front of me by squeezing through. I giggled and said "I'm in the line too". Monkey was shocked, declaring "...but ladies [indicating the teachers/TAs] don't have to line up and wash their hands". Seeing an opportunity to explicitly yet naturally clarify my role, I explained: "I'm a bit like the teachers because I want to keep you safe, but I also sit on the carpet and line up with you and eat my lunch with you too - which is not so much like the teachers." This seemed to satisfy the children and they went back to chatting in the line.*

[Fieldnotes, 28<sup>th</sup> September 2023]

Almost embarrassingly, this fieldnote shows how my efforts to do as the children do were largely ignored as I blended into the background as someone who was not in the line, despite been queued directly behind the last child. Monkey's claim that "ladies don't have to line up and wash their hands" indicates their confusion between how I appear (as an adult female, a "lady") and my actions (washing my hands) which are not aligned with the classroom norm.

Referring to "ladies" in this moment denotes a collective which includes me (as not conforming) as well as the other teachers/teaching assistants in Reception (all female). This serves to forefront the congruence of my gender with the other adults in the classroom who are staff and therefore not expected to line up and wash their hands. This may reflect the higher proportion of female teachers in primary schools in the UK (Department for Education, 2024). Overall, this moment perhaps indicates that my disruption of the expected behaviour of classroom adults was recognised by some children, negotiating my role as an "unusual" adult (Christensen, 2004, p. 174).

In particular, I wished to distance myself from the disciplinary power of an adult role within a school (Wyness, 2019). This was to pursue a relationship with the children where they felt more comfortable chatting to me than they perhaps would with someone who has the authority to reprimand them (Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). This was often a point of careful negotiation with the children, as their decisions to include me – as with other children and adults in the classroom – could involve the loss of personal items. As an adult, I felt the weight of the expectations of other adults in that I should be supportive in upholding expected behaviours within the school. Thus, I tried to tread a delicate line between being complicit versus disciplining the children:

*Outside at lunchtime, Rapunzel came over to me on the playground and appeared to confide in me.*

*Rapunzel: [showing me the Elsa branded lipbalm in her pocket] I've got lipbalm! ...but don't tell the teachers because I don't like getting told off [makes a sad face]*

*TP: Are you not supposed to have lipbalm?*

*Rapunzel: Well, I'm not sure...*

*TP: Maybe just keep it in your pocket then?*

*Rapunzel nods and runs off.*

[Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

I interpret Rapunzel's request to not tell the teachers as positioning me differently to the other adults in the school, those with the authority and the motivation to tell her off. Explicitly asking me not to tell them may suggest that she felt the need to clarify this aspect of my role, as visually I appear as an adult and I have also been directed by other adults in the classroom to complete jobs. By confiding in me, with some emotional persuasion (that getting told off makes her sad), she makes me complicit in the act of having a lipbalm that may not be allowed at school. This echoes a similar moment where another child, Ariel, gave me some of her hand sanitiser but asked me not to tell the teachers. Both situations position me – with Rapunzel, Ariel and other children in the class – as someone who does not enforce the rules but instead perhaps avoids them for their own gain<sup>18</sup>.

My clothing, accessories and hair also worked to position me in the classroom, and these aspects were often admired by Elsa, Ariel, Flower, Unicorn and Belle who worked to construct feminine identities in the class (Blaise, 2016). Throughout my fieldwork, I adopted the smart casual clothing that I had worn as a teacher in Reception. Notably, whenever I wore a pink, flowery patterned dress that I had, Elsa, Flower and Belle complimented me on it. Likewise, I usually wore my hair up in a ponytail but when I wore it loose, Ariel and Unicorn exclaimed how pretty it is as it looks much blonder when it is down. Perhaps these compliments echo the admiration of the 'girls'<sup>19</sup> towards Disney princesses (also reflected in their pseudonyms) who can be seen wearing 'feminine' dresses and often sporting long hair as symbolic of their femininity (Leader, 2018; Rutherford and Baker, 2021). Indeed, Elsa, Ariel, Flower, Unicorn and Belle included me in their play more often than other children, possibly because of these feminine constructions. Overall, I understood these compliments as marking my identity as coming to matter in gendered ways (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a).

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<sup>18</sup> I reasoned that because I was unaware of the school rules, I was not in a position to enforce them.

<sup>19</sup> Through my observations of classroom practices, it became apparent that Elsa, Ariel, Flower, Unicorn and Belle identified with the label 'girl'.

In a different way, topic activities that were themed around different cultural celebrations, such as Christmas, Eid or Halloween, marked children's ethnic, religious and cultural identities alongside my own (Barron, 2007; Hadley, 2009). Although all the children were included in the different classroom activities, such as designing henna patterns for Eid or decorating Christmas trees, some children demonstrated more knowledge of these festivals from their own personal experiences (Barley, 2013). My positioning as White British will have undoubtedly influenced my relationships with the children through the knowledge and actions that I was able to bring to the field. In October, I was asked whether I had a pumpkin for Halloween and in December, I was asked whether I had a Christmas tree and how it was decorated. Questions like these were common between staff, children and myself in the field, demonstrating the ways in which cultural identities were part of "the two-way exchange of information" (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, p. 11) that came to matter in Reception at Parkside.

I also found the construction of my own class identity to seep into classroom moments in the field (Reay, 2017; Walkerdine et al., 2001). As outlined in Section 3.2.1, class is a slippery concept that often defies definition which led to its lack of popularity in academia and as a marker of identity for the general public (Bradley, 2014, 2015; Savage, 2005). Nevertheless, in line with prominent working-class feminist academics (Reay, 2006; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008; Walkerdine, 2021), I suggest that the concept is still useful for uniting a focus on capitalist production with neoliberal values and how these are (re)made at the micro-level of daily interaction. This focus on "innumerable everyday practices" (Reay, 2004, p. 1019) appears at odds with overarching static structural labels such as working-class or middle-class, although they are often used to retain a collective focus (Bradley, 2015; Fox and Alldred, 2022). Whilst I cannot reflect on all the moments that have shaped my class positioning to date, I am able to reflect on some broader indicators relevant to this thesis that may position me for readers, albeit whilst rejecting a primary label of working- or middle-class.

As I am studying for a PhD, this associates with me with university and academia, suggested as a symbol of upward social mobility (Walkerdine, 2003; Walkerdine et al., 2001) and a further higher-education experience linked to the middle-classes (Bradley, 2015; hooks, 2000). In the field, I drew attention to this as the reasoning behind my time

spent at Parkside which arguably brought it to the fore as mattering in my ethnographic entanglement. Working within a university has the potential to position me as 'out-of-touch with reality' in an 'ivory tower' (Kostet, 2021; Renold and Ivinson, 2022). Indeed, I did experience some skepticism over the methods in the project which were critical of traditional childhood discourses, such as seeking the children's assent: As one teaching assistant commented "What do you do if they all say no?" [Quote from staff member, fieldnotes, 28th September 2023]. Nevertheless, my previous work experience as a teacher appeared to balance this out with staff, positioning me as someone who understood the pressures associated with day-to-day life in schools.

In a similar way to the gendered and cultural enquiries above, the children often asked me about my life: for example, who I lived with, where I lived, if I had any pets, if I had seen films amongst many other things. I answered honestly and this information built a reciprocal relationship with the children in which they were able to learn about my life as I learned about theirs (Alderson and Morrow, 2011, 2020; Tummons, 2024). This speaks to Tummons' (2024, p. 2) "relational curiosity" (p. 2) where the ethnographer is part of "mutual or reciprocal processes of inquiry" (p. 2) with their participants. Although the children did not respond to these aspects in a way which I interpreted to be indicative of reasoning about class, they often drew parallels with their own lives or those of people they knew. Indeed, I found myself making assumptions about the children's class positioning based on things that they told me about their lives: what their parents did, the holidays they went on, the clubs they attended and the clothes that they wore. I considered these to be illustrative of the "innumerable everyday practices" (Reay, 2004, p. 1019) that constitute class positioning, giving it its everywhere yet nowhere quality (Bradley, 2015, p. 45; Savage, 2005, p. 939). Where these assumptions interplay with my interpretations, I have discussed them as part of the specific situations throughout my findings.

#### 4.5.1.2.2 Agential cuts in the field

As outlined previously, an ethnographer's direct involvement in the field creates an intense sense of ethical accountability (Barad, 2007; Delamont and Atkinson, 2021). During my time within the field, I felt the weight of this responsibility with regards to the

“agential cuts” (Barad, 2007, p. 140) that I was part of constructing, for example, in how I responded to the children’s conversational points. On many occasions, children seemed to seek a reaction from me in response to a belonging or an event that they wanted to share. In these micro-moments, I felt that the responses I gave illustrates the “worlding” (Barad, 2007, p. 181) of things that matter in the classroom.

For example, the excitement that Walking Table expressed over his first swimming lesson (see Section 7.2.1). By acknowledging his statement with “oh wow”, I feel that I am implicitly agreeing with the idea that swimming lessons are something to be excited about, as well as Walking Table’s construction of them as ‘special’. In doing so, I am perhaps forming an agential cut which separates swimming lessons as something that matters in the classroom, as an experience that can be used to impress adults. For a similar example relating to ballet, see Section 7.2.1. These instances exemplify the ethical responsibility that must be exercised when adopting participant observation as an ethnographic method (Dennis and Huf, 2020).

Throughout my time in the field, I continuously reflected on these agential cuts through diary notes, adjusting my behaviour accordingly if I felt uncomfortable with the cuts I was co-creating. For example, I found ways to be less ‘complicit’ in the appreciation of children’s belongings and experiences through asking questions or maintaining more neutrality instead of giving praise-full responses. Nevertheless, this reflection itself is interesting. Why did I feel compelled to say “oh wow”? Is it Walking Table’s excitement? Is it empathy as I also enjoyed swimming lessons as a child? Is it being genuinely impressed by the middle-class notion of enrichment (see Section 7.2.4)? Is it a sense of adoration for small children from being a teacher (and possibly a future mother) myself? These are all reflexive considerations that I found to be productive when analysing my responses to the children’s behaviour.

In this section, I have discussed how aspects of my identity entered into the negotiation of my positioning in the school with the children and the staff. Most notably, my size/age was used to distinguish, but my gender, ethnicity and class also appeared to inter-weave to construct my role as an “unusual” adult (Christensen, 2004, p. 174) and seep into the agential cuts that I was responsible for in the field.

## 4.6 Analysis and re-presentation through writing

... the idea that there are real rigid distinctions between fieldwork and analysis, making them separate stages of an ethnographic research process, would be misleading ... *theoretical thought and critique*, and *interpretative understandings* cannot be separated from the ethnographic encounters from which they emerge. (Pink, 2015, p. 2, my emphasis)

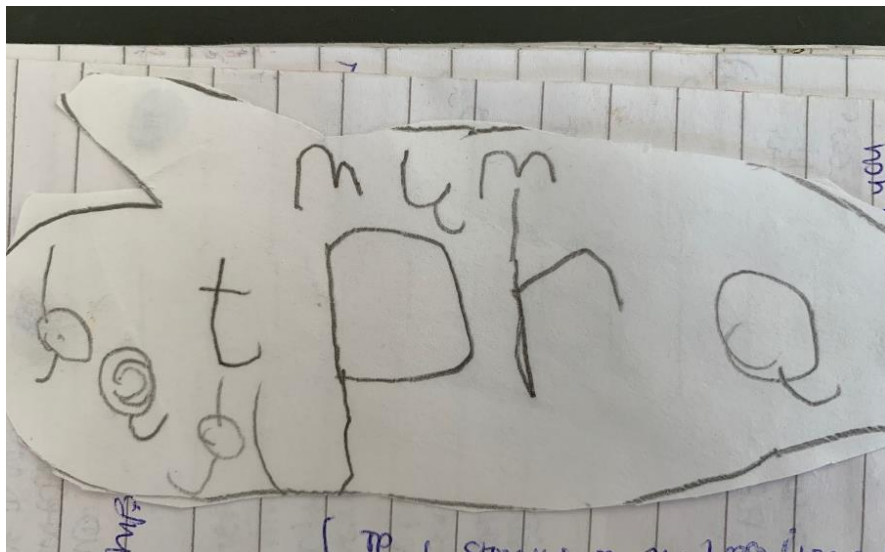
This quote by Pink summarises my experience of the analysis and writing process whilst studying for my thesis; the word analysis has come to denote a somewhat discrete stage of research which sits apart from data collection or writing-up (Crang and Cook, 2007; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Luttrell, 2016). These distinctions can be spatial in terms of fieldwork location versus analysing at a computer elsewhere, or temporal in the sense that analysis chronologically follows data collection (Pink, 2015). Yet, when analysis is reframed as “theoretical thought and critique” and “interpretative understandings” (Pink, 2015, p. 2), it becomes apparent that it is woven throughout every stage of the research process, including before and after data collection (Tummons, 2024).

Using a sociomaterial framework, I understand analysis and writing to be part of the “agential cuts” (Barad, 2007, p. 140) that I am responsible for in co-producing this thesis (Barad, 2007; see also Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2021). This is inherent in the very language I choose: “data” versus “fieldnotes” and “analysis” versus “interpretation” give very different tones to the writing (Mills and Morton, 2013). This is Barad’s (2007, p. 185) “ethico-onto-epistem-ology” where we must be accountable for the matters that we bring into being, the “worlding” (Barad, 2007, p. 181) we create. Here, I find echoes of Prout and James (2015, p. 7) “double hermeneutic” of childhood studies, in that by studying the constructions of childhood we contribute to its reconstruction. Thus, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) posit, this process was drenched in reflexivity; I continually reflected on the cuts that I was making throughout my thesis, particularly in the writing phase where my work becomes translated for an audience other than myself.

Given this, the process of interpreting my data was not linear, spatially or temporally-bound (Delamont, 2016; Pink, 2015). I ‘analysed’ whilst in school, whilst working with the children, on my way home, when typing up my fieldnotes and at the intervals

between school terms. I revisited ideas, pulled on threads that I had begun to weave from the literature I had read, and played with theoretical concepts. Throughout this process, I reworked my research questions multiple times, developing them to better represent the theoretical and practical ideas that I was entangling with (Delamont, 2016, 2022).

Nevertheless, the physical process of analysing my data can be followed in a fairly chronological pattern. Throughout each day, I would gather observational notes (usually very brief) from participant observation, as well as audio-recordings of the daily interpretation sessions (and collaborative projects where possible) and images of the children's work. My observational notes were divided into two columns: what I observed happening, and any initial reflections I had on the events (adapted from Berger, 2015; see also Konstantoni and Kustatscher, 2015). Throughout the research process, the children were also part of this note-taking process, asking me to read my notes, commenting on them and literally gluing their pictures into my notebook (see Figure 7). At the end of each day in the field, my handwritten fieldnotes and any transcripts were expanded and typed up with pseudonyms into NVivo (Lumivvero, 2024) a computer software designed for organising qualitative research notes. Images of children's work were pseudonymised and uploaded into NVivo.



*Figure 7. Ariel's picture that was stuck into my fieldnotes journal.*



Chadwick (2017) notes how the transcription of audio-files can be an act of analysis in itself (see also Braun and Clarke, 2006; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). Although there are the spoken words to be typed, there are also the gestures, tones, sensorial information, emphasis, emotions and intended meanings that emerge “between the lines” (Chadwick, 2017, p. 11). As Chadwick (2017) advises, I used bolding, underlining, punctuation and capitalisation in an attempt to enliven “the fleshy ways in which words, sounds, phrases and stories were told” (p. 11) by the children.

Throughout my time in the field, I would re-read my notes to try and build familiarity and sensitise myself to any links across observations. This process also facilitated my reflexive journal (a separate weekly diary) as I reflected on the sense that I was making from my fieldnotes (Delamont, 2020). For example, on occasions, I realised from further observations that some of my initial interpretations were perhaps not accurate. Rather than correcting these at the original point in my fieldnotes, I made a note of my misinterpretation and reframed it as an analytical question through which I could diffract further interpretations (Delamont, 2020); for instance, “in a peer interaction, is it the item or the child that is affective?”.

This re-reading of my notes helped me to continually organise my fieldnotes, informing potential areas for exploration as part of the interpretation sessions or collaborative projects. In doing so, I would notice absences or silences in my data collection (Reay, 1995; Walkerdine et al., 2001). For example, in November 2023, I realised that the locations of my observations for the past few weeks had all been indoors, despite the children being able to play outdoors during their “exploring” times (whatever the weather). As I was only two months into my fieldwork, I felt that I was still learning about what mattered to the children, and if that included outdoor time then I must be present out there too. In the following weeks until the end of term in December, I had a reminder in my fieldnote journal to attend at least one outdoor play session during exploring time per day. This was effective and broadened the range of observations and interactions that I saw between the children.

At the first half-term in October 2023, I read through all my notes and any other data in NVivo. Using my reflexive diary, I began to piece together threads that I felt may speak

to my research questions (as advised by Delamont, 2020); at that point, if children (re)produce ideas about social class (and how). I began to collate these threads as a series of twelve preliminary codes, weaving together the literature I had read with what I was seeing unfold in the classroom in relation to my research questions (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Some of these codes were vague and did not contain much data at this point (e.g. “gifting” “knowledge”), whereas some like “objects/possessions” were burgeoning with multiple components that needed to be delineated further. These codes are considered not as a reflection of the data, but as an analytical tool which shapes my entanglement with the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). I documented this process in my reflexivity journal along with initial reflections. Crang and Cook (2007) suggest that this ‘paper’ trail is crucial for making reasoning transparent and thus evidencing the reliability of analysis. For example, when reflecting on “objects/possessions” I noted:

*What also occurs to me is how precarious possession can be for children both because of other children and adults. For example, Rapunzel's lipbalm and Ariel's hand sanitiser which were both under threat of confiscation. Thinking about social class, would I be saying that the experience of middle-class children is different to that of their less-affluent peers? I need to be careful not to over-infer in the absence of data.*

[Reflexive journal, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2023]

I repeated this re-reading and coding process as an in-built quality procedure (Clarke and Braun, 2017) for my analysis during the winter break (December 2023-January 2024), and then again after my time in the field ended in February 2024. An advantage of NVivo is that extracts can remain in their position in my research diary (in terms of wider context and chronological order), whilst being annotated or sorted into codes. This is important as “data recorded at different times need to be examined in light of their place within temporal patterns...that structure the lives of the people being studied” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 192). In particular, I found the period before and after some children celebrated Christmas to be notable with reference to the interactions observed. When re-reading my notes and my codes, I also found myself adding past observations to codes as well as removing misfits that distort what that code has come to re-present (Crang and Cook, 2007). A disadvantage of NVivo is that it does not record or store these movements, only the finished results, and so I documented these changes in my reflexive journal alongside NVivo files.

When it came to the end of my fieldwork in February, I queried my coded extracts again with my research questions (Clarke and Braun, 2017). At this point, I found that my existing theoretical concepts (rooted in Bourdieu, 1984/2010), whilst usefully highlighting the construction of value related to social class, left the physicality of classroom matters slightly out of focus. I returned to the literature and reformulated my theoretical framework and research questions using sociomaterialism before revisiting my coded extracts with the theoretical concepts outlined in Section 3.5. They allowed me to focus on the specific materials and components that were intra-acting to produce the observed moments. Here, the “theoretical frame is active and creates effects” (Fenwick et al., 2015, p. 135); the frame itself intra-acts with the fieldwork observations to produce my thesis (see also Delamont, 2020).

I undertook a long process of re-grouping the extracts in a way that was cohesive and which felt most representative of my experience at the school (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). This involved delineating overarching codes, such as “belongings” into more specific areas that followed different patterns of materiality (i.e. classroom objects, water bottles, non-uniform clothing, Wildlife Area equipment). I identified patterns across the observations and moments that exemplified them; these moments formed the crux of my writing process. From here, I went backwards and forwards between the fieldnotes, my analytical notes and the writing that would eventually form my presentation of findings.

This (re)construction of my experience in the field is replete with “discourses and narratives that are themselves entangled with the materiality and sensoriality of the moment...memories and imaginaries” (Pink, 2015, p. 26). They are re-presentations of what I observed, experienced and thought in participation with other actors in the field, evident in the ways I have chosen to write about them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). This is also with consideration of the “constant dialectic” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 207) between myself, the children and the eventual reader of the thesis; making decisions about the written text, such as the use of pseudonyms, with all in mind (see discussion in Section 4.4.2).

Some of my fieldnotes have been expanded into vignettes or “narrative scenes” (Schöneich, 2021, p. 118). Vignettes differ from fieldnotes in that they have been elaborated into a more meaningful, detailed narrative. For me, this elaboration included drawing in more details about the classroom and practices from other sections of my fieldnotes, explaining the significance of certain concepts and being more deliberate in my choice of words for readers (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019; Schöneich, 2021). Nevertheless, it is important not to be drawn into describing intricately in a way that may obscure the transparency of the event. I have used vignettes as scenes in which the reader is invited to apply my analytical tools to the events that I have re-presented and draw their own conclusions (Schöneich, 2021, p. 118). This increases the transparency of ethnographic writing (Delamont, 2020). For the same reason, in my findings chapters I have clearly delineated description drawn from my time in the field (indented and italicised) and annotated with their context (fieldnote, reflexive journal, transcript, vignette) and a time and date stamp.

Throughout my re-presentation of fieldnotes, I use the first person to recount events in the field. This is “to remind readers of the researcher’s presence, influence, and role within the research context (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017, p. 5). I am not “seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581): My body, my clothing, my height, my history of relationships with the children and all other aspects that accompany my intertwining (physical or not) in the research setting are present in these moments (Sanderud, 2020; Tembo, 2021). In parts I also use the pronoun “we”, for example “Each lunch time, with the rest of the class, we would file through the school’s central corridor to reach the lunch hall” (Section 6.2.1). Again, this is thoughtfully employed to show the collective nature of the classroom actions I participated in.

In Baradian terms, the use of such pronouns can also be considered productive of the agential cuts that I am responsible for making, not just in the field but through this thesis. Using a first-person account separates myself as ‘someone who matters’ in this context. As noted above, this is intentional because I find it a useful mechanism through which to account for my actions in the field (Tembo, 2021; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017). Additionally, referring to my involvement as “we” may be interpreted as suggestive of an equal collective membership. However, arguably I – or indeed any of the children – did

not take part in such classroom practices from the same standpoint. Most notably, my positioning as an adult within the classroom meant that I could opt-out of these practices at any time and leave the school, unlike the children. Consequently, I attempt to employ pronouns as a tool throughout this thesis by reflecting here and throughout on the worlds they create.

## 4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented my methodological approach and the methods I have employed to explore what comes to matter in the children's peer culture at Parkside. Throughout the research process, the many thousands of micro-decisions and agential cuts I enacted are too extensive to document. These are present in the literature I read, the way I interacted with the children, through to the moments I chose to illustrate arguments in my findings chapters. As Fenwick et al. (2015) caveat "in all acts of description there remains what was not described" (p. 132). Indeed, I could have pulled out other threads within the children's experience, however I believe that this work represents my entanglement with the setting and my research questions. This is only to the best of my ability, given constraints on the process such as thesis word-limits, and does not guarantee how it will be received by others. I can only hope that through maintaining transparency (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Delamont, 2020; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017), demonstrating rigor and reflexivity (Delamont, 2016; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019), and making my reasoning and positionality explicit (Crang and Cook, 2007; Delamont, 2020; Mills and Morton, 2013) that the reader is satisfied that my approach is "good enough" (Luttrell, 2000, p. 499).

## 5 Chapter Five: Locating Parkside

### 5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have set out the framing of this thesis in terms of literature, theory, methodology and methods. In partnership, this chapter takes forwards these “invitations” (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 499) and responds to them with the specifics of my fieldwork at Parkside. This chapter aims to introduce the school in more detail, offering further insight into the mass of sociomaterial threads that (re)construct the Reception classroom at Parkside. In particular, this chapter explores the space, time and physical matters that make up life in Reception during my fieldwork (September 2023-February 2024). This is an endeavour to dislodge Shaviro’s “anthropocentric bedtime stories” that Barad (2007, p. 132) draws upon, by foregrounding posthuman and more-than-human matters, rather than the humans that inhabit these spaces. Here, as explored previously in Section 3.4.2.1, I consider these matters to “invade” (Willis, 2018, p. 582) events rather than constitute a mere backdrop.

Thus, this chapter begins with Section 5.2 by locating Parkside both temporally and geographically before presenting the educational material-discourse that in-forms life in Reception. The physical and temporal space of “the Early Years” at Parkside is mapped, in an attempt to demonstrate how these sociomaterial threads organise and are produced by daily life in the classroom. This is followed by Section 5.3 which aims to draw on the sensory and affective knowledge bases outlined in Section 4.2 to re-present how Parkside *felt to me*. The chapter concludes in Section 5.4 with an introduction to the findings that are presented across Chapters 6 and 7.

### 5.2 Setting

Locating this research, both temporally and geographically, is an important aspect of ethnographic studies which contextualises micro-interactions within local and national scales of reference (see Connolly, 1998; Corsaro and Molinari, 2017). The fieldwork for this study took place in a school within a city in the North of England between September 2023 and July 2024. Children who began school in September 2023 did so

in a landscape of changing social and economic conditions (Hill and Webber, 2022). Since late 2021, the UK is suggested to have been experiencing a “cost of living crisis” (Earwaker, 2022; Hill and Webber, 2022). This refers to a fall in disposable income where households struggle to meet the increased cost of living, such as food, household bills and other essentials (Earwaker, 2022). Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed that due to the increased cost of living, 38% of low-income families have had to reduce the amount they are spending on food for their children (Earwaker, 2022). Additionally, 70% also reported reducing, or planning to reduce, spending on Christmas and birthdays, in terms of celebrations or gifts (Earwaker, 2022). As such, this research indicates how household spending may have been impacted by recent events in the UK, offering threads that perhaps contextualise the emphasis this thesis places on consumption (see Section 1.1).

### 5.2.1 The school

As outlined in Section 4.3.2, the school is a two-form entry voluntary-controlled Church of England school with 313 children on roll in the academic year 2023/2024. The school was rebuilt in 2006, meaning that the current building is relatively new and purpose-built for contemporary pedagogy. For example, the building is separated into different areas for each year group and the younger year groups (Reception and Year 1) have outdoor areas adjoining their classrooms. There is also a pre-school which is situated within the same building as Parkside but operates independently from it in terms of admissions. Some children in the study attended this pre-school prior to starting Reception.

The school covers a fairly large site with extensive outdoor grounds and a car park with an attached roundabout for drop-off. It is surrounded by 5-foot-high green metal fencing, with a large entry gate for cars, and hedging which affords privacy and security for the children and staff. As it was only built in 2006, the building appears quite modern and is cared for by an external facilities company; as a result, outdoor areas are well-maintained, pathways are swept and repairs are done quickly meaning the building is kept in good condition. At the front of the school, there is a secluded area that is enclosed by a large hedge and metal fencing to keep it separate from the car park. This

is the “Wildlife Area”<sup>20</sup>; an outdoor learning area available for all classes to use. It has the earthy smell of damp mud, wood chippings that appear bouncy underfoot and a low-level of light facilitated by the large trees that punctuate the area.

In contrast, directly in front of the school building is a pale, neat pathway flanked by display boxes of flowers. An automatic door leads into the school reception area, where visitors are greeted by displays of the children’s work, a small sofa and a trophy cabinet with awards and achievements won by the school. Beside this are large windows that brighten the school’s main hall where children have sports lessons, assemblies and lunchtimes. A long corridor connects the front of the school to the classrooms at the back of the building, with internal doors segmenting the different year groups. These classrooms look out over a large concrete playground with wooden play-equipment, where families drop-off and collect children before and after the school day. Beyond this, a grassy field wraps around the edges of the playground, extending to the perimeter of the school marked by more fencing and hedges.

Parkside Primary is situated in a densely-populated village close to the city centre. As a result, many families walk to school as the majority live locally. Parkside is located in the middle of many houses, meaning that the roads can become congested easily when children are dropped-off in the morning or picked-up after school. It is within a couple of minutes’ walk to a nearby Secondary School, a local park and an extensive development of new-build homes which constitutes a large part of the Parkside’s catchment area. For the city, the average monthly rent is approximately £1,100 and the average house price is just above £325,000 as indicated by the Office for National Statistics (October 2024).

The school serves a relatively affluent and predominantly White catchment area. The number of pupils eligible for free school meals (at any point within the past 6 years) as well as the number of pupils whose first language is not English are both around half of the national average for state-funded primary schools in England (GOV.UK, 2024). The English Indices of Deprivation (IoD2019) suggest that the school serves multiple

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<sup>20</sup> A pseudonym.



neighbourhoods which are amongst the 20% and 10% least deprived neighbourhoods in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019).

#### *5.2.1.1 Curriculum and values*

As a state-funded primary school, Parkside Primary follows the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (Department for Education, 2014a) and the National Curriculum (Department for Education 2014b) for the years beyond this. The school website details how the curriculum is taught through topics, such as celebrations or historical events. Photos and examples of the children's learning are uploaded every six weeks to the school website to illustrate the children's achievements in school.

The values of the school focus on mutual respect, responsibility, holistic (personal, spiritual, moral and cultural) development, and children's wellbeing (School Website, 2024). As a Church of England school, Parkside also adopts a Christian ethos which recognises the development of the school's religious character following the principles of the church. Nevertheless, the school welcomes children of all faiths and backgrounds. Indeed, according to the school website, within the school "all relationships are based on trust, respect, equality and celebration of diversity" (School Website, 2024).

The school website sets out the expectation that all pupils should wear a school uniform. This is to ensure that children "look smart", "maintain high standards" and feel a sense of "belonging", "pride" and "responsibility" (School Website, 2024). Uniform items are specified as a white or navy shirt, a navy jumper or cardigan, grey trousers or (knee-length) skirts, black "sensible" shoes and black/grey/navy/white socks or tights (School Website, 2024). Blue and white dresses are permitted in the summer (School Website, 2024). Stud earrings, watches and religious items are permitted, however nail varnish, make-up and "extreme or high fashion" hair styles are not (School Website, 2024). Terms such as "sensible" and "extreme or high fashion" are not described further but perhaps indicate that overall, a plain and conservative approach to appearance is expected at Parkside. This is in contrast to three other schools in the local area that do not specify the same level of guidance related to clothing or additional items (like

earrings or nail varnish). Whilst another nearby school also prohibits nail varnish and make-up, it does not make a comparable comment related to hair styling.

In addition, families are also expected to provide a sports kit for their child. This should include a white or navy t-shirt and shorts, black or white plimsolls and trainers or warmer clothing for outdoor winter sports. Uniform does not necessarily have to be branded with the school logo but this option is available from a local retailer. The school has a Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) which all parents and guardians automatically become members of when their child starts the school. The primary function of the PTA is to raise money for the school, usually through events, to support learning opportunities for pupils. The PTA also runs regular second-hand uniform sales to support parents in purchasing school uniform.

On their website, the school explains the importance of extra-curricular activities and advertises the “variety of opportunities” that they are able to offer pupils (School Website, 2024). A range of clubs are available for children in Years 1-6, both at lunchtimes and after school, such as gardening, choir and many sports. Most of these clubs are free and run by teachers, however, there are a small proportion that require payment. These are mostly lessons for musical instruments which require external tutors.

### 5.2.2 The Early Years

The two Reception classes (children aged 4–5-years-old) in the school, also referred to as “the Early Years”, follow a tailored Early Years curriculum, which covers all requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (Department for Education, 2014a). The school adopts a “learning through play” approach (School Website, 2024) to develop children’s skills, reflecting pupils’ interests in the topics and materials provided throughout the classrooms (indoor and outdoor). As outlined in Section 4.3.2, each class has a dedicated teacher<sup>21</sup> and there are three teaching assistants who alternate between the classes.

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<sup>21</sup> One class has two teachers who job-share.

The Early Years area of the school sits at one end of the long corridor connecting all the classrooms. It is a through-way for staff to get to the adjoining nursery (the end of the building) and also has a secure door to Key Stage 1 (and the rest of the school) that can only be opened by adults using a two-lock system. Figure 8 shows the layout of the indoor Reception space. Entering from Key Stage 1 or via the external door onto the playground, the area feels spacious due to the large-open area of the cloakroom. The cloakroom leads to the toilets (separated for girls and boys) which are only for the use of Reception children. There is also an accessible toilet which is used by the adults, a storeroom and a shelving unit stacked with learning resources. Following through to a corridor shared by the two classrooms, the area becomes busier, with small-sized tables and chairs for groupwork, two fridges to store fruit and milk for snack-time and spaces for quieter play, such as the sensory area<sup>22</sup>. The walls overflow with examples of the children's work, professional photographs of pupils and brightly-coloured displays.

The doors to the classrooms face each other and their layouts appear to mirror each other similarly. Spanning out from the large open space facilitated by "the carpet", a rug where all the children sit, the classroom is divided into smaller areas for the children to explore during extended play sessions. These areas are guided by the seven areas of learning outlined in the EYFS statutory framework (Department for Education, 2014a). For example, the "writing table", an area marked by a table with small-sized chairs and a shelf full of mark-making implements, or the "reading area" with cushions, fairylights, cuddly toys, a child-sized teepee and a well-stocked bookshelf (see Figure 8). During extended play sessions, known as "exploring time", the children also have access to an enclosed outdoor space with resources such as climbing equipment, a sandpit and painting areas. Table 4 details the temporal threads that characterise a typical day for pupils.

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<sup>22</sup> An area which has activities designed to explore the senses, such as a bubble lamp or different fabrics.

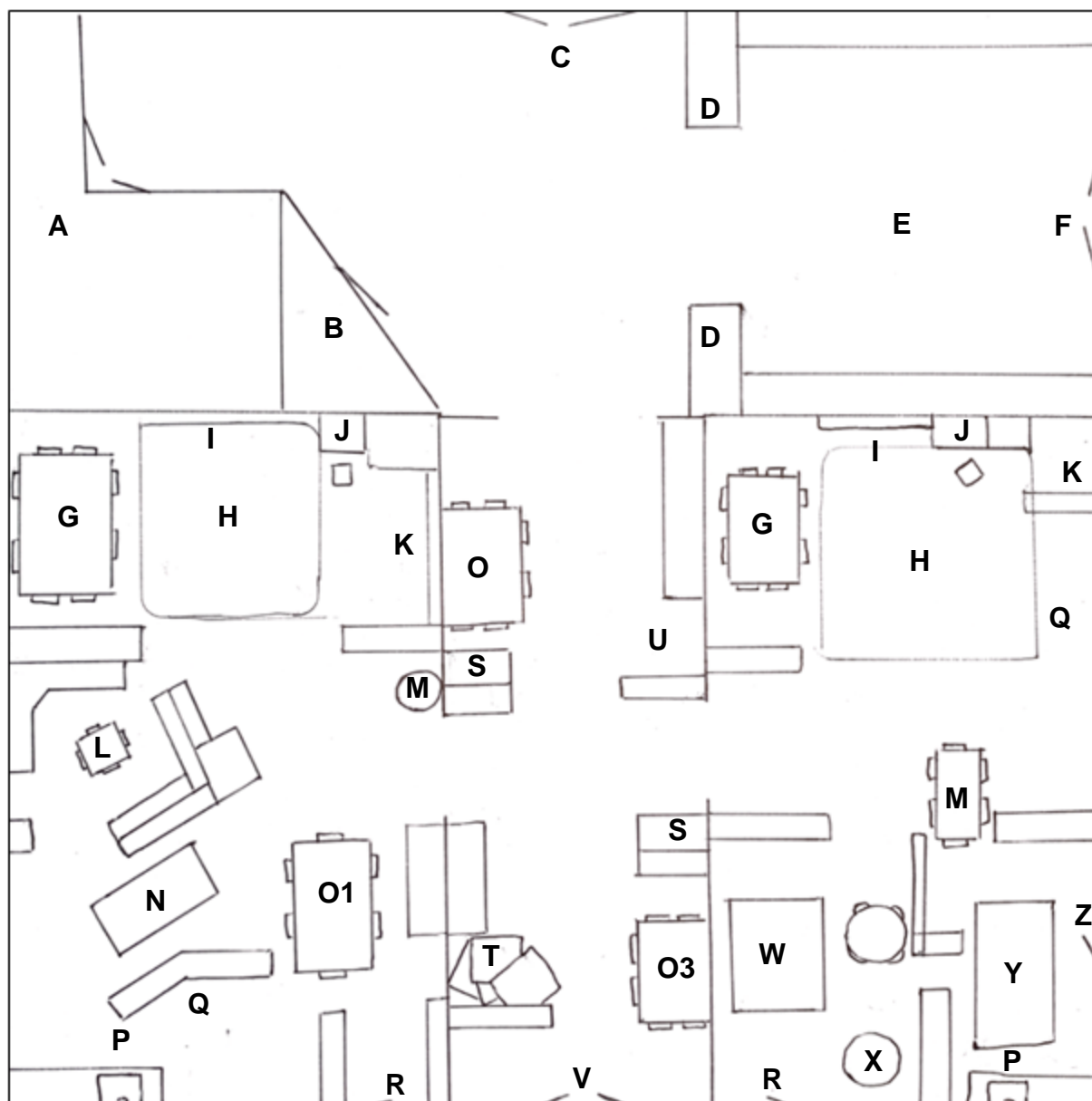


Figure 8. A representation of the area of the school that serves Reception pupils

### Key

A – Toilets (gender segregated)	B – Adult toilet	C – Door to Key Stage 1	D – Photo registration tables
E – Cloakroom	F – Entrance	G – Writing table	H – Rug (“the carpet”)
I – Interactive Whiteboards	J – Teachers’ desks	K – Reading area	L – Role play area (“the Home Corner”)
M – Investigation tables	N – Sandpit	O – Tables for group work	P – Low-height sinks
Q – Construction areas	R – Adult cupboards	S – Two boxes: one for pictures (“the Going Home Box”) and one for bookbags	T – Sensory area
U – Area for religious reflection	V – Doors to adjoining nursery	W – Craft table	X – Mathematics area
Y – Water tray	Z – Doors to the outdoor area		

Table 4. A typical school day for Reception pupils

Time	Activity
8.45am	Children arrive at school via the cloakroom.
8.45am-9.00am	Children separate into their respective classrooms to complete a morning activity whilst sitting on a rug in front of the interactive white board ("the carpet").
9.00am-9.20am	Children split into small groups for reading, either in the classroom or out in the corridor between the two classrooms.
9.20am-9.40am	The teacher delivers a phonics lesson to children on "the carpet".
9.40am-10.20am	Children choose what to do from the provision available across the two classrooms and the outdoor area ("exploring time"). During this time, teachers select children to complete focused group work. At the end of this period, the children have to tidy-up.
10.20am-10.40am	Children wash their hands, collect their water bottles and choose an item of fruit for snack and sit on 'the carpet' in their respective classrooms for "snack-time". Whilst they are eating, the teacher delivers a maths lesson.
10.40am-11.30am	Exploring time followed by tidy-up.
11.30am	The teacher reads the children a story on 'the carpet' and then the children wash their hands and collect their water bottles and packed lunches.
11.45-12.15pm	Children walk down to the hall and eat their packed lunch from home or a hot meal from school.
12.15pm-1.00pm	Children play outside (inside in bad weather) with the children from all other year groups.
1.00pm-1.25pm	The teacher delivers a teaching session with the children on "the carpet", such as a drawing tutorial or information about the focus topic.
1.25pm-2.45pm	Exploring time followed by tidy-up; or a sports lesson in the hall; or a trip to the school's "Wildlife Area".
2.45pm-3.00pm	The teacher reads a story or the class sing some songs on "the carpet" in their respective classrooms. The teacher hands out the contents of "the Going Home Box" and the children's book bags.
3.00pm-3.05pm	The children wait to be collected. One class waits in the cloakroom and the other in their classroom.

### 5.3 Beginning in the middle: tangling with Parkside

The school's building, curriculum and values, the classroom layout and the timings of the school day are just some of the interwoven sociomaterial threads that intra-act to (re)produce the “spacetime-matterings” (Kleinman and Barad, 2012, p. 77) of daily Reception life at Parkside. Humans are also an inseparable part of the weaving of this tapestry (Barad, 2007); those within the school (e.g. teachers and pupils/adults and children/me) and those outside of the school (e.g. families), as well as those past and future. I was just one of these humans “in the middle of the thickness of the actual present with all its multiplicities” (Lenz Taguchi, 2009, p. 61), yet I hope to use this section to further illuminate my entanglement with the field to frame the findings which follow.

Although I arrived in the Reception class at Parkside on my first day in the field in September 2023, I was already *in media res* (Latour, 2005, p. 206). The classroom, the teachers, the children, their families and I all carried with us histories of intra-actions gone by, a bundle of threads ready to be (re)tangled as we came together in September in the classroom. These threads would mesh in different ways on different days, knotting to (re)produce a patterning effect which characterised the school day and the children's peer culture as phenomena-in-information (Barad, 2007). It was these patterns and regularities that I took note of, that I interpreted as mattering-in-process (Barad, 2007).

As part of this, I tried to attend to how sensory and emotional knowledge and experiences were being constructed in the field. The physical spaces in the classroom were replete with these patterns: the relative privacy of some areas, such as the reading area, and the whispered voices that went with them; the materials, like sand and water, that produced excitement in the children; and the bustle of the Home Corner as domestic or fantastic role-plays were (re)enacted. This constituted *my* feeling in the field: laughing as the children debated whether baby Jesus likes hot dogs [Fieldnotes, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2023]; feeling excited (and flushed) as the children chanted “Go Tara” as I took part in a running game on the cold October playground [Fieldnotes, 17<sup>th</sup> October

2023]; and the repeated lure of the playdough tools or the colouring templates that I found calming and mindful to play with.

Thus, like many other researchers, I wholeheartedly enjoyed my time in the field and this positivity has no doubt informed this thesis. Undoubtedly there were also days where these spaces were not crucibles for such happy intra-actions; classroom life could also be characterised by uncertainty, instability and, thankfully less often, sadness. However, these can only ever be my interpretations, a partial view which becomes an exercise in co-construction through which “new ways of knowing are produced” (Pink, 2011, p. 271). The fruits of these new ways of knowing will be re-presented through the findings of this thesis, produced by my being *of* the field (Barad, 2007).

Yet, life in Reception at Parkside was so much more than a map of the classroom or a timetable of the school day, it was imbued with a vitality that is always *just beyond* the tools I had to re-present it. For me, this is the essence of events-in-information (Barad, 2007); they are fleeting, *felt* in the moment and drenched in a thousand agential cuts that we can only begin to pick apart. Ergo, this section represents a further effort to be transparent (Clarke and Braun, 2017; Delamont, 2020; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017) and to accept my role in “worlding” (Barad, 2007, p. 181) the classroom, both whilst physically present in the field and re-presenting that experience through this thesis. The findings that follow are realisations of this entanglement; moments overheard, patterns echoed and affect felt through *my* tangling in the middle.

## 5.4 Introducing the findings

In the chapters that follow, the findings for this thesis will re-present the aspects at Parkside Primary that I interpreted as coming to matter in the classroom. Undeniably, there were other aspects that could have been interpreted as mattering in the peer culture at Parkside. The aspects that I have put forward in the following chapters are themselves an intra-action produced by my ethnographic entanglement with the field and my research questions. To revisit, the research questions are:

1. What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?
2. In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

There are four aspects that I considered as coming to matter in the classroom peer culture in relation to the (re)construction of social class for young children. These aspects are referred to as “model cases” (Krause, 2021, p. 8), in the sense that I consider them to illustrate the phenomenon of social class – the “epistemic research object” (Krause, 2021, p. 8) – via the specific site of the Reception classroom at Parkside primary, the “material research object” (Krause, 2021, p. 8).

As Krause (2021) explains, a material research object “stands-in” (p. 21) for an epistemic research object, in some instances becoming a model case where it comes to typify the wider theory or model system. For example, the material research object for Marx (1888/2008) – working men in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe – became a model case for social class leading to theoretical blind spots such as women’s unpaid labour (Crompton, 1998) and children’s role in the economy (Hendrick, 2015). Here, the hoped-for contribution of the findings that follow is novel due to the original model cases of social class being adult and occupation-based at the exclusion of children (Ferguson, 2017). The forthcoming model cases hope to (re)construct what social class *can be*, through revising the material research objects that have come to constitute it (Krause, 2021).

Findings are constructed as four model cases, divided between two chapters:

- Chapter Six: (Re)constructing belongings:
  - children’s water bottles and;
  - the ownership of wellies;
- Chapter Seven: (Re)constructing experiences:
  - enrichment activities and;
  - birthday parties.

The model cases were gathered under these headings with the intention that this would illuminate points of commonality between the two cases: either their material



'belongingness' as an object of personal possession or their abstractness as an experience outside of school that is brought into the classroom space. It is through these points of commonality that their analyses converge.

In each of the four model cases, I explore a series of entanglements observed as patterns in the classroom. I consider these entanglements to be constitutive to the overall mattering of each case, illustrating slightly different facets of their unfolding but with points of similarity. Each of the four cases is expanded with a vignette that brings together the sociomaterial threads to focus on how these matters can be used to produce power dynamics within the children's peer culture at Parkside. Throughout each section, the different methods used in the field (see Sections 4.2.1-4.2.4) are interwoven as they become relevant, clearly demarcated with their specific context. Each model case concludes by specifically revisiting the research questions above to consider the response presented by the analyses.

## 6 Chapter Six: (Re)constructing belongings

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter brings together two “model cases” (Krause, 2021, p. 8) that I interpret as illustrative of how class is (re)constructed at Parkside Primary through what matters to the children. This chapter traces the specific moments through which water bottles and wellington boots, or “wellies”, take on importance for the children in their everyday lives at school. For the case of water bottles, I begin by exploring how classroom routines, such as snack-time, and water bottles’ construction as healthy afford their acceptance and status in the classroom (Section 6.2.1). This legitimacy is explored further in the vignette in Section 6.2.2, “A vignette: Friends who drink together”, which considers how these (re)constructions come to matter for the children and how water bottles can thus emerge in ways that have implications for friendships and peer interactions. For the second case, in Section 6.3.1 I show how wellies also come to matter to the children through their classroom legitimacy, namely their regular use as necessary equipment for the school’s “Wildlife Area”. Through a vignette in Section 6.3.2, “A vignette: Negotiating friendships with wellies”, I explore how, because wellies matter to the children, they can emerge in ways that (re)produce power dynamics between them.

Through these model cases, I draw out themes of distinction and in/exclusion, reflecting on how these moments can be infused with affect that can create positive or negative classroom experiences for the children at Parkside. I consider how the commonality between wellies and water bottles, as material belongings, in-forms the way they emerge in the classroom. In the final part of each section (6.2.3 and 6.3.3), I explore these scenes with reference to my research questions to ascertain how these power delineations and mattering between peers can be constitutive of young children’s experiences of social class.

## 6.2 Water bottles

### 6.2.1 Centre-stage: snack-time-carpet-space-bottles

*In the Reception class of Parkside Primary, my slightly battered cream-coloured drinks bottle with small painted bees on it clinks next to other metal bottles in a plastic tray. It's snack-time and the "water bottle tray" is carried by an adult into the classroom and placed alongside two bowls of fruit on one of the desks near the door. The red plastic tray (yellow for the other class) is brimming with an array of drinks bottles of all sizes, shapes and colours, bursting with football badges, Disney princesses and classic children's characters like Hello Kitty. These bottles are poised, ready to be claimed by their owner and taken to the carpet for snack-time.*

[Description expanded from fieldnotes, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

As with other chapters, we start in the middle (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003; Latour, 2005; Lenz Taguchi, 2009); in the middle of the school morning and in the middle of my fieldwork. This seemingly mundane custom is a daily occurrence in the classroom life at Parkside Primary; something that happens at around 10.20am each morning. At first, it seemed natural in its practicality, and it did not strike me as anything notable until a couple of months had elapsed in my fieldwork. As I will discuss, it was my induction into this daily pattern, along with the children's attention to the bottles, that illuminated to me their significance in the "worlding" of the classroom (Barad, 2007, p. 181).

The Reception children at Parkside can bring to school an individual drinks bottle labelled with their name, which is filled with water to encourage them to drink throughout the day. This bottle is brought from home and when the children arrive at school each morning, it is deposited in a small plastic tray which holds all the water bottles for that class (see Figure 9). These trays are placed on a low-height desk in the corridor between the two classrooms to ensure they are accessible for the children throughout the day. The trays are brought into the classroom for snack-time and the children also collect their bottles to use at lunchtime.



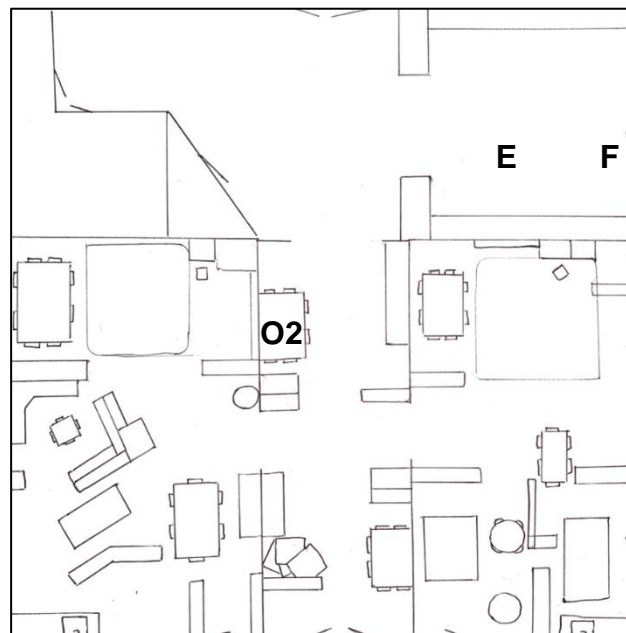
*Figure 9. The “water bottle trays” on the desk outside the classrooms*

This is not specific to the Reception class but something which I noted for other classrooms throughout the school. Each lunch time, with the rest of the class, we would file through the school’s central corridor to reach the lunch hall. This main corridor is flanked either side by classrooms ascending through the school years, and outside each one is a tray or box teeming with a similar collection of colourful and patterned bottles displaying what I assume are the interests of their owners. It is this pervasiveness throughout the school, as well as in the classroom peer culture, that encouraged me to explore the materiality of the water bottles. Indeed, they are not just part of the backdrop of the classroom but integral in shaping it, “invading” it (Willis, 2018, p. 582) as they come to matter through different material-discursive moments, such as snack-time.

Drinks bottles sit at a specific location within the discourses of personal belongings at school, the classroom and the children. Unlike other personal items such as toys, bottles have a discursive legitimacy which allows them to travel beyond the cloakroom and into the classroom (and corridor) space. At Parkside, this is in notable contrast to the mandated indistinguishability of children’s matching uniforms, sports kits and school shoes which are the other personal items allowed in the classroom. Other decorative items which display similar branding, such as lunchboxes, backpacks and coats, are resigned to the cloakroom and considered to not belong in the classroom. On multiple occasions, I observed children attempt to bring other personal items into the classroom,

such as Hello Kitty sunglasses or a Unicorn toy. The teachers and teaching assistants would ask the children to return these items to their bags or coats in the cloakroom to “keep it safe”. Importantly, this is a genuine motivation for the teachers who reported anxiety over children’s treasured items going missing at school and the upset this can cause (see also Stockstill, 2021).

Figure 10, reproduced from a more detailed version (Figure 8, Section 5.2.2) shows the indoor space in the Reception area of the school. The cloakroom (labelled E) can be seen to act as a filter once the children arrive through the main entrance (labelled F), catching their personal customised possessions and holding them for the duration of the day; all of those except their drinks bottle. The drinks bottle enters the inner classroom environment, holding an authorised position in the plastic trays on the table in the corridor (labelled O2). This is an important aspect of the bottles’ material-discursive construction that is inter-connected with the classroom moments discussed in due course.



*Figure 10. A map of the indoor classroom space*

The function of the children’s drinks bottles is arguably what enables their transgression of the usual constraints around decorative personal belongings. As they hold water, they are sanctioned and encouraged within the classroom environment to improve children’s health by ensuring they are hydrated and not consuming sugary drinks

(Moreno et al., 2021). Allowing children to drink water during the school day is also considered to promote cognitive performance (Dwozdowska et al., 2020; Moreno et al., 2021). Individual bottles (i.e. labelled with names) are considered more hygienic as the children do not need to share cups, and from my own experience, are helpful as they do not rely on inconsistent classroom resources (such as washing up liquid). Thus, individual water bottles are discursively constructed as healthy, hygienic and supportive of school performance, which may be constitutive of their authorisation (and promotion) in the classroom, throughout Parkside Primary, and in schools more widely (Water Only Schools Toolkit, 2021).

At Parkside, in addition to accessing their water bottles at snack-time, the children can use their bottles when they choose throughout “exploring time” across the classrooms; they are always available from the plastic tray in the corridor. Given the discourses of health attached to the water bottles, requests to drink are also rarely denied during lessons. Interestingly, I observed a few occasions where children asked for a drink at a seemingly inconvenient time, such as in the middle of a lesson. The teacher or teaching assistant usually always agreed, albeit reluctantly (“go on then”) given the disruption it can sometimes cause (other children begin talking or also ask to go for a drink).

Therefore, drinks bottles hold a particular legitimacy and freedom in the classroom environment that is not afforded to other possessions, particularly not those that overtly reflect personal interests. The ability of the bottles to display the interests of their owner, such as favourite animals, film characters and children’s brands such as Smiggle, may make them desirable for children and offer an avenue to express their individuality (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Iqbal et al., 2017; Pilcher, 2011; Danlin and Garlen, 2017; Stockstill, 2021), discussed further in Section 6.2.3. When taken with their legitimacy within the classroom, this suggests they are a unique aspect of children’s cultural expressions that can literally traverse the boundary between the cloakroom and the classroom that usually separates personal items. In addition to this, their hand-held portability means they are easily transportable within the classroom and, as we will see in the following vignette, easy to carry about whilst playing.

The bottles' positioning as a point of personal expression in an otherwise standardised environment, their centrality to classroom routines, and their perceived contribution to children's wellbeing, can be suggested to all form part of the web that produce them as a common point of admiration between the children. At snack-time, the children identify their bottle from the water bottle tray and take it to their "carpet space" where they must sit still and eat/drink for the duration. Whereas the fruit they eat is the same, their bottles always call out with a similar air of interest whilst confined to their carpet spaces for this period. I found myself caught in this snack-time-carpet-space-bottles entanglement with my own metal bee-clad bottle, where children would reach over and rotate it for inspection, point to the bees and smile at me or hold their own bottle side-by-side next to mine. Indeed, Dyson (2020) concurs that "'cool' water bottles" (p. 9) were considered a "peer-valued good" (p. 9) in her ethnography with 5–6-year-olds. This admiration is perhaps indicative of the influence friends can have on young children's desire for brands or products marketed at children (Pagla and Brennan, 2014; Pugh, 2011).

Whilst I began my fieldwork with a name label attached to my bottle, after a few weeks this dropped off and I did not replace it. This is because my bottle had become socially inducted into the 'library of personal possessions' that accompanied the Reception peer culture at Parkside. The children appear to have an acute knowledge of other's personal belongings, often matching up or returning unnamed hair accessories, lunchboxes, coats, toys and bottles to their owners. For example, at snack-time, one child asks another where his regular 'Pikachu' water bottle is as he had brought a different one into school that day. This knowledge may be from regular interactions as the children see their peers with their respective bottles every day at snack-time.

Yet, this may also be reinforced by the micro-moments in which the children frequently draw attention to their water bottles. In particular, branding, patterns or recognisable characters enable the bottles to be named and bring them into being in a way that goes beyond the name of their owner. As outlined in Section 2.3.2.3, Stockstill (2021) suggests that for young children – particularly those who are more affluent – personal property offers them an avenue through which they can assert their individuality and bond with peers, sometimes in gendered ways (see also Iqbal et al., 2017; Leader, 2018; Pilcher, 2011; Wohlwend, 2009). For example, one lunchtime, Rapunzel (a

Disney-inspired pseudonym) draws my attention to her bottle and educates me in naming Disney princesses:

*Amidst a relatively chaotic and loud lunch hall scene, Rapunzel calls across the table to me where we are both eating our packed lunches.*

*Rapunzel: Have you seen my bottles Tara? Do you know all the princesses on here?*

*I say that I don't. She has two water bottles (one for her lunch and one to have in the classroom which she still brings to the lunch hall). Both are brightly coloured plastic (one pink, one purple), decorated with Disney princesses and what looks to be high-quality, certified merchandise.*

*Rapunzel: [pointing one-by-one] That's Belle...Rapunzel...Aurora...Snow White...[and then to her other bottle] and that's Mirabelle! [with a big smile on her face]*

[Fieldnotes, 19<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

Although occurring in the lunch hall (a sanctioned space for personal *lunch-related* belongings), this scene is typical in how children would use their drinks bottles as a point of interest. I regularly observed this throughout the children's peer culture across school areas, particularly after the Christmas break, at lunchtimes or through silent pointing or physically presenting their bottles. Such practices are organised by the legitimacy of spaces, particularly the cloakroom/classroom separation, thus bringing the bottles into being in certain ways through their branding or decoration.

Through these aspects, I have attempted to demonstrate the jumble of practices, material-discursive understandings and spatial organisation which surround drinks bottles at Parkside Primary. Their positioning as tools for health can be suggested to enable their discursive and spatial legitimacy within the classroom, separating them from other decorative personal belongings confined to the cloakroom. Within this web, their use at snack-time where the children sit in close proximity with their peers places them centre-stage, perhaps further serving to arrange them as an individual item which can be admired in the classroom. In the vignette that follows, I hope to show how these aspects are woven through other specific moments within the classroom in which water bottles come to matter within the children's peer culture.



## 6.2.2 A vignette: Friends who drink together

### 6.2.2.1 The 'arena of appreciation': bottle-cloakroom-morning-children

*I am immersed in the morning bustle of the cloakroom as the children enter, laden down with their bookbags, backpacks, lunchboxes and water bottles. Nearby the benches, I notice Belle and Sheep huddling around Isabella and, despite the noise, they are discussing something with lowered voices. From my vantage point near the doorway, I cannot hear but I can see them leaning in to examine Isabella's water bottle which I assume must be new due to the interest it has attracted. Belle and Sheep point excitedly at the images of characters from the Disney film 'Encanto', represented by Figure 11 (Amazon, 2022). I am already aware of this film's popularity as one lunchtime I was introduced by Rapunzel to the main character 'Mirabelle', which adorned her own drinks bottle.*

*Whilst the girls<sup>23</sup> lean in to admire the bottle, Rainbow arrives in the cloakroom and immediately notices the huddle. She immediately freezes and after a pause, shouts Isabella's name once, and when she doesn't get a response, twice more. Once she has Isabella's attention, Rainbow, who always appears keen for Isabella's approval, makes a dramatic impressed face at her bottle by raising her eyebrows and opening her mouth. Rainbow hurriedly starts fumbling around in her bag for her own water bottle, mumbling that she has the same one.*

*The girls carry their water bottles through to the corridor which separates both classrooms and place them in the trays on the table. Rainbow jostles to place her bottle next to Isabella and it appears that closeness between bottles reflects closeness between friends. At this point, Sheep and Isabella explain that Rainbow has "tricked" them as – although she does have a Disney princess bottle – this is a slightly older bottle with different Disney princesses and importantly, not the same as Isabella's 'Encanto' bottle.*

*As it turns out, Sheep has the same 'Encanto' bottle as Isabella and later in the day, I observe them stood face-to-face by the water bottle tray in the corridor, making intense eye contact whilst they giggle and sip from the pop-up straws on their bottles. They hold them up in the air side-by-side and continue to giggle.*

[Vignette expanded from fieldnotes, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2024]



Figure 11. An 'Encanto' water bottle with a flip top lid, similar to those at Parkside Primary.

<sup>23</sup> This term reflects the way Belle, Sheep, Isabella and Rainbow identify based on observations of classroom practices.

This bottle-cloakroom-morning-children scene, expanded from my fieldnotes, was observed in January and notably, this was the first week back to school after the Christmas holidays. Personal belongings, particularly those received by some as Christmas presents, occupied a particularly central role amongst the children in this week. New water bottles, new backpacks, new watches, new shoes; a chorus of “this is new!” rippled through the cloakroom that week as the children excitedly showcased their new additions. Echoing my own experiences as a teacher introduced in Section 1.1, this is also congruous with the research presented in Section 2.5.2.1, where new possessions are observed as a discussion point between peers (Iqbal et al., 2017; Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Stockstill, 2021). As noted above, the material-discursive construction of the cloakroom as a space for personal possessions (to be left) is suggested to constitute an integral part of this entanglement, in-forming how this patterning occurred.

Repeatedly, this ‘arena of appreciation’ takes place in the cloakroom (see Figure 12) between 8.40am and 8.50am as the children arrive at school. This temporal space appears often marked with excitement as the children see each other for the first time that day, and rush to tell their friends things that happened the previous night, at the weekend or on their way to school. I find the children’s energy levels to be reflected in the thrum of chatter that characterises these ten minutes each day. For example, this is noticeably louder in the week after the Christmas break or other holidays, or the day the children arrive at school in the snow. It could also mirror other collective moods as well; the anxious silence or tears in the first few weeks of school or the discomfort of arriving at school soaked by the rain.



*Figure 12. The cloakroom in the Early Years at Parkside (displays anonymised)*

The architecture of the cloakroom as a large rectangular space, big enough for all the children to congregate and flanked by benches down each side, appears to construct an arena for these exchanges in which belongings can be discussed (labelled E on Figure 8, Section 5.2.2). Approximately 24 metal pegs, labelled with the children's names, are lined up above the benches on each side of the cloakroom, necessarily cramped together and overflowing with coats, sports kits, lunchboxes and backpacks. The children enter the cloakroom through the main door (visible in Figure 12 above, labelled F on Figure 8, Section 5.2.2) waving off their caregivers on the playground, and then add their belongings to their pegs. The close proximity of the pegs ensures that children's belongings are literally side-by-side, perhaps coaxing children to admire, compare and comment. The large, open-plan carpet space means that any valorised belongings which attract an animated huddle of children, such as in the scene above, usually also ensnare curious onlookers.

Indeed, this is the only physical space within the Reception area where the children from both classes are held together in close proximity, with their belongings to hand, and with the freedom to interact without as much adult oversight. The teachers are on-hand for parents/guardians to chat to outside the doors and the teaching assistants supervise the classrooms, meaning that the cloakroom seems comparatively less

surveilled. In contrast, the children are usually dispersed across the playground, lunch hall or classroom activities and when sat together on the carpet, they are closely overlooked and not allowed to hold personal items. In these ten minutes when the children arrive at school, I suggest that the spatial arena intra-acts with the temporality of the school day to produce a patterning of appreciative interactions. As will be discussed, I interpret these intra-actions as producing agential cuts – marking what matters – between belongings (the ‘Encanto’ bottle) and individuals (Isabella and Sheep versus Rainbow).

Like other ‘school-approved’ items such as backpacks and lunchboxes, industries have capitalised on the confluence of necessary school equipment and children’s culture to produce a flourishing market aimed at school children and their families (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Hamilton, 2012; Roper and La Niece, 2009; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017). Indeed, this translation of popular culture into school equipment allows consumption to seep into classrooms (Edwards, 2014; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Roche, 2009; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017), evident in the decorative, branded bottles that infiltrate snack-time at Parkside Primary. This runs counter to schools’ egalitarian values, lived out through practices such as wearing matching uniforms, which are intended to minimise distinction by placing all pupils on a standardised, common plane (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019).

This meshing of consumable products with popular culture has led to concern over the discourses that these brands promote to young consumers (Coyne et al., 2016; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017). Amongst (self-identified) girls at Parkside Primary, Disney princesses appear to hold a revered place in their peer culture and this is reflected in the corollary merchandise that proliferates throughout the year: bottles (see Figure 9), watches, backpacks, lunchboxes, hair accessories, non-uniform day clothing, wellies and school shoes (as well as their chosen pseudonyms, see Section 4.4.2).

Yet, such merchandise (and the wider Disney franchise) has been critiqued for promoting stereotypes of gender, race, class and sexuality (England et al., 2011; Fan, 2019; Towbin et al., 2004); such as idealised feminine beauty (Coyne et al., 2016) or “girl power” expressed through body image (Leader, 2018). Whilst more recent Disney

princesses are suggested to challenge some of these stereotypes, for example Merida in the Disney film *Brave* (Andrews and Chapman, 2012) who bucks gender norms of feminine dressing and duty, Rutherford and Baker (2021) suggest that this is “illusory” progress (para. 1) and cultural messages for hegemonic identity performances remain intact (see also Fan, 2019; Leader, 2018).

Indeed, Sandlin and Garlen (2017) describe how through capitalising on affect, the “Disneyverse” is able to profit from children’s “consumption of commodified identities” (p. 209) (see also Steinberg, 2011). The bottle-cloakroom-morning-children scene can be suggested to begin with affect via an example of this school-approved expression of consumption. The lure of the ‘Encanto’ (Castro Smith et al., 2021) water bottle is evident, inviting the children to rotate the bottle, to lean in. For these girls, the largely pink and purple colour palette of the bottle, decorated with flowers, may further increase its affective draw; see Figure 11 (Amazon, 2022). In other observations, they invoke different aspects of typically ‘feminine’ markers of identity, such as attending ballet/dance lessons and styling their long hair by wearing decorative hair accessories (Blaise, 2014; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Pilcher, 2011).

Thus, the colours and the decoration of the bottle align with cultural markers of femininity and their affective pull documented in other research with young children (Coyne et al., 2016; Kustatscher, 2015; Pilcher, 2011; Stockstill, 2021; Yoon, 2020). With the recognisable Disney characters also displayed, the materiality of the bottle can be interpreted as a visual expression of feminine identity (Wohlwend, 2009; Steinberg, 2011); producing it as highly affective in this scene. Whilst such artifacts can be creatively reworked by children to challenge traditional stereotypes (Wohlwend, 2009; Fan, 2019; Steinberg, 2011), the focus here is “not simply what we know about Disney but *what we are becoming* through our engagements with Disney” (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017, p. 210). In this case, how through consumption, commodified identities that have become the ‘stuff’ of childhood experiences (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Löfdahl, 2006).

Yet, it is not the ‘Encanto’ bottle in this scenario that is *inherently* valuable: I suggest that the intra-action of its newness at the start of term with its heteronormative femininity and Disney branding produce it as an affective force for these girls (England et al.,

2011; Leader, 2018; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Rutherford and Baker, 2021; Towbin et al., 2004). The spatial and temporal affordances of the classroom routines may be further intra-acting elements working to produce this pattern within the children's peer culture, where the children could express their appreciation of their possessions to their peers in the early morning cloakroom arena.

Through this intra-action, I interpret agential cuts as enacted and separations between the children and belongings produced. It is through these elements entangling that it is possible to see their separability; how the 'Encanto' bottle is produced as a desirable object and how this in turn forms power relations between the children (see Section 3.5). The positioning of this specific bottle in the initial cloakroom huddle is enfolded back into further intra-actions where Isabella and Sheep bond over their matching bottles, giggling and maintaining close physical proximity. This emphasis on sameness mirrors Pugh's (2011) ethnographic findings presented in Section 2.5.2.1, where children used consumer culture to connect to others (see also Iqbal et al., 2017). However, this appears to be at the exclusion of Rainbow, who does not have the material resource to be able to participate in this peer culture routine in these moments. Her attempts to join the girls with her 'classic' Disney princess (but not 'Encanto') bottle is interpreted as a "trick", perhaps reinforcing the protected space available only to those with the 'right' bottle.

The film *Encanto* (Castro Smith et al., 2021) is relatively new in the Disney franchise compared to the 'classic' princesses such as Snow White and Cinderella that are on Rainbow's bottle (Leader, 2018). This may explain its popularity at Parkside Primary, as a newer, more novel iteration of the Disney franchise (Rutherford and Baker, 2021). Indeed, although *Encanto* merchandise is available relatively cheaply via online websites (around £10), this has not yet acquired the reach of long-standing 'classic' Disney princess merchandise which is available affordably in supermarkets. This may contribute to its affective force within the classroom peer culture, as it is set apart from the more 'classic' Disney princess merchandise which is more widespread (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017).

#### 6.2.2.2 *Drinking forever: drinking-rules-classroom-bottles-children*

This exclusionary dynamic between Isabella, Sheep and Rainbow re-appears one week later, when the legitimacy of bottles in the classroom environment is again used to produce power delineations.

*It is exploring time and I am sitting on the carpet with another child completing a jigsaw. Rainbow, Sheep and Isabella suddenly (and noisily) rush in through the classroom door causing me and some other children to quickly look up. Rainbow is ahead of the other two, who appear to be holding their water bottles (the same matching 'Encanto' ones from the previous week). Rainbow looks about rather wildly and stomps up to me – I think as I am the first adult she saw. She points an accusatory finger backwards at Isabella and Sheep who are now sipping rather pointedly from their straws with wide eyes. Rainbow hurriedly exclaims:*

*Rainbow: They are keeping their bottles **forever***

*Isabella attempts to interject but Rainbow cuts her off:*

*Rainbow: (quietly but firmly) ...well you don't need them **forever***

*Despite Rainbow's angry tone, I see her face drop a little after she says this. From previous observations where Rainbow tried to 'trick' the girls to be included, I feel for Rainbow as I infer that this is perhaps an intentional act to exclude rather than to appreciate their bottles or drink from them. I agree with Rainbow and try to loosely advise Isabella and Sheep that they may be able to play more easily if they have a drink and return their bottles to the tray. Isabella and Sheep spin around, still sipping on their straws, and exit the classroom with Rainbow trailing behind them.*

[Vignette expanded from fieldnotes, 16<sup>th</sup> January 2024]

In this drinking-rules-classroom-bottles-children scene, it is possible to again see the entanglement between drinks bottles, the temporality and spatiality of the classroom, and the children's peer culture as productive of power differentials. As it is exploring time, the children can retrieve their bottles from the water bottle tray whenever they like; a temporal affordance perhaps in-forming the scene. Although the tray is in the corridor (where play spaces are limited), Isabella and Sheep appear to be keeping their bottles with them for an extended period of time, across different areas of the classrooms beyond the corridor where they are usually spatially bound. This is legitimised by the material-discursive connotations of the bottles as healthy and therefore as an acceptable activity for the children to engage in at this time, thus going unnoticed by the adults in the classroom.



Rainbow attempts to call out Isabella and Sheep's manipulation of the classroom rule that enables them to drink. As Rainbow states, they do not need to drink all the time, or "forever", which seems to be temporal as well as spatial (across the classroom areas). I interpreted Rainbow's protest as a response to feeling excluded from the triad rather than offence at their flouting of the classroom rules as she does not regularly follow such rules herself. Indeed, Isabella and Sheep's continued and constant sipping, with wide innocent eyes, is perhaps an attempt to 'prove' that they are using their bottles to drink to summon the discursive protection of the classroom rule as healthy.

Arguably, there is nothing physically stopping Rainbow from playing with Isabella and Sheep whilst they hold their matching water bottles, and it is my understanding that this is not Rainbow's complaint: Isabella and Sheep are not overtly excluding her, for example, by saying she cannot play with them. It may be the case that this drinking-rules-classroom-bottles-children exclusion is therefore *felt implicitly*, rather than enacted explicitly. In doing so, I interpret this interaction as (re)producing agential cuts between 'Isabella and Sheep with 'Encanto' bottles' and 'Rainbow without an 'Encanto' bottle' in the peer culture.

### 6.2.3 Revisiting the research questions

1. What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?

In this section, I have re-presented three scenarios through which I believe drinks bottles come to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. Firstly, I interpret the snack-time-carpet-space-bottles entanglement as a confluence in which the temporality of snack-time met with the spatiality of the carpet; the children sit together for around 20 minutes, closely confined to their carpet spaces, with their bottles as a material-discursive point of interest. The *individual* ownership of bottles is mapped visually, each child sat cradling their decorative bottle, whilst the proximity of the carpet – along with wandering gazes – may facilitate the space for appreciation and comparison. I observed this between the children on multiple occasions and was



inducted myself into the library of ownership, where the children are aware that the bee bottle belonged to me.

Secondly, the bottle-morning-cloakroom-children entanglement is illustrative of the 'arena of appreciation' that regularly occurred in Reception, but notably as part of the children's post-Christmas return to school. The specific moment between Isabella, Belle, Rainbow and Sheep illuminates how the spatiality of the cloakroom, along with the temporality of the morning (and school terms) intra-acts with the affective force of the 'Encanto' bottle. These intra-actions produce agential cuts between Isabella and Sheep with an 'Encanto' bottle and Rainbow with her regular Disney princess bottle.

Finally, the drinking-rules-classroom-bottles-children moment demonstrates how the agential cuts enacted between Isabella/Sheep and Rainbow are enfolded in further iterations in the classroom, re-emerging but not in the same way. The temporality of exploring time, along with the spatiality of the tray in the corridor, intra-act to produce a moment in which the 'Encanto' bottles are used to produce power differentials between the girls. Rainbow's exclusion from the friendship triad emerges through Isabella and Sheep's creative adaptation of the classroom rules, made possible by Rainbow not owning an 'Encanto' bottle. Importantly, this is not to say that Rainbow is excluded *because* she did not have a bottle, although she may have been, but rather these delineations of difference are used to exclude in a way which matters in the children's peer culture.

## 2. In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

These moments are made possible in part by the affective force of drinks bottles for the children. In the moments re-presented here, it was an 'Encanto' bottle which appears as more desirable than a 'classic' or 'old-fashioned' Disney princess bottle more widely available. Although price differences are relatively small, drinks bottles that utilise more current Disney princesses or recognisable characters appear to have been translated into an affective register (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Massumi, 2015). Furthermore, as in the scene beginning this thesis (Section 1.1) and other research presented in Section 2.5.2.1 (Iqbal et al., 2017; Kustatscher, 2015; Stockstill, 2021), the excitement *new* bottles generates, among other personal belongings, arguably reinforces the desirability

of having novel items both in terms of current trends – such as ‘Encanto’ – and in the sense of buying something brand new. Indeed, Dyson (2020) notes how, in her classroom ethnography with 5–6-year-olds, “access to certain peer-valued good (e.g. ‘cool’ water bottles instead of classroom bubbler<sup>24</sup>) was economically constrained” (p. 9).

In particular, the proliferation of Disney princesses at Parkside suggests ways that “experiences of childhood are appropriated for corporate profit” (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017, p. 208). The abundance of Disney merchandise can be argued to have woven cultural consumption with children’s day-to-day lives illustrating how it is (re)constructed as inseparable from “life itself” (Thorne, 1999, p. 3). In doing so, Disney (and children’s brands more generally) “represents the new face of neoliberal power, capable of not merely providing entertainment but also shaping the identities, desires, and subjectivities of millions of people” (Giroux & Pollock 2010, p. xv). At Parkside, this is perhaps evident in the gendered ways in which consumable goods allow commodified identities to emerge (Braidotti, 2011); this is alongside girls’ other expressions of femininity, such as their Disney pseudonyms (Isabella, Belle, Ariel and Rapunzel) or claims to attend ballet (see Section 7.2.1).

This affective register shapes the classroom practices observed, such as on the carpet at snack-time and the ‘arena of appreciation’ in the morning cloakroom. Yet, these practices appear also enfolded back into the affective register; perhaps the very existence of the ‘arena of appreciation’ in the mornings produces the affective force for novel items that it was created from. In other words, the affective force of the ‘Encanto’ bottle in the cloakroom (re)produces the ‘arena of appreciation’ peer culture practice and in doing so, this practice reinforces the affect of the ‘Encanto’ bottle – as having an arena to be ‘seen’ in by peers.

Arguably, this speaks to Massumi’s (2015) point that capitalism has “fed its operations back into the field of emergence of bare activity so integrally as to *become-immanent* to it” (p. 108, my emphasis) (see Section 3.4.4). The bottles’ affect produces the conditions for them to be affective. This affective force is woven throughout the moments re-

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<sup>24</sup> An American term for a drinking fountain.

presented in this chapter, showing how the material-discursive, spatial and temporal intra-action of water bottles in the classroom peer culture can produce exclusionary power relations that advantage those with newer, more current or branded bottles.

Such moments are knotted with children's economic circumstances (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019). Since the children at Parkside Primary are only 4-5-years-old, they are unlikely to be able to directly translate this affect into consumption practices by purchasing new bottles. Nevertheless, as Pugh (2011) suggests, children can successfully negotiate their access to such goods via their caregivers through specific requests, particularly for birthdays and Christmas. This was something I observed at Parkside, with children making comments such as, "I am getting that for my birthday" or "I would like one of them for Christmas". This emphasises children's indirect role as consumers (Pugh, 2011) and links back to arguments of identity through consumption presented in Sections 2.2.2 and 2.5.2.1.

However, since the onset of the "cost of living crisis" in 2021, families have become increasingly restricted by shrinking budgets, and those with lower-incomes have reported reducing spending on birthdays and Christmas (Earwaker, 2022). Indeed, families have shared their anxiety surrounding the pressure to ensure their child can fit in with school norms, for example, by buying school equipment marked by desirable branding (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Hamilton, 2012; Roper and La Niece, 2009). Attempts to standardise children's school experience, for example through uniforms, has not alleviated this economy of difference but just pushed distinction (through consumerism) to other areas (Bryson and Crossley, 2015; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Page et al., 2021; Reay, 2008; Ridge, 2011). In doing so, businesses have capitalised on 'school-approved' items, such as lunch boxes and drinks bottles, targeting marketing at children with popular characters (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Steinberg, 2011), like the Disney proliferation noted at Parkside (also noted in Wohlwend, 2009).

Although the price of children's drinks bottles can vary widely, typically from £5-£20, it is perhaps the attraction of new items and *current* branding through which more financial burden is exerted. As hooks (2000) suggests "consumer capitalist socialization

[sic]...teaches us all to spend much and value little” (p. 157). I suggest that the ‘arena of appreciation’ and snack-time arrangements create the conditions for those with recognisable or new bottles to be affective. Here, I do not wish to reduce social class to delineating those with the money to spend on new bottles. Rather, as Fox and Alldred (2022) suggest, it is affect within assemblages that “produces material capacities and incapacities” (p. 511). It is the convergence of property (in this case, drinks bottles) with children’s peer culture in the classroom that produces the conditions to be noticed by the goods that individuals own (see Section 2.5.2.1). Sociomaterial entanglements that enable the mattering of property are as much the producers as the products themselves.

In summary, the moments presented in this section are suggested to demonstrate how drinks bottles come to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. It is through affect that these drinks bottles emerge, creating agential cuts between the children who are distinguished by their possessions or in/excluded in friendship circles. I contend that these notions of distinction and in/exclusion through individual ownership are symptomatic of class distinctions, as economic differences lived out through social and cultural practices (R. Butler, 2019).

### 6.3 Wellington boots

Following children’s water bottles, the second half of this chapter will explore how another personal belonging, wellington boots or “wellies”, comes to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. In the first half of this chapter, the children’s ownership of water bottles, as a material belonging, converges with their legitimacy in the classroom to produce the moments through which they emerge as important to the children (Section 6.3.1). As the second half of this chapter will show, also understanding wellies as a *material belonging* illuminates interesting commonalities in how they come to matter in the classroom at Parkside. For example, in both cases, their materiality allows them to be physically possessed and thus, they can be coveted or shared in a practical way to negotiate friendships (Sections 6.2.2 and 6.3.2). Similarities as well as

points of difference between the two cases are used to explore their (re)constructions in the classroom throughout Sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.3 and in the conclusion of this chapter.

### 6.3.1 Wellington boots in Reception: Wildlife-Area-cloakroom-wellies

Outdoor learning has become an integral part of teaching and learning in English primary schools for its purported benefits on cognitive and social and emotional wellbeing (McCree et al., 2018; Waite, 2011). At Parkside primary, the children were able to regularly attend the school's "Wildlife Area" as part of the curriculum offering. As described in Section 5.2.1, the Wildlife Area is a section of land next to the car park on the school site where trees, plants and flowers grow. It is used in all weather conditions, including rain and snow, and the children are encouraged to interact with the natural environment: there is a "mud kitchen", trees to climb and decorations made from natural materials. For one afternoon each week, each class would be able to play in the Wildlife Area whilst completing one nature-inspired learning activity, such as printing with leaves or painting with sticks.

Attending the Wildlife Area in all weathers therefore requires suitable clothing so that the children can comfortably attend. The children usually bring in coats depending on the temperature, but the school also provides waterproof jackets and trousers for the children to wear over the top of their uniforms to ensure the children stay dry when out in the rain for the afternoon. These waterproof jackets and trousers are stored at school in a large trunk in the cloakroom. They are all the same design, simple block colours with no branding or decoration on (see Figure 13) and are well-worn from having been heavily used over the years.



*Figure 13. The school-owned waterproofs*



*Figure 14. School-owned wellies on the bench in the cloakroom.*

At the start of term, families are also asked to provide a pair of wellington boots, or “wellies” as the children call them, for their child to keep in school for use in the Wildlife Area. These wellies are stored under the bench in the cloakroom, underneath each child’s named peg. As with the water bottles, the children’s wellies are decorated with a multitude of children’s characters, novelty design features or colourful patterns. The school also provides a collection of wellies – left or donated by previous pupils – intended for children who have not got their own pair of wellies to use for the Wildlife Area. These wellies are stored at the end of the bench in the cloakroom where the children retrieve and return them before and after lessons in the Wildlife Area (see Figure 14). As this collection of wellies once belonged to other children, they are not all the same as in the school-bought waterproofs and often display patterns or characters.

Like drinks bottles, wellies sit at a specific nexus within the discursive dynamics of personal belongings at school, the classroom and the children. Their function – as necessary equipment for the Wildlife Area – means that they are granted a similar legitimacy to drinks bottles, in terms of being a school-approved item unlike toys. However, in contrast to water bottles, the spatial context of their use – the outdoors – excludes them from the inner classroom areas and they remain under the children’s

pegs in the cloakroom throughout the day. Their less frequent use (once-per-week) compared to the water bottles (daily) means that they are not as central to classroom life but nonetheless, a regular and predictable occurrence within the routines of the school week.

Each class in Reception would have their Wildlife Area afternoon on a different day. After lunch, before their session, the children would be sent to the cloakroom to change into the clothing necessary for the weather conditions that day. In the autumn and winter months, this would usually be their coats, a school-owned waterproof over the top, school-owned waterproof trousers and their wellies. This usually leads to a somewhat lengthy and chaotic scene where the cloakroom becomes full of children wriggling about on the carpet, pulling off their school shoes and struggling into the required clothing. This Wildlife-Area-cloakroom-wellies routine marks the children's preparation for the Wildlife Area, a temporal aspect which intra-acts with the spatiality of the cloakroom to shape the mattering of wellies at Parkside.

As noted in Section 6.2.1, the spatial organisation of the cloakroom as a large communal space allows the children to interact with their possessions close to hand, unlike the classroom. Like the 'arena of appreciation' in the cloakroom on a morning (Section 6.2.2.1), the relative lack of disciplinary oversight from the teachers during this time contributes to the moments that emerge at this confluence. The teacher and the teaching assistant are on hand to help (as was I), but given the busyness, the children have scope to interact more freely, albeit within the confines of the benches. As a result, I often witnessed scenes which are oriented around the children's personal belongings needed for the Wildlife Area, with wellies being particularly prominent.

Like drinks bottles, wellies are a product that can be specifically marketed to children by their decorative designs, largely using popular children's culture (Giroux and Pollard, 2010; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Steinberg, 2011). Indeed, the majority of children's wellies brought from home are decorated with popular children's interests such as Pokémon, Disney princesses, Paw Patrol, dinosaurs, fairies or rainbows. As Stockstill (2021) suggests, children's personal property is seen as a way through which children – particularly those who are more affluent – can construct their identity or connect with

peers (see also Iqbal et al., 2017; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017); discussed in the literature in Sections 2.3.2.3 and 2.5.2.1. Certainly, the congruence between children's wellies and their pseudonyms is striking; for example, the child pseudonymised as Elsa (a character from 'Frozen') who owned Elsa wellies, likewise Unicorn with her eponymous wellies. This extends to other aspects of the children's belongings that are 'customised' to their interests such as drinks bottles, hair accessories, backpacks, watches and coats.

These personalised wellies are contrasted with the selection of school-owned wellies available on the bench in the cloakroom (see Figure 14). Although school wellies are often not as decorative or current due to being donated or left behind by previous pupils in Reception, there are a few pairs that have notable patterns or detail. The school provides these for children who do not have wellies. However, on occasions, I observed some children opting for a school pair of wellies over their own. In particular, the pink and purple floral wellies (middle of the top row of the bench, Figure 14) are the most highly sought after pair amongst Elsa, Ariel, Unicorn, Flower and Belle; children who regularly draw on 'feminine' discourses. The least popular (not often borrowed) are the plain blue or green wellies that are often used by children who do not have any other wellies to choose from (their own or the other desirable school-owned pairs).

Such designs can perpetuate gender norms, such as the use of stereotypical colours and patterns intended for certain genders (Blaise, 2014; Pilcher, 2011; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Yoon, 2020). Indeed, in Figure 14, there is a clear visual distinction between the pink, floral and sparkly designs and the darker blue and green wellies. However, this alone does not suggest that these wellies are inherently gendered through the difference in their styling. Rather, it is the way in which the pink or blue wellies emerge through material-discursive moments that genders them (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a). Throughout my observations, on all but one occasion I observed Elsa, Ariel, Unicorn, Flower and Belle (the 'girls') wearing the pink and purple wellies. Once, I did observe a boy trying to squeeze his feet into the purple wellies with bunnies on the toes (just visible on the bottom row of Figure 14), however they proved too small and he resorted to wearing his own wellies from home.



One pair of school-owned wellies (first in the top row of the bench, Figure 14) is arguably the most eye-catching for me, with a bright pink pattern and a large image of the Disney character Daisy Duck. Initially, I was confused by their lack of admiration given the popularity of other pink wellies and Disney in general (see Section 6.2.2); I only saw them borrowed on one occasion. However, it became apparent through chatting with the children and observing their other personalised items, that Daisy Duck was not a recognisable, and therefore desirable, Disney character. This is despite her overt femininity (the pink bow on her head visible on the wellies) that I thought may appeal to children who like other Disney characters (see Section 6.2.2). However notably, she does not have the affective lure of a princess (Coyne et al., 2016; England et al., 2011; Leader, 2018; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Rutherford and Baker, 2021; Towbin et al., 2004).

Here, I have attempted to demonstrate the tangle of practices, material-discursive understandings and spatial organisation that produce wellies as coming to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. Like water bottles, their spatial organisation is underpinned by and contributes to their material-discursive construction, in this case as necessary outdoor equipment for a school lesson. The temporal, spatial routine of getting ready for the Wildlife Area (Wildlife-Area-cloakroom-wellies) places children in an arena where the wellies come to matter in ways which are gendered. In the vignette that follows, I interpret these aspects as intra-acting to enable specific moments in the classroom where wellies produce agential cuts in the children's peer culture.

### 6.3.2 A vignette: Negotiating friendships with wellies

#### 6.3.2.1 *Desirable footwear: cloakroom-wellies-Frozen-friends*

By the end of October 2023, the children are well-versed in the routine of getting dressed for the Wildlife Area. One afternoon, I observe a particular exchange between Ariel, Elsa and Unicorn whilst helping the children get changed.

*After lunch, the children are sent to the cloakroom to change to go to the Wildlife Area. The day is dull, grey and raining and so the teacher explains that the children need to wrap up and put on the school-owned waterproof trousers, a pair of wellies (their own or a pair loaned from the school bench), and their coat or a school-owned waterproof. This changing period is intended to be around ten*

minutes but like most days, it stretches to around twenty as the children chat to each other and wait for help from an adult to struggle into their wellies or waterproof trousers. As a result, the cloakroom feels fairly hectic as there are abandoned school shoes littering the carpet and children wriggling about on the floor as they try to shimmy into their waterproof trousers.

Whilst I am helping a child get dressed, I overhear Ariel telling Elsa that she could not find her wellies. The two girls go up and down the bench, checking to see if they can find where they are. After a few minutes, it becomes apparent that they must not be in school (as Ariel usually always manages to keep her belongings on her peg). Elsa is very sympathetic and, clearly eager to help her friend, she offers her spare pair of wellies for Ariel to borrow. Fortunately, Elsa has two pairs of wellies in school, both adorned with characters from the Disney film 'Frozen'. Her spare pair are a light turquoise colour with silver sparkles all over and a 3D depiction of the Disney princesses from 'Frozen', Elsa and Anna, similar to the one represented in Figure 15 (Click 3 Click, 2025).



Figure 15. A 'Frozen' welly boot similar to Elsa's.

Elsa, already dressed in her other pair of 'Frozen' wellies, retrieves her spare pair from the bench underneath her peg and hands them over to Ariel. Unicorn, whose peg is very close by, looks over and – realising that Elsa is loaning Ariel her spare 'Frozen' wellies – puts on a sad face, her brow furrowing deeply, her eyes downcast and her mouth corners pointing down. I hear her partial muttering that she wants to wear Elsa's spare pair of wellies and wonder if Elsa had promised them to her previously.

Elsa also hears Unicorn's grumpy muttering and anxiously looks between Ariel and Unicorn, seemingly caught between her two friends. She pauses for a moment and then, with a mature air to resolve the situation, asks Ariel and Unicorn if they wear the same size shoe. As I was helping other children get dressed, I am not able to write down all of the discussion, but to summarise: Elsa tries to broker a deal between Ariel and Unicorn, whereby Ariel would wear Unicorn's wellies (also patterned, but not 'Frozen') and then Unicorn could wear Elsa's spare pair of blue, sparkly 'Frozen' wellies that she wants to borrow. Poor Elsa is desperately trying to mediate between Ariel and Unicorn so that Ariel has a pair of wellies to wear and Unicorn can have the 'Frozen' pair that she clearly wants. I observe this negotiation for a couple of minutes, Elsa trying to appease Unicorn – whose arms are now tightly folded across her chest – because Ariel is not relinquishing her claim to the 'Frozen' wellies in that Elsa has agreed to loan them to her first.

Aware of the teacher's prompts to hurry the children, I lean over to the group of girls and try to help Elsa:

TP: [to Unicorn] I think the wellies are for Ariel because she doesn't have any...

*This appears to break the stalemate between the three and Ariel smiles in triumph as she drops to the carpet to put on the blue, sparkly 'Frozen' wellies. Unicorn, still with a downcast gaze and upturned mouth, trudges to line up at the doors ready to go to the Wildlife Area. Elsa takes Unicorn's hand, apparently offering to be her partner as a further attempt to console her. Unicorn allows Elsa to take her hand but maintains her sad expression, looking to the floor away from Elsa. Elsa appears to lean into Unicorn, whispering something in her ear in what I think is a further attempt to cheer her up.*

*When Ariel joins the line behind Elsa and Unicorn, I overhear Elsa telling her in a quiet but firm voice:*

*Elsa: Remember to give them back to me though, yeah?*

*Ariel nods and does a few little happy jumps in her borrowed wellies as the line departs through the doors to go to the Wildlife Area.*

[Vignette expanded from fieldnotes, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

Ariel, Elsa and Unicorn are a group of three girls who form a friendship triad within the classroom peer culture. Although they occasionally play with other children, such as Walking Table or Belle, this is usually still in their unit of three. As two of their pseudonyms suggest (Ariel and Elsa), they like Disney princesses and as the other pseudonym suggests (Unicorn), they also enjoy cultural symbols often constructed as feminine (England et al., 2011; Leader, 2018; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Rutherford and Baker, 2021; Towbin et al., 2004). At one point, they are the main instigators of a “kitty-corn”<sup>25</sup> craze which sweeps through both classes – mostly popular with the children who identify as ‘girls’ – repeatedly perfecting drawings of them and bringing them to life in the role-play area.

As a result, the ‘Frozen’ wellies exert a particular affective force for this group of friends, similar to the ‘Encanto’ drinks bottles in the previous section (see Section 6.2.2). The fact that Elsa has not one, but two pairs of ‘Frozen’ wellies puts her in an advantageous, yet precarious, position in this scene. She is able to help her friend who does not appear to have any wellies that day, however, the loan of such a desirable pair of wellies to Ariel is at the disappointment of Unicorn. Unicorn’s preference for ‘Frozen’ wellies above her own patterned wellies or the school alternatives (see Figure 14) may again illustrate the affective force of, in this case, Disney branding related to princesses (Leader, 2018; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Rutherford and Baker, 2021). As discussed in

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<sup>25</sup> A ‘kitty-corn’ is a rainbow-coloured kitten with a unicorn’s horn on its head.

Section 6.2.2.1, this enables commodified identities to enter into the classroom via affective consumable goods, making children's experiences inseparable from "the new face of neoliberal power" (Giroux and Pollock, 2010).

In the scene above, this affective force produces agential cuts between the 'Frozen' wellies compared to others, as well as Ariel as their wearer and Elsa as their owner. Unicorn appears inconsolable despite being able to be Elsa's partner to walk to the Wildlife Area. This may suggest that the affective force is tied to the wellies rather than the wellies as an extension of Elsa; if the affective force was driven by the wellies *being owned by* Elsa, we might reasonably expect Unicorn to be appeased when Elsa chooses her to be her partner over Ariel (the children always walk in twos). Oppositely, Ariel seems to bask in the agential separation that her intra-action with the 'Frozen' wellies forms, evident in her refusal to allow Elsa to re-loan them to Unicorn and her "happy little jumps" whilst wearing them.

Nevertheless, Elsa is still agentially separated from both Ariel and Unicorn as she is the owner of the wellies and thus, the only one authorised to choose who can wear them. Recognising their strength, at the end of the scene, Elsa appears newly protective over the wellies and reminds Ariel: "Remember to give them back to me though, yeah?". Generally, the children respect this unwritten rule of ownership throughout the classroom peer culture by returning mislaid personal possessions and vying for the favour of children who have desirable items to loan. Still, this power to choose is subject to some emotional persuasion from Unicorn and it is unclear whether the situation would have been resolved without my intervention. With hindsight, I maybe should have left this scenario to run its course, however I was aware of the teacher's increasing frustration over how long the children were taking to change.

Although Ariel and Unicorn do not expect Elsa to share the pair of wellies that she chooses to wear, her additional pair is surplus to requirements and as such becomes a contested object within the cloakroom-wellies-Frozen-friends entanglement. This authorisation to loan items (through ownership) runs in stark contrast to school-owned items which must be shared with peers. In Ahn's (2011) ethnographic study with 4–5-year-olds in the US, children creatively appropriated adult's idea of sharing to "address

specific organizational [sic] features of their peer culture” (p. 295). In the scene, Elsa adopts the notion of sharing, through loaning out her wellies to meet her own goals within a peer culture where wellies have come to matter. In this moment, Elsa seems to want her and Ariel to wear ‘Frozen’ wellies, possibly as a point to bond over (as Isabella and Sheep did with their ‘Encanto’ bottles) (Pugh, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015), albeit causing a fissure with Unicorn. In doing so, this moment seems to further exemplify the literature around how consumable goods can be used to negotiate friendships (outlined in Sections 2.5.2.1 and 2.5.3.2).

Elsa’s surplus of desirable items was not limited to wellies. Throughout my time in the field, I often observed her with other items that attracted the admiration and approval of her peers: sparkly or animatronic keyrings, novelty hair accessories, Pokémon or Christmas stickers and ‘Elf’<sup>26</sup> and ‘Frozen’ water bottles. Interestingly, during my fieldwork, Elsa seems to recognise that her attempts to gain recognition through her possessions are much more successful when she is somehow able to share these with her peers; a ‘sharing tax’ of sorts (also noted in Iqbal et al., 2017; Pugh, 2011). This is much harder with items such as wellies (the limited number of which causes issues in the above scene), but easier with her sticker collections and keyrings.

#### *6.3.2.2 Elsa’s solution: cloakroom-wellies-friends-sharing*

About one month later, in November 2023, I observe a similar scene in which Elsa uses her spare wellies again to negotiate her friendship dynamics with Ariel and Unicorn. Notably, these are a different pair to the ‘Frozen’ ones contested in the opening scene.

*Most children have finished getting changed to go to the Wildlife Area and are lined up in pairs at the door. Across the cloakroom, Elsa and Unicorn are the last two children sitting on the carpet as they change their shoes. I am a little surprised as both Elsa and Unicorn are usually very quick at getting changed and, given previous experience, I suspect that something else may be afoot.*

*The teacher attempts to hurry them again which prompts Elsa to come over to me to try to justify their delay. Elsa explains that Unicorn is sad because she has not got to wear her [Elsa’s] spare wellies, despite Ariel and Unicorn both having their own pair from home. Elsa has two pairs of wellies in school, one with fleeced lining in and her other ‘Frozen’ pair. In a strikingly similar turn of events,*

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<sup>26</sup> Elf (Favreau, 2003) is an American comedy film about a Christmas elf who journeys from the North Pole to New York.

*Elsa has given her spare pair of wellies “with fleeces in” to Ariel, offering Unicorn her remaining spare pair (whilst Elsa plans to wear Ariel’s instead). I explain to Elsa that there are plenty of other school-owned wellies to wear if Unicorn does not want to wear her own.*

*Elsa nods and goes back over to Unicorn who appears to already be wearing her own wellies. Unicorn has an exaggerated forlorn expression on her face, with her gaze downcast and a finger gently touching her upturned lips. Elsa, who is a little taller than Unicorn, stoops to try and catch Unicorn’s eyeline and puts on a high pitched, soft – almost parental – tone of voice:*

*Elsa: (Unicorn)...which ones shall I wear? [gripping on to her remaining pair of wellies and Ariel’s pair of wellies]*

*Unicorn looks up from under her furrowed brow, points to one of the pairs and in a small sad voice tells Elsa “those ones”. Unicorn’s frown loosens and she seems happier that she is able to have control over this decision, albeit not the decision she wants (to wear the wellies with fleeces in). I am struck by the way Elsa appears so mature as she coaxes Unicorn to manage her friendship with the two girls.*

[Vignette expanded from fieldnotes, 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2024]

In this scene, almost a month after the first, the cloakroom-wellies-Frozen-friends entanglement re-emerges. The necessary preparation that the Wildlife Area requires brings the children to the cloakroom arena again, where the weather also prompts the use of their wellies. As before, Elsa has two pairs of wellies in school: one pair is the same ‘Frozen’ pair from last month, however the other is a different pair, notable because of their fleeced lining. Interestingly, although Ariel now has a pair of wellies unlike before, she still manages to borrow Elsa’s additional fleeced pair, much to Unicorn’s dismay.

As the ‘Frozen’ wellies did, it appears that the wellies “with fleeces” in are exerting an affective force. Like many of Elsa’s other possessions, the fleeced wellies are pink suggesting her self-styling with stereotypical cultural markers of femininity (Pilcher, 2011; Yoon, 2020). However, Elsa, Ariel and Unicorn did not refer to them as *pink* wellies but rather wellies “with fleeces” which may indicate that this was their significant defining feature. As noted previously, this is not to suggest that fleeced wellies are inherently valuable in children’s peer culture. These wellies, although not a new purchase for Elsa, are new in this setting and therefore perhaps represent an exciting alternative to Ariel and Unicorn’s own wellies or the school-owned options. Thus, it is

the intra-action of the wellies with the temporal-spatial routines of getting ready for the Wildlife Area in the cloakroom that produces them as coming to matter at Parkside.

When interpreted with the first scene, this perhaps reinforces that the agential cut was not about separating 'Ariel without wellies', but rather separating 'Elsa with wellies'. Ariel did not have wellies in the first scene and this was used as a material-discursive justification for Elsa to loan Ariel her spare pair. Conversely, now that Ariel has her own wellies, in order to justify her loan, Elsa creatively employs an alternate strategy for managing her friendship triangle: Elsa offers Unicorn the choice over which wellies she [Elsa] should wear to the Wildlife Area. Observing this, I was struck by the maturity of her solution in which I recognised a familiar strategy for working with children; giving a choice between two things to offer the child a sense of control and distract from the fact that neither option may be what the child originally wanted. Her coaxing, gentle tone compliments this to transform her seemingly fleetingly into a doting parent persuading their child.

Unicorn does appear satisfied – at least partially – by Elsa's offer to choose her wellies. This contrasts with the first scene where, despite Elsa's attempts to appease Unicorn by being her walking partner, Unicorn remained visibly upset. Whilst in the first scene, Elsa employed the authority to choose who wears the wellies, this was to ill effect with Unicorn. In the second scene, despite the same outcome (Ariel wore the wellies that Unicorn wanted), by employing a creative strategy and sharing her power to choose Elsa is able to soothe Unicorn's upset. In doing so, I perceive Elsa as creating an agential cut – in-formed by the power differentials the first scene produces – which includes both her and Unicorn, the latter becoming a partial-owner by proxy.

By diffracting these moments through one another, I interpret Elsa's solution as harnessing the affective force of the wellies *in intra-action with* the dynamics of the peer culture. Beyond ownership of the wellies, by being able to somehow share her experience with peers (in this case Ariel *and* Unicorn) Elsa is more successful when the cloakroom-wellies-friends entanglement re-emerges. This demonstrates how moments are enfolded into each other: Unicorn's sadness in the first scene in-formed Elsa's

solution in the second. As such, the entanglement came again but not in the same way due to Elsa's successful negotiation.

### 6.3.3 Revisiting the research questions

1. What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?

Using these three entanglements, I have attempted to re-present the moments through which I interpret wellies as coming to matter in the Parkside Primary peer culture. These moments are knotted within a web of peer practices, material-discursive understandings and spatial and temporal routines associated with the Wildlife Area. Firstly, through the reoccurring Wildlife-Area-cloakroom-wellies entanglement, it is possible to see how wellies are a material-discursive object understood as personally owned and necessary outdoor equipment. This functionality underpins the translation of children's marketing into classroom equipment (Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Roche, 2009; Steinberg, 2011), allowing them to emerge as an item of personal expression (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Stockstill, 2021) explored in the literature through Sections 2.2.2 and 2.3.2.3. These aspects intra-act with wellies' spatial organisation as they remain in the cloakroom, accessed only as part of a specific temporal routine. Thus, wellies converge with the specific practice of getting ready in a close environment with peers, a period which is marked by less disciplinary oversight from adults.

The Wildlife-Area-cloakroom-wellies confluence is interlaced with the second episode where Elsa loans a spare pair of wellies to Ariel, affective through their branding with Disney's 'Frozen'. This cloakroom-wellies-Frozen-friends entanglement produces a series of agential cuts between the 'Frozen' wellies versus others, as well as Elsa as their owner and Ariel as their wearer. Elsa and Ariel are agentially cut together as they are both wearing 'Frozen' wellies whilst Unicorn is not. Although Elsa tries to appease Unicorn by being her walking partner, perhaps trying to shift the agential cut by excluding Ariel, this is unsuccessful. This demonstrates the strength of the affective force of the 'Frozen' wellies and thus, the depth of the splits it can cause, echoing the literature around consumable goods and friendships noted in Section 2.5.2.1.



In the third cloakroom-wellies-friends-sharing scene, the second scene re-emerges in a strikingly similar way but with interesting delineations. Although Ariel has her own pair of wellies, Elsa loans her a spare pair of fleeced wellies that she has in school, again to the disappointment of Unicorn. Yet, through sharing her authority to choose between wellies (bestowed by ownership), Elsa manages to restore good relations with Unicorn. Elsa's creative sharing of her control could be interpreted as reforming the agential cut to incorporate her and Unicorn as the 'decision-makers' with control over personal property.

This emphasises the 'sharing tax' dynamic of the peer culture at Parkside whereby gaining recognition through possessions is more successful when this is shared with peers (also noted in Ahn, 2011; Iqbal et al., 2017; Pugh, 2011). In contrast to the cloakroom-wellies-Frozen-friends scene, Elsa's solution invokes the dynamics of sharing valued in this peer culture meaning that she benefits twice; once by sharing her wellies with Ariel, and also by sharing her ownership with Unicorn, despite Unicorn *still* not getting to wear the wellies she desires.

## 2. In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

At first glance, the financial expectation that families provide a pair of wellies for use in school appears minimal (circa £10-£20). However, for some families this will add to the already hefty financial burden of providing equipment for school alongside uniforms, sports kits, lunchboxes, drinks bottles and school shoes (Bryson and Crossley, 2015; Page et al., 2021; Ridge, 2011). At Parkside, wellies usually remain in school throughout term-time, implying that either children do not have a pair of wellies at home during this time or that they have an additional pair. Across the scenes outlined above, Elsa has three pairs of wellies (two pairs of 'Frozen' wellies and a fleeced pair) which suggests, when taken with her other surplus possessions, that this does not amount to a financial burden for her family.

In these moments, Elsa's capacity to negotiate with her spare wellies produces agential cuts that distinguish what matters, resulting in power relations between peers (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a). Her interchanging personal possessions amount to a relatively constant stream of novel interest that she endeavours to share with her peers, marking her as

somebody who *has things*. Indeed, this is reminiscent of the children that can consume, the ‘haves’ versus ‘have-nots’ (hooks, 2000), noted in Sections 2.5.2.1 and 2.5.3.2. Although these possessions change – ‘Frozen’ wellies, fleeced wellies, stickers, drinks bottles – the agential cut they produce re-appears in a similar way; she is that person who has new things and also has the authority to *share* those new things. As echoed by the literature in Section 2.5.3.2, Elsa has the consumable goods constructed as valuable in the peer culture to use as ‘stuff’ to negotiate friendships.

At Parkside, the value placed on sharing – by the adults and the children – intra-acts with the distinction offered through personal ownership to produce a dynamic in which recognition is gained through distribution (the ‘sharing tax’). On the one hand, this sharing dynamic within the peer culture works counter to the principles of individualistic ownership and personal expression promoted by consumerism under capitalism (see Section 2.2.1) (Giroux and Pollock, 2010). In the cloakroom-wellies-Frozen friends scene, Elsa is able to strengthen her ties with Ariel through sharing the agential cut formed by her spare pair of ‘Frozen’ wellies.

Yet, we see this re-emerge most fruitfully for Elsa in the final scene, where she capitalises on the dynamics of sharing twice; through her spare wellies *and* the authority to choose bestowed by ownership. Thus, on the other hand, within a peer culture, children may creatively re-work adult notions of sharing to include or exclude friends according to their own goals (Ahn, 2011; see also Section 2.5.3.2). Arguably, this retains distinction through consumerism and ownership, agentially separating those children who have the material resources (such as wellies) to be able to share them (R. Butler, 2019; hooks, 2000; Pugh, 2011).

Furthermore, the power differentials produced are enabled in part by the affective force exerted by (the ownership of) certain wellies – those that are branded ‘Frozen’ or are fleeced – over and above other wellies that are available in the classroom. Notably, Disney branding or a fleeced lining is characteristic of children’s wellies that are typically more expensive<sup>27</sup>. It could be that the children like these wellies *because* they are more expensive, as seen in studies with older children and desirable brands (Elliott and

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<sup>27</sup> This was evaluated by comparing the average price in online searches for these products.

Leonard, 2004; Hamilton, 2012; Roper and La Niece, 2009). However, it may also be that because these wellies are more expensive, they are less common in school and may thus be more unusual (and affective) in this context for the children as a result (for similar examples see Kustatscher, 2015; Pilcher, 2011).

As discussed in Section 6.2.2.1, Disney branding in particular translates a “cultural curriculum” (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017, p. 193) of its own into the classroom via consumable merchandise (see also Steinberg, 2011). This intertwines children’s experiences of childhood with “the cultural consumption [of] commodified identities” (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017, p. 209). Giroux and Pollock (2010) identify this as “the new face of neoliberal power” that is “capable of not merely providing entertainment but also shaping...identities, desires, and subjectivities” (p. xv). Whilst such desires can be stereotypical and normative (Leader, 2018, Rutherford and Baker, 2021), children do not necessarily passively consume these and may creatively challenge these over time (Fan, 2019; Wohlwend, 2009; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Steinberg, 2011).

Taken together, these scenes suggest that wellies come to matter by unfolding through specific material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. Such moments produce agential cuts, separating what and who matters in the peer culture, driven by consumerism in the affective register as outlined in Section 3.4.4 (Massumi, 2015; see also R. Butler, 2019; hooks, 2000; Rose, 1999). These agential cuts form power delineations which mingle with past and future events, solidifying notions of distinction and in/exclusion through the ownership of property. Still, this is tempered by a ‘sharing tax’ within the peer culture at Parkside which, almost paradoxically, only allows children like Elsa to maximise their power to be distinguished through sharing this with others.

## 6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I trace the unfolding of how water bottles and wellies come to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside. As this analysis has hopefully shown, the sociomaterial entanglements that enable the mattering of materialities are as much the producers as the products themselves. The analyses of these cases illuminate commonalities in how water bottles and wellies are (re)constructed as *belongings* that

matter. Material-discursive, spatial and temporal threads weave together to create specific moments in which the children's peer relations are an inseparable part.

It is through affect that these moments emerge (Massumi, 2015; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017), creating agential cuts between the children who are distinguished by their possessions or in/excluded in friendships. Yet, this is not to suggest a deterministic linearity; the items are not intrinsically differentially valued but instead become valuable through their entanglement with the interweaving classroom routines, spaces and resources. Whilst a 'sharing tax' dynamic within the peer culture – where the children must share to be recognised – creates an inverted sense of individual ownership, through practices such as loaning items the notion of possession remains intact (Ahn, 2011).

As such, the peer culture at Parkside Primary intra-acts in ways that allows children to be recognised through the goods that they own (Baudrillard, 2016; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Pilcher, 2011; Steinberg, 2011). Linking with the literature in Sections 2.2.2 and 2.5.2.1, I interpret this as a notion of class in which personal expression is promoted through consumerism under capitalism (Pugh, 2011; Rose, 1999; Walkerdine, 2020; 2021); as Braidotti (2011) warns, even "identities turn into commodified products repackaged as acts of self-expression and liberation" (p. 285) (see also Giroux and Pollock, 2010). Answering the queries posed in Section 3.5, I suggest that socioeconomic differences *are* translated into an affective register (Colebrook, 2002; Massumi, 2015; Walkerdine, 2017) that can become integrated into peer culture, as noted in other research with young children (Iqbal et al., 2017; Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Stockstill, 2021; Wohlwend, 2009).

## 7 Chapter Seven: (Re)constructing experiences

### 7.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 explores two “model cases” (Krause, 2021, p. 8) which are brought together under the heading of “Chapter Seven: (Re)constructing experiences”. This chapter represents the classroom moments through which I interpret enrichment activities and birthday parties as coming to matter at Parkside Primary. In the first case presented in Section 7.2, I trace three entanglements – one as a vignette (Section 7.2.3) – where different aspects of school, such as the writing table, form part of how enrichment activities emerge as important through classroom life. For the second case in Section 7.3, I first discuss two classroom arrangements that shape how birthday parties are constructed at Parkside (Sections 7.3.1 and 7.3.2). Two further entanglements are framed through a vignette, Section 7.3.3 “A vignette: The contested space of invitations”, to illustrate how these identified classroom arrangements may (re)produce power dynamics between the children.

Across these two model cases, I consider how the classroom organisation (of space, time, furniture and activities) means that they both emerge in particular and similar ways, reflecting their commonality as experiences that happen outside of school. I contemplate how these scenarios afford power differentials between the children, echoing the themes of distinction and in/exclusion seen in Chapter 6 and noted elsewhere in the literature. In the final part of each section (Sections 7.2.4 and 7.3.4), I explore these scenes in response to my research questions to consider whether this importance in the classroom is constitutive of young children’s experiences of social class.

### 7.2 Enrichment activities

Enrichment activities can be clubs or groups that provide a wide range of sports, music, hobbies and arts for children of all ages. They can be attached to schools, taking place at the end of or during the school day, or separate to the school site. In relevant literature, the term “enrichment” is often used to cover any and all possible additional

activities, whereas “extra-curricular” activities are enrichment activities provided by schools (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019; Robinson, 2024; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). Whilst the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019; Wilson and Worsley, 2021), in this section I opt for “enrichment” as the specific activities referred to are provided by private companies separate to the school (geographically and organisationally).

It is important to note that the term ‘enrichment’ is heavily value-laden, making their moniker inseparable from the assumption that they are beneficial. Indeed, literature often references their value for children’s wellbeing (Siraj and Mayo, 2014), general education (OECD, 2020) and future employability (Robinson, 2024; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016), hence their focus in UK Government initiatives (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019) and research more generally.

### 7.2.1 Activities at Parkside: writing-table-activities-children

*Walking Table, myself and two other children are sitting at the writing table in Class 2. We are all busy drawing and colouring different pictures, the felt-tip pens quietly scribbling across each page.*

*Walking Table: [pauses colouring] Do you know when it was my birthday...going backwards [in time]...that was a...special day...and now going forwards it will be another special day because I am having my first swimming lesson!*

*Walking Table held his head up high as he said this, a large beam across his face, seemingly proud and excited to tell me about this. His enthusiasm prompts me to reply with "oh wow" and thank him for sharing it with me.*

[Fieldnotes, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

At Parkside, although there are a wide variety of extra-curricular clubs on offer to children (paid for and free), these are only open to children in Years 1-6 and not Reception. Thus, in Reception, enrichment opportunities for the children are all external to the school and usually happen away from the school site. Nevertheless, throughout my time in the field, I began to notice the importance of these activities in the children’s peer culture, notably as a topic of conversation and in some cases, competition. As in the example with Walking Table above, this was primarily through announcements to peers but also seen elsewhere by children explaining their after-school plans. Despite these activities being spatially and temporally separate from the school day, occurring

away from school after the school day, I observed how children speak them into being within the classroom setting, as Walking Table does in the fieldnote extract above.

This spatial distance between enrichment activities that happen outside of school, and the children's conversations inside of school, means that they are not materially present in the classroom in the way that items such as water bottles are. This in-forms the moments that bring such activities into being, as mattering in the children's peer culture. In the examples in this section, the mattering of enrichment activities in the classroom occurs *verbally* between the children during my fieldwork, observed as a particular habitual discussion at the writing tables in the classrooms; hence the writing-table-activities-children intra-action.

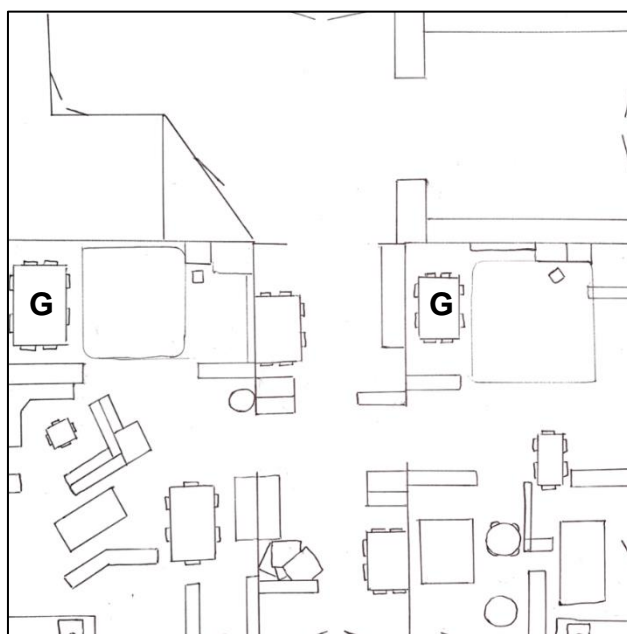


Figure 16. A map of the indoor classroom space

Figure 16, reproduced from a more detailed version in Figure 8 Section 5.2.2, shows the indoor space in the Reception area of the school with the “writing table” shown in each classroom (labelled G). These writing tables are each in a respective corner of the classrooms, flanked by two walls and a bookshelf on three sides, affording them a small sense of privacy away from the other areas of the classroom. What's more, they have eight chairs allowing up to eight children to sit at the table facing inwards. Notably, this facilitates a space where more children can gather together (and sit at a table) for a sustained time, compared to other tables elsewhere in the Reception area. They are

also a place where I was able to sit comfortably and record fieldnotes which no doubt contributed to this entanglement (discussed in Section 4.5.1.2).

Despite their name, the writing tables are set-up to promote writing, drawing, colouring and other general creativity with stickers, scissors, stamps and stencils available from the nearby shelving unit. This is a particularly popular area of the classroom which throughout the day will often have multiple children sitting around it, enjoying the colouring templates and the felt tips that are available. From observing the children, I found that they would sit and colour for up-to 15 minutes at a time at the writing table, positioned in the conference style seating arrangement facing inwards.

The seating arrangement, along with the writing table's popularity, afforded group discussions in a habitual way which I did not observe in other areas of the classroom. Even in the lunch hall, where the children sit at long, rectangular tables with twelve seats, I did not observe similar conversation. This could be due to the fact that the children are also eating whilst in the lunch hall meaning their mouths are otherwise occupied. There is also a high degree of adult supervision to ensure the children's safety whilst eating, and prompt them to continue eating rather than talking. In contrast, children can chat whilst they colour at the writing table with less supervision due to the shelves and surrounding walls.

I suggest that the materiality of the writing table in-forms the emergence of enrichment activities in Reception at Parkside: the relative privacy of the table, the eight seats facing inwards, the popularity of colouring as an activity and the extended period that children sit and colour. Thus, the materiality of colouring at the writing table co-creates an arrangement that affords enrichment activities to be habitually discussed here. Although the children are not prompted to speak about enrichment activities specifically, I did not observe similar patterns between other topics – such as colouring pencils, holidays and siblings – regarding how often they are discussed or the topics' effect between peers. This resonates with the literature discussed in Section 2.5.2.2, that extra-curricular or enrichment activities form a notable part of children's school experiences (involving peers). At Parkside, these are discussed verbally and as part of conversations with multiple peers as part of the writing-table-activities-children intra-



action. This muddles with the spatio-temporal distance between enrichment activities and the classroom/school day already discussed, where the children may talk about activities that happen elsewhere in their lives.

Indeed, Walking Table's announcement described in the fieldnote extract occurs one morning at the writing table in Class 2, where as a group we had been colouring for around 10 minutes or so already. I was struck by Walking Table's description as he equates his first swimming lesson with his (most recent) birthday, both a "special day". I consider this high-praise given the excitement and value that children place on their birthdays at Parkside (see Section 7.3). Similarly, on another occasion, the writing-table-activities-children entanglement appears to come again through Rapunzel's announcement to her peers.

*At the writing table, I am sitting with five other children as we colour our respective colouring templates, looking up to carefully select the next felt tip pen. Admired this, Rapunzel walks across the carpet in the classroom and finishes standing tall next to her the chair closest to her at the writing table. Her body is angled so that it's not clear whether she is talking to the child on the nearest seat, me, the whole table or all simultaneously.*

*Rapunzel: Well, today....is the first day that I am...[makes a pretend fanfare sound and mimes playing a trumpet]...going to swimming!*

*I catch a glimpse of the reaction from the child closest to Rapunzel: They say nothing and don't look up whilst they continue colouring but they do mime looking impressed by upturning their mouth and jutting their chin out a little.*

[Fieldnotes, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2024]

The comedy with which this announcement is performed (Rapunzel's pretend trumpet) grabs my attention, along with a few other children who are sitting at the writing table. It prompts a further discussion about gymnastics that is discussed in more detail in the children-swimming-gymnastics-writing-table-competition vignette below. Rapunzel's fanfare sound effect invokes imagery of an old-fashioned British practice usually done to mark the arrival of somebody royal, perhaps informed by her vast knowledge of children's films and books. I interpret the trumpet enactment as Rapunzel's way of demonstrating that this is an important announcement. Although she did not shout, her raised tone perhaps indicates that she wants to catch the attention of other children at the table too (which she does successfully).

Elsewhere, the writing-table-activities-conversation entanglement reoccurs between Belle and another child during a colouring session at the writing table:

*I am sitting at the writing table colouring with Belle and a few other children. A child introduces the topic of swimming lessons, explaining that this is why they are not going to the after-school club today. Belle, who is sat next to me, overhears and jumps in:*

*Belle: [proudly] I'm doing gymnastics today!...and I'm doing swimming **too***

*The other child seems a little put out since Belle had one-upped their swimming lessons but Belle continues:*

*Belle: Well, do you go to Active Life<sup>28</sup> to do swimming lessons?*

*The child is not sure but Belle continues anyway:*

*Belle: I do*

[Fieldnotes, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

Belle's announcement about the gymnastics and swimming activities that she attends at a nearby premium gym, Active Life, are threaded through with a sense of excitement or pride. Her emphasis on the word "too" stresses her involvement in multiple clubs, so much so that it prompts confirmation from another child at the table. Belle asks the child at the writing table whether they go to swimming lessons "at Active Life". Although this could be interpreted as an attempt to differentiate swimming lessons according to a premium gym, I interpret Belle's enquiry as focused on understanding whether the child goes to the same place as her. This is due to parallels with other interactions in the classroom where children similarly ask whether peers go to particular clubs (identified by features such as a named teacher as well as venues); discussed further in the next paragraph. This is perhaps part of the spatial becoming of enrichment activities in that, because they occur outside of school, the children appear to be interested in the details of where and when the activities happen, sometimes to establish if it's the same one (as Belle attempts to do).

More generally, as part of conversations around enrichment activities, I observed some children attempting to establish which specific clubs/lessons their peers went to. This echoes research by Ridge (2011) and Sutton et al. (2007) where children are aware and

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<sup>28</sup> A pseudonym for the name of a premium gym near the school, where the cost of an adult membership is approximately £75-£125 per month.

compare the class-based differences in leisure time activities (Section 2.5.2.2). At Parkside, this was usually through describing a location or naming it (as Belle does above), noting the level or “year” group (as seen in the forthcoming vignette), or identifying other peers who attend. Indeed, on one occasion I observe a heated conversation between three girls where one was claiming to go to ballet lessons:

*The children are dismissed to the third exploring time session of the day. Quite a large group of children gather around the writing table and I sit down nearby. At one point, the voices are raised on the table and I look over, it appears that Isabella is claiming to go to ballet:*

*Ariel: [to Isabella] You're NOT going to ballet!*

*TP: Do you go to ballet Ariel?*

*Ariel: [pouting in an annoyed tone] Yes with Elsa and Unicorn [not Isabella]*

*It's not clear why Ariel was so affronted by Isabella's claim to go to ballet. From overheard whispers, I think it is because Isabella doesn't go to Ariel's dancing and so she thought that she was lying.*

[Fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2024]

Ariel names Elsa and Unicorn specifically perhaps to verify her claim that she goes to ballet in response to my question. Of note is Ariel's anger over Isabella's claim, which I can only speculate as to why this was the case. In my fieldnotes, I consider if the value that 'girls' in the classroom place on ballet seen elsewhere, possibly as a 'feminine' activity (Blaise, 2014; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Pilcher, 2011), contributes to its contested nature. If ballet is used to distinguish in the peer culture, then perhaps claims to attend need to be verified due to it happening beyond the spatio-temporal remit of the school day.

In seeking my own clarification on whether Ariel goes to ballet, I consider in my reflexive journal whether I am also contributing to the mattering of enrichment activities at Parkside. My response being: of course. My interest in this scene, as well as in the daily interpretation sessions more widely, is inseparable from the emergence of enrichment activities in the field. As discussed in the Section 4.2, all aspects drawn upon in my findings are “brought about through intermingling of particular social and material elements, of which the researcher is a productive part” (MacLeod et al., 2019, p. 180). Instead, thinking reflexively about my question, I consider the conditions through which

it emerged. My motivation for asking was partially to divert Ariel's anger away from Isabella, but also to perhaps resolve the situation through clarifying if both girls attend different ballet classes (although I did not get that far). This was a result of me not knowing whether Ariel or Isabella attend ballet, reinforcing the spatio-temporal distance (and thus unobservable nature) of the school- enrichment-activities enactment already outlined.

A notable bridging of this spatial distance between clubs and the school day was through the classroom practice of taking "Bruce Bear<sup>29</sup>" home. Children in each class would be given the opportunity to take Bruce home to spend a weekend with them, taking photos and filling in his travelling scrapbook to document this. The teacher would then share each child's addition to the scrapbook, of which swimming lessons feature among many other activities. More generally, from an academic perspective I found this book particularly insightful in gaining more information about the children's home lives through the photos, language and writing included (usually completed by parents/guardians). Through Bruce's scrapbooks (one for each class), I learned about the children's interests, the enrichment activities they attend, their weekend activities and their home environments. These books were always available for the children to look through in the reading corner of their classroom and on many occasions, I would observe the children looking through them, excitedly pointing things out and smiling.

Interestingly, for both Walking Table and Rapunzel in the fieldnotes above, their announcement about clubs relates to the claim that this will be their *first* swimming (lesson). I suggest that this is also an integral aspect in-forming the relative popularity of swimming as an enrichment activity in mattering at Parkside. Evidence from Sport England (2023) indicates that only 22 per cent of children in Key Stage 1 (ages 5-7-years-old) can swim. Since swimming is only part of the statutory National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2014b) from Key Stage 1 onwards, children below this age are unlikely to be able to swim. Children who are 4-5-years-old during their Reception year are therefore unlikely to have learned to swim yet and hence, if they do attend swimming lessons, are more likely to be doing so for the first time.

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<sup>29</sup> A pseudonym for a soft toy bear.

It is possible that this underscores the emotions which are threaded through the announcements made by Walking Table and Rapunzel. In the field, I felt their joy, their excitement and possibly a sense of pride through markers such as their smile, the comical delivery and the word “special”. Perhaps this is also reflected in my celebratory response to Walking Table (reflected on in Section 4.5.1.2.2). Conversely, Ariel’s anger – possibly in her defence of ballet – shows that the emotions that interweave with clubs are not all positive. Thus, I interpret enrichment activities as affective for children; particularly those which are exciting as a first experience, but also in guarding the distinction offered by them (also noted in the literature in Section 2.5.3.2).

The children’s announcements could be motivated by affect; in other words, the attraction of associating themselves with enrichment activities. The intra-action of affect with the classroom architecture and spatial-temporal context of clubs enacts agential cuts between the children and clubs, producing ‘children who attend enrichment activities’ as separate. These affective encounters could be suggested to produce power relations through children distinguishing themselves as an activity attendee. In the examples above, Rapunzel’s announcement exhibits to her friends that she will attend swimming lessons, prompting a debate (discussed in the vignette below) about who attends what enrichment activities. Likewise, Belle’s demarcation of herself as going to swimming *and* gymnastics separates her as an attendee at multiple activities. Finally, Ariel attempts to specifically separate by name (Elsa, Unicorn and herself) those who attend ballet, versus those who do not (Isabella), resulting in distinctions that differentiate.

This affective pull may be corollary to the discursive construction of enrichment activities as a benefit to children. As noted previously, enrichment activities are widely purported to be beneficial to children’s wellbeing (Siraj and Mayo, 2014), general education (OECD, 2020) and future employability (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019; Robinson, 2024; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). The idea that enrichment activities are the responsibility of parents to buy into to supplement their children’s education, and ultimately life chances (equated with employability), underpins their discursive construction as valuable, advantageous and beneficial (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016); discussed further in Section 2.3.2.2.3. This thesis focuses on *how* enrichment activities

come to matter, thus here, this discursive value may be another intra-acting element which co-constructs the excitement and classroom announcements observed.

In addition, the inclusion of swimming in the National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2014b) works to construct it as an important life *skill*. Albeit from Key Stage 1 onwards, the Government define swimming as a skill which must be taught according to the statutory guidance for Physical Education (Department for Education, 2014b). This gives swimming a particular educational legitimacy in terms of being an activity that all children should participate in, over and above other sports such as ballet that are not in the Curriculum. Therefore, swimming sits at a particular discursive confluence as being not just an ‘enrichment’ activity, but one which has a precise legitimacy as a necessary skill. For children at Parkside who attend swimming, this validity may interconnect with their excitement, perhaps as an activity which is repeatedly (re)constructed as valuable by teachers, adults and parents.

### 7.2.2 Collaborative projects: activities-children-skills-body-confidence

Through these announcements over a period of a few months, I came to notice that enrichment activities mattered to the children at Parkside. As a result, I chose to explore these activities further with the children through some of the collaborative projects in January/February 2024. After asking a few children whether they want to participate (and them declining), I discuss enrichment activities with two groups: Pilot, Rainbow and Isabella (11<sup>th</sup> January 2024); and Rapunzel and Sheep (1<sup>st</sup> February 2024). As outlined in Section 4.2.3, the children choose different methods to explore a topic with me, in this case, drawing pictures, acting out with dolls and discussing verbally. As a group, we reconvene to discuss how they would like their work to be read<sup>30</sup>.

In the first group, Rainbow chooses to act out her knowledge of enrichment activities with some small-world dolls. She explains that the dolls were at “sports clubs” and lines three dolls up together to show them “swimming” (see Figure 17); perhaps emphasising the collective nature of enrichment activities as most often done in groups. In Figure 18, Rainbow moves the doll’s arms and legs, delicately jumping the doll up and down on the

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<sup>30</sup> With both groups, I was able to audio-record and take photographs of their work with the children’s permission.

table, to demonstrate “ballet”. Reflecting on Rainbow’s choice of method (dolls), I wonder if this is indicative of the physical and embodied nature of enrichment activities; indeed, this appeared to be echoed in the physical actions and knowledge explored by others (discussed below).



*Figure 17. Rainbow's dolls "swimming"*



*Figure 18. Rainbow's doll doing "ballet"*

Also notable is the choice of enrichment activities Rainbow opts to tell me about; swimming and ballet are popular activities that I usually hear spoken about in class. Whilst swimming is talked about by girls and boys alike, I am only aware of girls discussing claims to attend ballet classes, sometimes quite heatedly (see Section 7.2.1). Although it could be coincidental, out of three dolls (one displaying male characteristics and the other two, female) Rainbow chooses one which is stereotypically female to act out “ballet”, a discipline which is often constructed as feminine (Blaise, 2014; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Pilcher, 2011): The doll has long, blond hair, a pink flowery dress and pink shoes (Pilcher, 2011; Yoon, 2020). As discussed in Section 7.2.1, this perhaps positions ballet as an enrichment activity which comes to matter in a gendered way. Thus, I interpret Rainbow’s choice of enrichment activities, as well as her choice of method, to matter in this collaborative project entanglement.

Within the same session, as we are seated at a table in the corridor, Pilot explains to me the enrichment activity that he attends:

01:25 Pilot: *I don't go to sports, I don't really do sports...No, I do...do martial arts. That means...[trails off]*

01:31 TP: *[prompting] That's like a sport.*

01:34 Pilot: *[animatedly with his hands outstretched] Yeah, yeah, and it's like, like...yeah, yeah, it's like punching. I did it on...Monday. Yeah, it's like you're kind of doing punching*

01:46 TP: *Ohh, I see. And do you like going there?*

01:49 Pilot: *Yeah, yeah.*

01:51 TP: *What do you do while you're there?*

01:53 Pilot: *[acting out the physical actions from his chair] **Right.** So there's like to do [sic] kicking and star jumps and punches and, yeah, yeah and they're like kicks that way [nods to one side] and that way [nods to the other]*

[Transcript from a collaborative project discussion session with Pilot, Rainbow and Isabella, 11<sup>th</sup> January 2024]

Once the connection is made between enrichment activities, sports and “martial arts”, Pilot becomes very animated in this recording, his volume and hand gestures increasing. This is in contrast to my other interactions with him, where he comes across as quietly confident, particularly about things he has an in-depth knowledge about such as becoming a pilot or his Christmas routines. He begins talking very quickly about what his martial arts club involves with a particular emphasis on “punching” in the first instance. When I question further what the club involves (01:51), Pilot’s confidence is marked from the outset with a decisive “Right” (01:53), before he relays his expert knowledge of “kicking”, “star jumps” “punches” and particular “kicks”. His body begins to mimic the movements as he’s talking and at one point, he stands up from his chair to adopt what I assume is the correct stance to punch from.

Despite his verbal explanation, Pilot’s physical embodiment of the martial arts class becomes central to his telling. This is accompanied by subject-specific vocabulary associated with the club. The air of confidence which children assume when telling me about their physical prowess or knowledge from an enrichment activity is something which I *felt* through their body language and tone of voice. From my attempt to position myself as someone who wants to learn from the children, the children move into the role of teacher; a role which I assume they enjoy from their enthusiastic re-tellings.



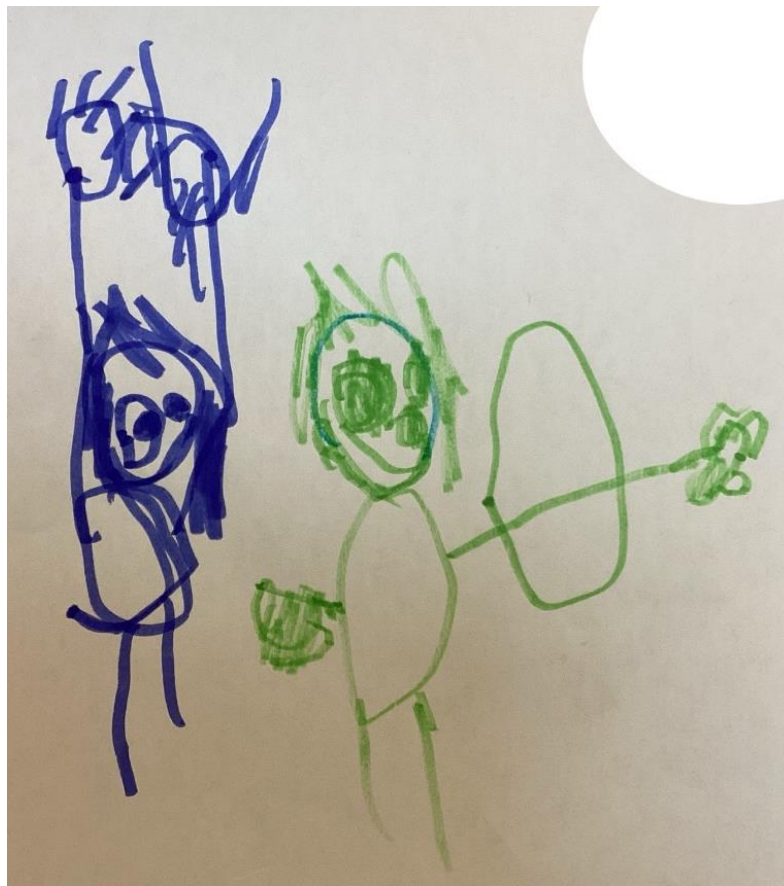
This physical confidence and knowledge are echoed in the second collaborative project with Rapunzel and Sheep. In this session, they both choose to draw pictures related to their interpretation of enrichment activities. Both girls draw swimming experiences, although Rapunzel also adds “karate” to this (see Figure 19 for Rapunzel’s drawing). Whilst Rapunzel is drawing her picture, she begins to chat:

*Rapunzel: I'm drawing swimming first! [draws a figure on the left-hand side]  
That's a push and glide...*

*She continues to draw the figure on the right-hand side.*

*Rapunzel: This is me doing some karate...my hand is going to tuck in for a karate punch.*

[Fieldnotes from a collaborative project activity session with Rapunzel and Sheep, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2024]



*Figure 19. Rapunzel's drawing of a "push and glide" on the left and a "karate punch" on the right*

As in Pilot's explanatory movements, Rapunzel invokes a specific vocabulary when talking about the enrichment activities she attends; "push and glide" and "tuck in for a karate punch". From spending time with the children at Parkside, attendance at enrichment activities is often infused with a sense of excitement and pride over their physical accomplishments. When we come to discuss their pictures at the end of the session, Rapunzel speaks with a similar air of confidence when explaining to me how to execute a "push and glide":

*01:25 Rapunzel: My picture's about my swim class and karate...I do lots of moves at karate like punches and blocks and... keeping safe when someone is doing dangerous things to you... like a choke*

*01:41 TP: Oh wow, ok. So this one is... [pointing at the left-hand side picture]*

*01:44 Rapunzel: A glide*

*01:47 TP: [prompting from the earlier conversation] That's a... push and glide you told me? Yeah?*

*01:53 Rapunzel: [acting out a push and glide on her chair] So when you're doing push and glide, you have to hold your hands on the wall and your feet have to be on the wall and then you push with your feet and get your arm about like this [pulls her arm overhead]. But in (Name)'s class it's called The Rocket.*

[Transcript from a collaborative project discussion session with Rapunzel and Sheep, 1<sup>st</sup> February 2024]

Rapunzel's comment that the "push and glide" is called "The Rocket" in another child's swim class perhaps implies that swimming lessons are the subject of peer discussions where they share their experiences; much like evidence presented by Ridge (2011) and Sutton et al. (2007) in Section 2.5.2.2. Like Pilot, Rapunzel cannot help but use her body to act out a "push and glide", foregrounding the physical and embodied nature of these classes for children. With an emphasis on acquiring new skills, these classes often focus on what bodies can do (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003; Fox and Alldred, 2022). As noted elsewhere, this resonates with benefits to children's confidence (OECD, 2020; Siraj and Mayo, 2014) and as a capital to be acquired for future employability (Robinson, 2024; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016); see also Sections 2.3.2.2.2 and 2.3.2.2.3.

Through the micro-moments and collaborative projects above, I have sought to show the tangle of spatial and temporal factors, classroom architecture, material-discursive

understandings and bodily affects that interconnect to produce enrichment activities as mattering Parkside Primary. The writing-table-activities-children entanglement can be seen to (re)emerge through different instances in slightly different ways. I interpret this as a product of the classroom writing tables and the distance between 'out-of-school' and 'inside-school' prompting enrichment activities to come into being through verbal conversations within the classroom peer culture.

Through collaboration with the children, I attempted to illustrate how enrichment activities are infused with the material-discursive matter of body confidence in the tangle of activities-children-skills-body-confidence. These entanglements are underpinned by the affective pull of enrichment activities in the peer culture, as having the potential to distinguish. In the vignette that follows, I hope to show how these themes are woven through another specific moment within the classroom in which enrichment activities come to matter at Parkside.

### 7.2.3 A vignette: Enrichment activities that distinguish

#### 7.2.3.1 *Competition: children-swimming-gymnastics-writing-table-competition*

*At the writing table, I am sitting with five other children as we colour our respective colouring templates, looking up to carefully select the next felt tip pen. I am hunched over the table on account of being too big for the tiny chair and table arrangement. There is an air of quiet productivity about the table as the children seem quietly engaged in completing their pictures. Amidst this, Rapunzel walks across the carpet in the classroom and finishes standing tall next to her the chair closest to her at the writing table. Her body is angled so that it's not clear whether she is talking to the child on the nearest seat, me, the whole table or all simultaneously.*

*Rapunzel: Well, today....is the first day that I am...[makes a pretend fanfare sound and mimes playing a trumpet]...going to swimming!*

*This sentence begins slowly with her pausing around the first few words. Her voice is clear and cuts through the relative lack of noise on the writing table to seemingly land right in the middle of the children sat around it. Rapunzel's volume raises as she mimes playing the trumpet and she finishes her sentence with a dramatic high-pitched tone and a flurry of her hand movements. I catch a glimpse of the reaction from the child closest to Rapunzel: They say nothing and don't look up whilst they continue colouring but they do mime looking impressed by upturning their mouth and jutting their chin out a little. Seemingly encouraged by the non-verbal response, Rapunzel continues:*

*Rapunzel: ...and the first Friday after the holidays, my mummy has booked me into the after-school club<sup>31</sup>! I'm very excited!*

*Again, Rapunzel begins to talk more quickly and her tone becomes more high-pitched as she shares her excitement. She flaps her hands too and squeezes her eyes shut, illustrating the bodily effects of her excitement. Rapunzel's excited tone – or what she's saying – seems to have attracted the attention of the other children who are sat around the table. It appears that they have honed in on the word 'swimming' as a flurry of "I go swimming" and "me too" ripples around the table. This seems to have disrupted the concentrated colouring as the children are now stood from their seats, looking at each other across the table, holding pens absentmindedly while they engage in conversation. Perhaps because she is closest to me, or because she is the loudest of the rippling claims, I follow what Elsa responds in this event:*

*Elsa: I do [swimming] too!...but I'm too tall for gymnastics now. [to Belle] What year are you in for gymnastics?*

*Belle: Reception, year one and year two*

*Elsa: [to another child] What year are you in for gymnastics?*

*Another other child replies.*

*Ariel: I only know what year I am for swimming...*

*A claim of "I'm in year six" comes from somewhere on the table.*

*Belle: I'm in year seven!*

*Elsa: I'm in ten! I'm in the last group of sevens - one group, two group [sic], three groups - the last group...I usually teach some people how to do it*

*Ariel: [suspiciously] what are their names?*

*Elsa: [nonchalantly] I can't remember - I'm just writing a register because I can't remember everyone's name [she starts to write down a list of names]... I've only been there for two months so I'm still learning everyone's names*

*I'm surprised by this quick thinking to cover her tracks as it seems unlikely that Elsa has to teach in the manner she explains.*

*Ariel: I'm going to tell my mummy I want to go to gymnastics!*

*Elsa: [quickly backtracks] Weeeell it might be a long time before I can teach **you***

*Belle: I teach stage three and four*

*Elsa: I teach stage ten and eleven. The teachers who teach that stage are away and ask me to help teach six and five too*

*Belle appears to have no response to this and so, maybe a little disappointedly, drops her head to continue colouring. Perhaps satisfied that she has the last*

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<sup>31</sup> This club is run by the school for the purposes of after-school childcare. It has a name which Rapunzel used, but it has been anonymised here.

*word, Elsa selects a felt tip pen and drops her head to continue colouring too. The rest of the children around the writing table also shift their focus back to colouring as their shoulders hunch over their respective pictures and the volume drops once more.*

[Vignette expanded from fieldnotes, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2024]

In this children-swimming-gymnastics-writing-table-competition scene, it is possible to see how the writing-table-activities-children comes again but not in the same way. Rapunzel's announcement (discussed in Section 7.2.1) appears to prompt a verbal pile-on where other children around the writing table also claim to go swimming. This perhaps reiterates the affective lure of swimming, as – true or not – the children are keen to add their individual claim to go. It is less important whether these claims are factual, the point is that these children *want to stake their claim to swimming* alongside their peers. The focus of this analysis is therefore on what the children desire to construct or “project” (R. Butler, 2019, p. 130). This is also evident in the latter half of the scene with regards to the girls claiming to attend gymnastics.

Here, I find it useful to diffract the event in Section 6.2.2, where Rainbow lies about owning an Encanto water bottle, illustrating its desirability. The materiality of the children's water bottles in the classroom means that Rainbow is unable to avoid being found out and accused of playing a “trick” on the other girls. Conversely to the Encanto water bottle, as noted in the first part of this section, the spatio-temporal separation between enrichment activities and school affords children leniency in their claims to attend.

This question of fact echoes Truscott's (Truscott et al., 2019) pre-school ethnography with 3–5-year-olds in Australia. The authors outline a scene at pre-school in which a girl, pseudonymised as Dr.K., claims to attend ballet classes. This information is queried with Dr.K.'s parents after doubts over its validity and they confirm that Dr.K. does not attend ballet. Whilst Truscott et al. (2019) reflect on the decision to share this information from an ethical standpoint of confidentiality, I contrast Truscott's adult status in this scenario with the children at Parkside. It was easy for Truscott to verify this information via a practitioner, a capacity enabled by her adult (and arguably researcher) status. Returning to the children-swimming-gymnastics-writing-table-competition

entanglement, the notion that this information is *not easily verified by children* is perhaps integral to its (verbal) becoming in the classroom.

I interpret these claims as (re)producing agential cuts between children who swim or do gymnastics, and those who do not. As each child adds their individual claim to go swimming to the conversation (in the flurry of “me too” that ripples around the table), they (re)form the separation around what matters (children who swim) to include themselves. Likewise, when the conversation shifts to gymnastics so do the claims to attend, albeit it indirectly through a comparison of the level attended. This pattern echoes the dynamics observed by Pugh (2011) and R. Butler (2019) where children reach for a sense of group belonging through adding their individual claims to a cumulative collective (see Section 2.5.2.1); the “in crowd” (hooks, 2000, p. 27). Through the tangling of children-swimming-gymnastics-writing-table-competition, their separability can be seen; how swimming and gymnastics are produced as desirable through the arrangement of children-writing-table and a competitive conversation. In doing so, this creates power differentials between the children that attend swimming/gymnastics and those that do not, much like the emotionally charged distinctions reported by Ridge (2011) and Sutton et al. (2007) in Section 2.5.2.2.

The latter part of this scene is characterised by a discussion around gymnastics which stemmed from Elsa’s direct question to Belle: “What year are you in for gymnastics?”. This prompts what I interpreted to be a somewhat competitive exchange between Elsa, Belle, Ariel and another child at the table. Confusingly, Belle suggested that she was in three classes “Reception, year one and year two” which seems unlikely given that these are terms for school years rather than the more convincing “stage three and four” that she indicates she teaches later in the conversation. This conflicting vocabulary between school terms and stages made me question whether Belle was telling the truth. However, as outlined previously, the veracity of the claims is not the focus in these interactions but rather what the claims desire to “project” (R. Butler, 2019, p. 130) and the boundaries they aim to draw between themselves and others.

The girls compete to claim to be in a higher gymnastics year group, ascending through years “six” “seven” “ten” and then conflictingly also “the last group of sevens”. This

sense of competition perhaps reinforces the attempts to separate, or perform agential cuts, between children in the peer culture. Whilst this was initially through attendance (at swimming), this develops into claims over the streamed nature of gymnastics classes into ability groups, presumably according to increasing skill. I interpret this as further attempts to (re)form the agential separations between the children and what matters in the peer culture. In this case, the agential separations are around the child that attends the highest-ranking gymnastics class, producing gymnastics as mattering in the process as the children speak it into being.

Further to this, Elsa appears to raise the stakes in the conversation again when she adds that “I usually teach some people how to do it”. I interpret this as an attempt by Elsa to (re)form the agential cuts yet again, offering her distinction through the role of teacher, rather than a student in a higher-level class. Despite the spatio-temporal distance between school and enrichment activities, it appears that this tests the limits of what is believable as Ariel asks with suspicion what the names of her students are. I was surprised by Elsa’s quick thinking in which she states that she cannot remember the names of her students because she has only been there “two months”. I interpret this as ‘quick thinking’ because I do not think it’s true that Elsa teaches swimming in the manner she suggests, given she is only 5-years-old. Elsa’s explanation seems to satisfy Ariel who adds that she will “tell my mummy I want to go to gymnastics!”, presumably to be taught by Elsa.

On hearing this, it appears that Elsa may be concerned that she will be found out as she adds that it “might be a long time before I can teach **you**”. When Ariel responds that she will come to Elsa’s classes, this threatens the spatio-temporal distance between school and enrichment activities highlighting its role in the becoming of enrichment activities at Parkside. Ariel’s comment that she will “tell [her] mummy” also underscores children’s experience of enrichment activities as mediated by adults (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Ridge, 2011; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016); see also Section 2.3.2.2.3. Particularly at such a young age, the children in Reception must negotiate attendance at enrichment activities through their parents or guardians. This is entangled with other contextual factors, particularly financial, that will be discussed when revisiting the research questions.

Finally, Belle's declaration that she also teaches "stage three and stage four" in response to Elsa's assertion to teach reiterates the competitive undertones in this discussion. I interpret Belle's response as (re)affirming the affective lure of gymnastics "teaching" as a desirable claim to make and an attempt to (re)shape the agential cut around gymnastics as including her alongside Elsa. Elsa's reply to this reiterates the competitive edge to the conversation as she states that she teaches "stage ten and eleven", numerically much higher than Belle's stage three and four. I understand this as Elsa taking back ownership over the agential cuts formed previously, to distinguish herself from Belle's new claim that she also teaches.

#### 7.2.4 Revisiting the research questions

1. What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?

In this section, I have re-presented three entanglements through which I interpret enrichment activities as coming to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. Firstly, I consider the writing-table-activities-children tangle as integral to the information of enrichment activities in the peer culture. The formation and function of the writing table, along with the spatio-temporal distance between schools and enrichment activities, is part of the confluence of how these activities come to matter in the peer culture through verbal interactions discussed habitually at the writing table. Primarily observed through Walking Table, Rapunzel and Belle, I interpret their announcements to peers as demonstrating the affective lure of claims to enrichment activities, also noted elsewhere in the literature (Ridge, 2011; Sutton et al., 2007). This intra-acts with the discursive construction of enrichment activities as a beneficial experience for children, sometimes marking their first experience of a lifelong skill such as swimming.

In the second entanglement, activities-children-skills-body-confidence, I explore the bodily matters of enrichment activities, based on collaborative projects completed with the children. Through the children's responses, I consider the content of their responses, as well as the mediums they choose, to be illustrative of their material-discursive inscription of enrichment activities; as something their body can do. In these



cases, enrichment activities appear to imbue some of the children with confidence, knowledge and physical skills. I interpret this as a constituting part of the affective capacity of these activities, offering children who are tangled in this activities-children-skills-body-confidence web the power to distinguish themselves.

This notion of distinction comes again in the third entanglement, the children-swimming-gymnastics-writing-table-competition vignette. I suggest that the first entanglement explored is enfolded within this scene, coming again but as a slightly different iteration. As in the writing-table-activities-children entanglement, the spatio-temporal distance between school and enrichment activities forms part of the way they are able to come into being in the peer culture. Diffracting the scenario of Rainbow's Encanto bottle (Section 6.2.2) and research by Truscott et al. (2019), I consider how the children's positioning alongside this spatio-temporal arrangement introduces questions around 'truth' that is not afforded to material items in the school. This intra-action enables the children to compete over (re)forming the agential cuts, producing what matters (swimming, gymnastics, gymnastics teaching) in the process.

## 2. In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

In part, I have discussed how these moments are enabled by the affective capacity of enrichment activities for children at Parkside Primary. I have discussed how this is interwoven with their becoming in that they emerge as announcements to peers, threaded with excitement and pride. The material-discursive nature of these activities as enrichment (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019; Robinson, 2024), developing bodily skills which instil knowledge, capacities and confidence in the children, contributes to their construction as something to be excited and proud of; much like the distinction commented on by Ridge (2011) and Sutton et al. (2007) in Section 2.5.2.2. This may also be linked to the children's age in Reception (4–5-years-old) as they are more likely to be attending enrichment activities for the first time, marking them as a new development in their life, such as a Walking Table's announcement about his first swimming lesson as a "special day".

Throughout this section, these affective moments form agential cuts that allow enrichment activities (and their attendees) to matter in the classroom peer culture at

Parkside. I interpret the competition, excitement and pride threaded through the mattering of enrichment activities as illustrative of their affective capacity to distinguish children from their peers, through performing and (re)forming agential cuts. Through these separations, matters “become distinct and power relation relations produced” (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a, p. 99) not only through what they *include* but also what they *exclude*, “the constitutive outside” (Barad, 2007, p. 64). In these scenes, the children are separated, by marking *who* matters through *what* matters, in this case those who can speak enrichment activities into being versus those who cannot.

As acknowledged, there is a question of truth in the children’s claims to attend enrichment activities permitted by the spatio-temporal distance between school and clubs. Whilst this could be argued to undermine distinction through socioeconomic positioning, in that anyone can claim to attend, I contend that the emergence of enrichment activities as mattering still works, through affect, to translate socioeconomic differences into capacities and eventually power inequalities. The knowledge, skills, confidence, excitement and pride are all affective in bringing these activities into being in – what I suggest – are authentic ways. For example, children’s excitement motivates them to announce their attendance or their physical skills learned at enrichment activities culminate in physical demonstrations. If a child did not actually attend an enrichment activity, I reason that enrichment activities may not emerge in these ways.

What’s more, through the moments re-presented, it is possible to see how the claims to attend are still subject to verification (Belle’s enquiry about the location and Ariel’s rejection of Isabella’s claim) and suspicion (about Elsa’s teaching in the vignette). As in Truscott et al.’s (2019) ethnography, where Dr. K. made a false claim to attend ballet, it could be suggested that children looking to be distinguished by something that is not true will eventually be found out. In Truscott et al.’s (2019) research, as well as my own, I observe a tension between claims to be distinguished and their resulting requirement to be verified. This was also the case in Rainbow’s claim to own an ‘Encanto’ water bottle (Section 6.2.2), which was eventually exposed as a “trick”, conspicuous in its (lack of) materiality in the classroom.

There is much existing literature that links enrichment activities with families' economic circumstances or class (Farthing, 2014; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Reay, 2015; Ridge, 2011; Sutton et al., 2007; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016; Wilson and Worsley, 2021); see also the literature discussed in Sections 2.3.2.2.3 and 2.5.2.2. Access to enrichment activities is considered to be unequally distributed around the UK and can vary by children's household income, school, gender, ethnicity and geographic location (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019). Many organisations charge a fee to attend, due to the resources required (staffing, equipment etc.) which makes them inaccessible for many families, particularly those with low household incomes (Farthing, 2014; Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Sutton et al., 2007). This is further entangled with the context at Parkside, where extra-curricular clubs are offered to children in school Years 1–6, but not Reception. This means that for children in Reception at Parkside, access to enrichment activities is through external organisations which are likely to be more expensive than school-provided activities (many of which are free) (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019).

The cost-of-living crisis has put household budgets under further pressure, reducing the amount of disposable income that is available to spend on enrichment opportunities (Earwaker, 2022). This risks deepening the already increasing divide between families that can and cannot afford to pay for enrichment activities (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019; Ridge, 2011). This financial aspect is also tangled with the availability of parents to be able to take children to activities, aside from their paid work, as well as the travel links required to attend – if it can be accessed by car or public transport (Ridge, 2011; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). In addition, with state school budgets shrinking, schools have reported being forced to cut their provision of extra-curricular activities (Ofsted, 2020), also widening the gap between the offering at independent (fee-paying) schools and their state counterparts (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019).

Research discussed in Section 2.3.2.2.3 points to relationships between middle-class parenting and the formalised economy around paid-for enrichment activities. As Vincent and Maxwell (2016) explain “‘good’ parents are required to ‘buy into’ enrichment activities for their children, with concomitant implications for those whose access to activities is limited by economic circumstance” (p. 269; see also Wilson and Worsley,

2021). As they suggest, this creates a discourse around what ‘good’ parenting is (Reay, 2015) by what it includes as much as what it excludes, “the constitutive outside” (Barad, 2007, p. 64). This discourse centres around such activities as beneficial, as Vincent and Maxwell explain:

... enrichment activities serve as an investment for the future, a process of inculcation into the tastes and dispositions of the professional middle classes, and that a ‘Renaissance child’ with skills and talents in sport, music, art and so on, can gain (further) positional advantage... (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016, p. 272)

As presented in Section 2.2.3.1, this works to construct working-class families as deficient, because they are considered to not perform ‘good’ parenting practices in the way that middle-class norms demand (Reay, 2008, 2015; see also Cushing, 2020, 2022; Nightingale, 2019).

Enrichment activities have also been linked to middle-class families as an example of Annette Lareau’s concerted cultivation (see Section 2.3.2.2.3). As previously discussed, Lareau’s work has been criticised for overlooking children’s perspectives and constructing class parenting practices as a one-way, static process of transferring resources to children, often reifying such practices in the process (Ba’, 2021; Calarco, 2014; Kustatscher, 2015). Thus, while these models suggest *why* enrichment activities are associated with middle-class childhoods, they do not explain *how* this happens for children through their day-to-day school lives (as these findings have attempted to do).

In the moments illustrated throughout this section, I have attempted to answer this invitation to show how it is *through affect* that I interpret enrichment activities as coming to matter at Parkside. In doing so, the focus is shifted to *how* classed relations are produced, rather than *why* (Deloria, 2012; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Tembo, 2022).

Enrichment activities may indeed be classed in themselves (as not equally-financially accessible), but they are also classed through moments of affective unfolding in that they are positioned as what matters through peer interactions at Parkside. Here, socioeconomic differences are translated into an affective register, establishing capitalism as an “ontopower” (Massumi, 2015, p. 110) which has produced the conditions for its continued (re)emergence; *enrichment activities are affective for*

*children* as well as families (Social Mobility Commission, July 2019; Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Siraj and Mayo, 2014; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016).

To summarise, the moments re-presented in this section demonstrate how enrichment activities come to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. As in Chapter 6, it is through affect that these activities emerge. In doing so, their becoming creates agential cuts between children who are distinguished by their attendance at enrichment activities, and their resulting knowledge, skills and confidence, as reported elsewhere in the literature (Kustatscher, 2015; Ridge, 2011; Sutton et al., 2007). I suggest that the discourse this (re)creates – in constructing enrichment activities as desirable – (re)produces distinction through economic differences lived out through social and cultural practices (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016).

## 7.3 Birthday parties

Following enrichment activities, the second half of this chapter will explore how another experience, birthday parties, acts as a model case for what comes to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. Through comparing and contrasting these model cases, it is possible to see how their commonality as out-of-school experiences in-forms how they surface through classroom moments in similar ways. Notably, this is an increased emphasis on verbal interactions in a way that diverges from that seen in Chapter 6, yet materiality remains integral to how experiences emerge at Parkside. Like the writing table in-forms how enrichment activities emerge (see Section 7.2.1), classroom resources and furniture as well as paper invitations also contribute to how birthday parties come to matter to the children (Section 7.3.3.1). These comparisons between the cases are woven throughout the latter half of this chapter and in its conclusion in Section 7.4.

### 7.3.1 Partying Parkside-style: parties-Soft-Play-Shack-excitement-school

*As Rapunzel sits down at the writing table, she grabs one of the birthday card templates available and says aloud to no-one in particular:*

*Rapunzel: [smiling] I'm doing a card for my birthday later on*

*Walking Table overhears Rapunzel and by what he says, assumes Rapunzel must have a birthday coming up (although I believe she has already had her birthday in this academic year).*

*Walking Table: [quietly to Rapunzel] where's your birthday going to be at?*

*Rapunzel: Welllllll, I have loads of time to think*

*Walking Table: Well...do you want it to be at the Soft Play Shack<sup>32</sup>?*

*Rapunzel: [thoughtfully] I think I'm going to (Name)'s party at the Soft Play Shack*

*Walking Table: So do you want it at the Soft Play Shack?*

*Rapunzel: [indecisively] Well maybe...*

*Walking Table: Soooo many people go to the Soft Play Shack...I feel like everybody wants to be like me [throws both arms up into the air and gazes to the sky dramatically]*

*Walking Table suggests that 'everybody wants to be like him' because he has already had his party at the Soft Play Shack.*

[Fieldnotes, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023]

This moment between Rapunzel and Walking Table is illustrative of some of the myriad sociomaterial threads that weave together to produce a specific type of birthday party as mattering in the children's peer culture at Parkside. In keeping with the literature presented in Section 2.5.2.2, throughout my time in the field, I began to recognise the notion of birthday parties as important to the children; not just attending them but hosting them and being able to invite their peers, as part of classroom practices, resources and school organisation, and (re)creating them in their play at school. Although these produce parties in a range of guises, I contend that what emerges at Parkside is a certain configuration that enfolds back to (re)produce its affective quality through classroom life; that is, the birthday party as an organised event for a child's birthday in which physical invitations are used to ask their friends to a (paid-for) venue. As in the example above, it is a particular soft play<sup>33</sup> venue – the Soft Play Shack – through which many of the parties spoken about in the classroom are brought into being. Figure 20 (Kidify, 2025) shows an example of a soft play venue. Approximately a

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<sup>32</sup> A pseudonym for the name of a children's soft play franchise that has multiple venues across the UK, although the children use it to refer to one specific site geographically close to their school.

<sup>33</sup> Soft play venues are usually large indoor sites with large play structures with multiple 'soft' obstacles. They are physically challenging for smaller children but largely considered safe due to their soft construction. In some venues, different spaces are designed for different age groups.

20-minute car journey from the school, the Soft Play Shack is an indoor children's play area that features prominently in the Parkside peer culture, as a popular destination for children's birthday parties and as part of their shared references. As Walking Table proclaims, "Soooo many people go to the Soft Play Shack" which he interprets as everybody wanting to be like him, as he had his party there earlier in the academic year. Although Rapunzel appears less sure about whether she would like her party at the Soft Play Shack, she does appear to consider its popularity as she is attending Cari's birthday party there.



Figure 20. A children's soft play venue illustrative of the Soft Play Shack which is spoken about at Parkside.

Throughout my time at Parkside, I continued to notice the Soft Play Shack's pervasiveness across the children's peer culture as a recognisable reference. Usually I observed this reference unfolding verbally, for example, as part of role play [1] or in discussions [2]:

*[1] During an exploring time in the classroom, Ariel runs over and shouts loudly to Belle:*

*Ariel: (Belle)! It's your birthday at the Soft Play Shack tomorrow! Come on!*

*Ariel and Belle run over to the teepee in the reading area in Class 1 and take off their shoes to go inside. I wonder if this represents the soft play of the Soft Play Shack and if the ritual of taking off shoes somehow transports the children there as they have to remove their shoes to play at the Soft Play Shack.*

[Fieldnotes, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2023]

*[2] Whilst colouring at the writing table, a child mentions their birthday:*

*Elsa: [interrupting] She had a party at the Soft Play Shack! I know because I went*

*Belle: [defensively] I didn't go because I was at [sic] skiing*

*Elsa makes a funny face and rolls her eyes, almost as if she doesn't believe Belle. Belle seems a little put out, she drops her head with a small pout and continues colouring.*

[Fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2024]

In these examples as well as the rest throughout the chapter, the Soft Play Shack is specifically named which brings it into being in a particular way – through its brand name (Elliott and Leonard, 2004). I interpret this naming as differentiating the Soft Play Shack from other party venues. This naming could reflect a variety of different reasons: its geographical location as closer than other venues to the school; its popularity with children (and/or parents) of this age group; or its frequent use among other aspects. The detail with which the children (re)produced the Soft Play Shack in the classroom seemed to suggest that it was a memorable place: Ariel and Belle's energetic role play; the "bumpy bridge" and "hot dogs, chips and chicken nuggets!" [Fieldnotes, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023]; and the "little lamppost" that is described as marking the carpark of the Soft Play Shack [Fieldnotes, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2023].

Birthday parties at the Soft Play Shack, and indeed at other party venues, occur at a spatio-temporal distance to the school; they happen outside of school (at another location and after the school day) which in-forms how they come to matter at Parkside. Like enrichment activities (Section 7.2.1), the moments I observe parties unfolding within emerge through children's verbal interactions, as they bring parties that happen *outside* of school *into* the classroom. To diffract the emergence of enrichment activities with parties further, Belle's reference to the premium gym, Active Life, and the references to the Soft Play Shack may suggest that naming the Shack also serves a similar function (to locate events outside of school rather than to differentiate) (see Section 7.2.1).

Yet, I contend that whilst naming the Soft Play Shack may operate as a useful locator, it *also* functions as a differentiator. In the scene with Belle, swimming lessons hold the



affective capacity for children rather than “Active Life”. Contra, in the cases outlined in this chapter, it is the brand name (the Soft Play Shack) which is affective. Although a few other venues were referred to during my time in the field (a restaurant, another soft play venue and a gym), this was only by one or two children. The Soft Play Shack in its branded specificity, over and above other venues or generalised parties, is affective for the children, as the number and range of their references throughout the examples in this chapter suggests.

In her ethnographic work with 5–9-year-olds, Pugh (2011) describes how brand names allowed certain “commodified goods and experiences” (p. 9) to matter between children, emerging in the classroom as a route to connect to their peers. For example, Pugh (2011) describes how children’s experiential knowledge of food chains such as Taco Bell and product names such as GameBoy produced affective interactions in which children excitedly bonded over a shared reference point (see Section 2.5.2.1). I suggest that the Soft Play Shack name operates in a similar way. Illustrating the theme of distinction identified in the literature (Section 2.5.3.2), this naming is exemplified in Walking Table and Rapunzel’s conversation, Ariel and Belle’s role play and Elsa’s interruption on the other child’s behalf, all of which are underscored by the children’s shared understanding and/or experiences of the brand name.

Thus, the children at Parkside who have parties at the Soft Play Shack, or can talk about parties they have attended there, bring this specific soft play venue into being in a way that constructs it as distinctive amongst their peers – a popularity which accrues a cumulative effect. The more the Soft Play Shack is mentioned, the more desirable or ingrained as a norm it becomes in the peer culture, further facilitating its use as a reference point at Parkside. This is perhaps best exemplified at the outset of this chapter, when Walking Table overtly positions the Soft Play Shack as the popular choice, constructing it as a party norm:

*Walking Table: Soooo many people go to the Soft Play Shack...I feel like everybody wants to be like me [throws both arms up into the air and gazes to the sky dramatically]*

[Extract from fieldnotes presented above, 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023]

Prior to this, Walking Table offers the Soft Play Shack (twice) as the only potential option for Rapunzel's party location. Through this intra-action between the children and the Soft Play Shack brand name, I contend that agential cuts are enacted and separations are produced. Walking Table creates an agential cut between the "many people that go to the Soft Play Shack" (to host their party) and those who do not. In doing so, the separability within the entanglement can be seen, producing power differentials between matters: the affective force of the Soft Play Shack; children who host parties there; and the children who do not host parties there.

Likewise, in the interaction between Elsa and Belle introduced above, Elsa interrupts to tell me about a party that was at the Soft Play Shack:

*Whilst colouring at the writing table, a child mentions their birthday:*

*Elsa: [interrupting] She had a party at the Soft Play Shack! I know because I went*

*Belle: [defensively] I didn't go because I was at [sic] skiing*

*Elsa makes a funny face and rolls her eyes, almost as if she doesn't believe Belle. Belle seems a little put out, she drops her head with a small pout and continues colouring.*

[Fieldnotes, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2024]

Elsa's interjection perhaps demonstrates the significance of the Soft Play Shack at Parkside; she immediately forefronts the Soft Play Shack as important information. Like Walking Table, this demonstrates the prominence of the Soft Play Shack in the peer culture at Parkside, forging an agential cut which separates it as a noteworthy party location – at the exclusion of others. This is reminiscent of Pugh's (2011) research presented in Section 2.5.2.2, where children established parties "of the same caliber [sic]" (p. 8) that were 'worth talking about'.

Further to this, Elsa adds "I know because I went" possibly as an attempt to (re)form the separation around what matters (the Soft Play Shack) to include her as an attendee, in addition to the host. Belle's response may illustrate that Elsa's agential cuttings have had the desired effect as she defends why she did not attend. As the vignette will show, these agential cuts that mark the Soft Play Shack are enfolded back within the peer culture, (re)producing the conditions for the Soft Play Shack's continued (re)emergence; a point discussed in more detail in Section 7.3.4.

Nevertheless, as described in Section 4.2, I am an irremovable part of these intra-actions, inseparable from the production of events-in-information as I co-construct meaning with the children (Barad, 2007; Niemimaa, 2014; Tummons, 2024). It is possible that Elsa's interjection was a response to my previous enquiries into parties; she interrupted with this information as she thought I may be interested in it based on what she already knew about me. Even so, it is not the claims to be unprompted which support my interpretation here (i.e. that Elsa forefronted this 'independently'), but that Elsa named the Soft Play Shack specifically.

### 7.3.2 Classroom legitimacy: birthdays-parties-classroom-learning

A notable bridging of the spatial distance between parties and school is the classroom practice of the "Birthday Assembly" at Parkside. This Birthday Assembly occurs sporadically in response to each child's birthday, sometimes grouping those in the same week together. At the end of the school day, the children from both classes gather in one classroom sitting cross-legged on the carpet. The teacher invites the birthday child(ren) to the front of the class where they are asked about their birthday celebrations, if they were having a party and what presents they have or might receive. The class sings "Happy Birthday" and the birthday child 'blows out' three wooden candles on a toy cake. Many of the children appear to enjoy this ceremony, receiving the undivided attention of their teacher and all their peers and speaking about their birthday, evident in their laughs and smiles.

I interpret this as a "worlding" (Barad, 2007, p. 181) of the classroom space in which birthdays and parties come to matter. Here, I find echoes of how children's water bottles came to matter through the classroom arrangement of the snack-time routine (see Section 6.2.1). In this case, the spatial organisation of the birthday assembly, where the child stands in front of the class, suggests that the child is distinguished in this instance by their birthday marking them as special. Although in the assembly, the focus is on birthdays (which do not always co-occur with a party), there are two notable aspects of parties at Parkside that intermingle with the birthday assembly, further promoting the inseparability between birthdays and parties.

Firstly, due to the more affluent demographic at Parkside Primary (see Section 5.2.1), the organised, paid-for iteration of a children's birthday party was relatively common amongst the families at Parkside (hosting or attending). As such, staff members did not shy away from it as a topic of conversation with potentially distinguishing effects (families who can afford parties versus those who cannot). This contrasts with national programmes for "poverty proofing" school practices which attempt to remove markers of inequality, such as branded pencil cases (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019, p. 356). From observations of staff-child interactions, it appears that parties are a common thing for staff to ask most children about in relation to their birthdays.

Secondly, the architecture of schools as organising children in classes means that the children often develop friends within the same class or year group. As I observed whilst at Parkside, this resulted in families handing over children's birthday invites – usually a decorative slip of paper – to the class teacher to distribute to their peers who had been invited. The practice of giving invitations represents an integral part of how parties are constructed within the classroom space and will be explored further in the vignette. For now, it is enough to say that these invites enter the classroom via the teacher. As such, when the teacher comes to question the birthday child about their celebrations, they almost unfailingly bring their party into the conversation due to their shared knowledge of the event.

In doing so, a discursive slippage between the two seems to be constructed, where parties and birthdays are almost interchangeable. This intra-acts with the meaning of a 'Parkside-style party' which is relationally produced, placing a specific emphasis on paid-for venues where the Soft Play Shack is continually recognised. These observations represent a series of continual and repeated becomings, moments of unfolding that are patterned (Barad, 2007; Deleuze and Guattari, 2003; Massumi, 2015). Here, it is not birthday parties that are inherent with socioeconomic differences because of paid-for venues, it is their entanglement within classroom intra-activity which results in differential effects. In other words, the (re)production of the Soft Play Shack across the peer culture, the birthday assembly and the discursive slippage between birthdays and parties contributes to a specific construction of a birthday party.

If the teacher did not ask/know about a party, the birthday child would usually bring it up as part of the birthday assembly discussion. I interpret this as illustrative of the affective quality of parties, as exciting, memorable and important as part of young children's journey growing-up (Prout and James, 2015). Again, here I find echoes of the patterns observed around extra-curricular activities, where the affective push of clubs motivates their emergence through authentic animated announcements to peers (see Section 7.2.1). Likewise, the discourse around *first* swimming lessons is perhaps comparable to the cultural emphasis on birthdays replete in the birthday assembly, as children celebrate milestones on their journey to adulthood. Present here, as in developmental psychology, is the discourse that children are "adults-in-the-making" (Thorne, 1993, p. 3) on their way to complete socialisation or cognitive development, adult rationality or mastery of their psychological processes (Prout, 2011; Prout and James, 2015).

The affective capacity of birthdays and parties for children make it a popular topic to theme academic learning around, particularly in younger school years<sup>34</sup>. Indeed, from 13<sup>th</sup> November 2023 for two weeks, "Birthdays" is the themed topic for learning in Reception at Parkside. This meant that all classroom activities and lessons are birthday and party-related:

- the playdough table has a birthday tablecloth and some candles for the children to make playdough birthday cakes;
- the writing table has party invite or birthday card templates on (as in Walking Table and Rapunzel's interaction at the start of this chapter);
- the literacy lessons that week are based on writing birthday party invitations;
- the Home Corner (role play area) has a range of birthday party items such as party hats, party plates and cups;
- and the children can make birthday crowns at the craft table.

These activities are not inherently coterminous with the notion of a paid-for birthday party at a venue, nor is their meaning static or unidirectional (i.e. the children imbue the resources with meaning). Instead, the children relationally construct the meanings of

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.twinkl.co.uk/resources/festivals-and-cultural-celebrations/birthdays/birthdays-party-resources>

physical resources. This in-formed by the materiality of such resources, which I suggest in part (re)produces the specific iteration of the Parkside birthday party as a formalised event to which they invite select friends. In the scene with Walking Table and Rapunzel, they intra-acted with the birthday card templates on the writing table which produced their discussion around hosting parties at the Soft Play Shack. The materiality of the card templates, as the ‘stuff’ of birthdays, in-forms this entanglement. The card templates are agentic *through* their assemblage with the children, in the sense that they co-produced the capacity to change something (Barad, 2007; Fenwick et al., 2015). In this case, in-forming the Parkside-style party.

Similarly, when tidying up the Home Corner during the “Birthdays” week, I found a template for a Party List (see Figure 21). Although the list could have been for anything (an example was completed for food items), this one had been used to list children to attend a party that I observed taking place during exploring time. The materiality of the list – as finite, with boxes that could be tick-able – intra-acted with the discourse of parties to (re)produce the notion of guest selection. Interestingly, I noted that five out of the seven children on the list were children that I had observed discussing party invites or using parties to strengthen their friendships (by offering invites). As I will discuss in the vignette, inviting friends to a party can intra-act with the cost of hosting parties (particularly at paid-for venues) among other things, creating a sense of competition and in/exclusion over who can attend parties.



Figure 21. 'Party List' with children's names written on it (anonymised)

Alongside invitations and decorative tableware in the classroom, there were a range of classroom books available for the children specifically tailored to the “Birthdays” classroom theme. Based around birthdays as they were, many of the narratives focused on parties; again, this perhaps underscores further the discursive blurring between birthdays and parties. For example, Rapunzel asked me if I would read “Peppa Pig: The Fancy Dress Party” (Ladybird, 2016) with her. The narrative centres around Peppa who is having a fancy dress party. Her parents (Mummy Pig and Daddy Pig) organise a party at their house to which “All their friends are invited” (Ladybird, 2016, p. 1). As can be seen in Figure 22, Peppa wears a “fairy princess” outfit whilst her brother George wears a “dinosaur” costume (Ladybird, 2016, p. 2).

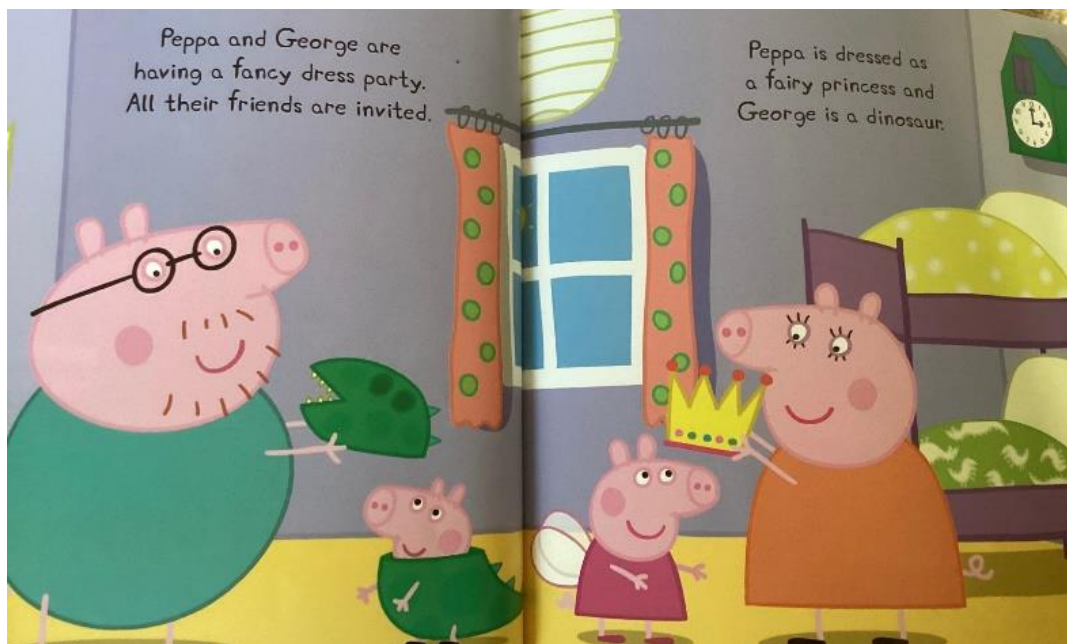


Figure 22. The first two pages from "Peppa Pig: The Fancy Dress Party" (Ladybird, 2016)

In terms of parties, the book implicitly draws on the notion of (heteronormative) families who have the availability and money to host a children's party. Whilst they host it at home (not a paid-for venue), Peppa and George can invite "all their friends" (Ladybird, 2016, p. 2) that – from the illustrations – amounts to seven which their house comfortably accommodates. Hackley (2017) explains that the Peppa Pig franchise, which also includes TV programmes, films, toys, games, children's clothes and even a theme park, has been critiqued for perpetuating Western, British middle class, heteronormative and patriarchal storylines. Davies and Saltmarsh (2007) warn that the



“pedagogic move toward the popular” (p. 15) binds commercial to pedagogic resources. This means that discourses within the market that maintain (gender) stereotypes (like Peppa Pig) “have already become part of the fabric of what it means to be gendered and literate” (Davies and Saltmarsh, 2007, p. 15).

Although only one book is discussed here, the other birthday books in the reading area also drew on defining features which I saw echoes of in the classroom resources set out, the children’s drawings (see Figure 23), play and discussions. In addition to inviting friends, the books defined parties as having cakes, gifts, party clothes, presents, balloons, and decorations; perhaps all of which have economic implications (discussed further in Section 7.3.4). The discursive blurring between birthdays/parties is further reinforced by the classroom vocabulary wall<sup>35</sup> for the “Birthdays” themed week which displays the words: year, balloons, invitations, banner, party, decoration. Thus, at Parkside, it appears that in representing birthdays through material resources it becomes intrinsically interwoven with parties, possibly a byproduct of the abstract and non-material nature of birthdays as the passing of each year since birth.



*Figure 23. A picture drawn by Belle at the writing table in exploring time, during one of the Birthday themed weeks at Parkside [9th November 2023].*

During one of the “Birthdays” weeks, the children watched an episode of Topsy and Tim (Williams and Justin, 2014), a BBC programme adapted from a series of popular children’s books. The episode, titled “Birthday Party” (Series 2, Episode 28, Williams

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<sup>35</sup> This display lists the key vocabulary that will be explicitly taught with each topic.



and Justin, 2014), presents a similar narrative to the Peppa Pig book. Topsy and Tim are twins who are celebrating their fifth birthday. Their (heteronormative) parents surprise the twins with a large, wooden playhouse in the garden as their birthday present, and a surprise party. Around fifteen children arrive at their house, where all the children play games and then eat a meal together. The parents surprise the twins with an elaborate, two-tier “dino-butterfly” (Williams and Justin, 2014) birthday cake; the girl, Topsy, blows out the butterfly side and the boy, Tim, blows out the dinosaur side.

Whilst I do not wish to suggest that children are passive cultural consumers (Buckingham, 2000; Steinberg, 2011), these resources illustrate some of the classroom material that interweaves with the unfolding of parties within the Parkside peer culture. The literary material available appears to echo the idea of parties as synonymous with birthdays, in that to celebrate a birthday is to have a party. These parties appear to be constructed as economically unproblematic with large houses big enough to accommodate groups, parents who are able to financially afford and spend time planning and hosting them, and decorative materials or elaborate cakes.

What’s more, the theming of parties (as in the examples above) are illustrative of the gendered ways in which parties can be constructed through resources in the classroom. In the Peppa Pig book, Peppa wore a pink, fairy princess outfit whilst George wore a dinosaur costume, arguably reinforcing stereotypical gendered interests (Hackley, 2017; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022). Likewise, in Topsy and Tim, Topsy’s side of the cake was decorated with butterflies whilst Tim’s was designed with dinosaurs, perhaps further illustrating that how parties can be marketed to differ according to gendered interests. Additionally, there was a choice of party invitation templates at the writing table in the classroom with two distinct themes; one was pink with fairies on it whereas the other was decorated with pirates. Whilst the children were allowed to ‘decide’ between the two, the majority of children identifying as girls opted for the fairy template whilst the same was true for boys choosing the pirate template. Taken together, I interpreted this as an entangling of birthdays-parties-classroom-learning through which parties come to matter in the Parkside peer culture in gendered ways. As Davies and Saltmarsh (2007) point out, this entwines gender binaries with what it means to be “gendered and literate” (p. 15).

Through these assemblages, I have attempted to lay out the jumble of spatial factors, material-discursive understandings, classroom practices and resources that relationally construct what it means to party 'Parkside-style'. I interpret the pervasiveness of the Soft Play Shack in the children's peer culture as illustrative of its popularity creating a cycle of (re)production as a (desirable) birthday party norm in the classroom. This interweaves with the spatio-temporal distance between parties and school, parties-Soft-Play-Shack-excitement-school, through which parties emerge in part verbally in the classroom.

The affective capacity of this understanding of parties is *felt* in the children's excitement; this is capitalised on for academic purposes legitimising parties within the classroom space. Parties come to matter through classroom practices such as the Birthday Assembly and themed learning activities and resources. However, through the materiality of birthdays – that is the 'stuff' that makes up birthdays – a discursive slippage occurs at Parkside which synonymises birthdays with parties. This constitutes a "worlding" (Barad, 2007, p. 181) of the classroom in which birthdays-parties (with a specific meaning) matter.

### 7.3.3 A vignette: The contested space of invitations

In the first section of this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the sociomaterial threads which interweave to produce a specific understanding of birthday parties at Parkside and how this performs agential cuts. With this vignette, I will try to further illustrate how I observed this understanding as produced by – and productive of – differential effects between peers, which are threaded through with affect.

#### 7.3.3.1 *To be invited: parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations*

*As the school day approaches home time, the children get ready to leave. They are sat in their carpet spaces in the classroom, watching a video whilst the adults are handing out pictures and letters from "the Going Home Box". With the adults focused on other tasks, the children are chattering happily on the carpet, comparing personal items such as key rings on their book bags. One of the teachers pulls out a birthday invite from the Going Home Box and gives it to Elsa. The teacher explains to Elsa that the invites were given out yesterday but as she was not at school, she is receiving hers today. This explanation appears to attract the attention of a few children on the carpet.*

*Elsa reaches her hand out in earnest, raising off the floor from her sitting position onto her knees towards the teacher and grabs the invite avidly. She hurriedly sits back down in her carpet space with the invite cradled in her lap and her head bent over it, trying to decipher what it says. Next to Elsa, Unicorn (who received an invite yesterday) leans over and explains that it's another child's party invite. Ariel and two other children lean in too, gathering round Elsa despite having received invites themselves the day before. This makes quite the crowd with five of them huddled around an A5 slip of paper.*

*One of them seems to know or have read on the invite that the party is at the Soft Play Shack and announces this accordingly. With the Shack's mention, the children make dramatic shocked faces at each other, their mouths hanging open in an 'O' shape. The girls then lower their voices. Although it's difficult to overhear, they appear to be discussing the Soft Play Shack, sharing what they know about the venue and commenting on who has been there before. They establish that everyone in the class has been invited to this child's party which seems to further the excitement, perhaps because they can all share in this event.*

*The adults finish handing out the contents of the Going Home Box and call for the children's attention ready to go to the cloakroom for home time, bringing an abrupt end to the girls' conversation. The girls turn their heads towards the teacher to listen. Elsa clutches her invite in her hand, glancing down at it next to her book bag.*

[Vignette expanded from fieldnotes, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023]

In this parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations scene, it is possible to see how the two entanglements already outlined are interwoven within it, coming again but through a different moment. The parties-Soft-Play-Shack-excitement-school tangle is enfolded as part of the affective quality of the invitation received in this scene, also noted elsewhere in the literature (see Section 2.5.2.2). Additionally, the classroom organisation of “the Going Home Box” that forefronts parties echoes the “worlding” (Barad, 2007, p. 181) of the classroom discussed in birthdays-parties-classroom-learning assemblage. Specifically, it is the classroom practice of “the Going Home Box” which I suggest intra-acts with the materiality of a physical birthday invitations to in-form how parties come to matter in this moment at Parkside.

The classroom practice of giving out the contents of “the Going Home Box” happens at the end of each day in both classrooms, when the children are sitting in on the carpet usually watching a short video. Similar to the one in Figure 24 (Galleon, n.d), the birthday invitation for Elsa is already in the Going Home Box, leftover from the pile that was handed out previously (when Elsa was absent). Throughout the day, the children can put any work they would like to take home into the Going Home Box to be stored until home time. This box is a large red plastic container which is accessible through the day outside the classroom door on the floor (labelled S on the classroom map, Figure 8 Section 5.2.2).



*Figure 24. A birthday party invitation similar to the one handed out for a birthday party at Parkside.*

Although the children are watching a video, they often appear keen to receive what the adults hand out from the box. Like Elsa in the scene above, I observed children kneeling up from their sitting position to allow them to reach for the offered item, stretching out their arms, curiosity in their eyes as they crane their necks to look. In contrast, when newsletters are handed out, the children may not take their eyes off the screen, allowing the staff member to drop the paper into their lap rather than reaching out for it. The nature of this classroom practice – giving out individual items whilst the children are sat together on the carpet – forefronts the contents of the Going Home Box. This is in the

somewhat public arena of the carpet, where the children are sat close together and can observe the different items being handed out, including party invitations.

Here, it is useful to diffract the spatial organisation of snack-time (Section 6.2.1) where the children also sit on the carpet. Likewise, in this parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations entanglement, it is through the spatio-temporal organisation of the Going Home Box practice that I came to observe the materiality of parties in the form of invitations. Just like the water bottles, these physical slips of paper are foregrounded in this classroom practice; they are not just part of the backdrop of these moments, but integral in shaping them, “invading” them (Willis, 2018, p. 582).

As are the classroom resources, invitations constitute the ‘stuff’ of birthdays; they bring parties that occur at a spatio-temporal distance to the school, into the classroom. I contend that the materiality of these paper invites contributes to the mattering of parties in the classroom. Their function – inviting a child to a party – endows them with an affective capacity for each child, confirming that they are invited to an exciting event. Their tangibility brings credibility in that, whilst children may offer verbal invites to their parties elsewhere, these do not hold the same authenticity as a ‘real’ invite. Likewise, their specificity – literally marked with the name of a particular child – constructs them as in/exclusive in that (unless all children are invited) they are only given to certain children (Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011). In the scene above, I interpret the affective force of this invite through Elsa’s reaction – her head bent over the paper – and the interest of her friends as they lean in (despite all having received their own invite the day before).

I observed this parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations entanglement on different occasions, each culminating in similar reactions. On 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023, Elsa’s party invitations were handed out during the same Going Home Box classroom routine. Although the teacher did not announce what they were, the children who received them flapped their hands excitedly and admired the sparkly stickers which were used to seal the envelopes. I observed Elsa lean over to the children she had invited to proudly explain that everyone has a different sticker to seal their invite. Similarly, on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024, some decorative unicorn-themed invitations were handed out to invite

children to Ariel and Unicorn's birthday party. The children who received them were immediately excited, clutching them tightly and shaking them at their nearby friends in recognition across the carpet. In a similar way to water bottles, the ability of the invitations to be personalised to the interests of the birthday child, such as favourite animals or characters, perhaps contributes to the affective quality of parties and their attraction for children (Pilcher, 2011; Stockstill, 2021); sometimes in overtly gendered ways (Davies and Saltmarsh, 2007; Leader, 2018; Wohlwend, 2009).

Thus, I suggest that party invitations are affective for children as part of their intra-action with the classroom routine of the Going Home Box in which children are sat in close proximity with their peers. Yet in the scene above, parties come to matter *through* affect; we see the popularity of the Soft Play Shack (Section 7.3.1) enfolded within this moment. The girls' reaction to hearing that the child's party is at the Soft Play Shack prompts faces of mock shock as they enthusiastically discuss memories of attending parties there.

As previously discussed, this is illustrative of how children bring this specific soft play venue into being in a way that constructs it as distinctive amongst their peers. The affective force of the Soft Play Shack in this scene is arguably interwoven with other moments in which it is constructed as desirable, for example by Walking Table at the outset of this chapter. This recognition in turn produces its continued popularity. Such entanglements (re)produce the conditions for the Soft Play Shack's continued (re)emergence: the name holds an affective force which brings parties into being in a way that constructs certain venues as mattering. Ergo, the Soft Play Shack has the conditions in which to be affective – party venues matter at Parkside.

### *7.3.3.2 To invite: parties-host-invite-friends*

The affective quality that permeates the act of receiving a party invitation is part of a reciprocal relationship with the status of the child who is able to give these invitations. At Parkside, to be invited is an enviable position, henceforth so too is the power to invite. This affective dynamic re-appears through a series of moments I observed, where being able to invite friends to a birthday party is used to produce power delineations.

*As part of the going home routine, Class 1 are sat in the cloakroom with their belongings waiting for their parents/guardians to arrive to collect them. The children who are attending the after-school club sit on one of the benches opposite the children who are going home, waiting to be collected by another member of staff and taken to a different classroom. With the focus on the parents/guardians arriving to collect the children, the children who are waiting to go to the after-school club are less overlooked by the members of staff who are preoccupied readying the other children to leave. I usually sit with them on this bench.*

*I overhear Elsa chatting to Belle. They are sitting next to each other and Belle has one hand on Elsa's back, stroking up and down affectionately. It seems that they're chatting about birthdays and Elsa is explaining to Belle that she will be having a party in the coming weeks. Elsa describes where her party will be (at a local restaurant) and other arrangements like the fact she will have party bags.*

*Belle appears taken in by Elsa's description and asks whether she will be able to go. Elsa continues enthusiastically talking about the details of her party and appears to ignore Belle's question. It's unlikely that Elsa hasn't heard Belle because they are sat right next to each other and Belle is still stroking Elsa's back. Belle asks again, slightly louder and a little more quickly, with a little more anxiety in her tone. Elsa again does not answer Belle's question as to whether she is invited.*

*Following this, Belle seems slightly rejected. She stops stroking Elsa's back, leans over to me with a neutral expression and puts her head on my arm, as if seeking comfort.*

[Fieldnotes, 24<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

Revisiting this scene, I remember Belle's rejection when she failed to receive some confirmation that she would be invited to Elsa's party. Contra to the excitement of receiving an invite, Belle's reaction perhaps illustrates how these moments can be characterised by uncertainty and rejection, demonstrating the antagonistic 'other' of positive affect. This echoes Kustatscher's (2015) presentation of birthday invitations as "currency" (Kustatscher, 2015, p. 178) for children to barter friendships. Two days later, an interaction with Elsa furthered my entanglement with her birthday party:

*In the morning, I am helping the children to hang up their coats when Elsa arrives. From across the cloakroom, I see her mum handing the class teacher a pile of envelopes as Elsa looks on excitedly. The teacher then walks over to me with the pile of envelopes. She explains that they are birthday invitations for Elsa's party and asks if I can put them on her desk in the classroom (as she is busy welcoming children). I oblige and take the pile of envelopes into the classroom. They are all named and decorated with pink flowers, sparkles and butterflies and each envelope is sealed with a different sparkly sticker.*

*Later that morning during exploring time, Elsa comes over to me and announces proudly:*

*Elsa: I've got birthday cards ... on (the teacher's<sup>36</sup>) desk ... but I can't invite everyone because we're going to a café and we'll see if these people can come but if not, we'll invite some other people*

*I smile and admit that that sounds exciting. Elsa, apparently satisfied, runs off to play.*

[Fieldnotes, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2023]

Elsa's birthday party – although temporally in the future – enters the classroom in a material way that matters as this moment unfolds “in the middle of the thickness of the actual present with all its multiplicities” (Lenz Taguchi, 2009, p. 61). I suggest that this is through her physical invitations that arrive at school through the legitimacy of the teacher, who facilitates their distribution at the end of the school day. Indeed, as described above, these invites were handed out to great excitement amongst the recipients in the parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations assemblage. Their desirability (for both the host and recipients) may be in part constructed by their overtly gendered presentation – pink flowers, sparkles and butterflies – which reflect Elsa's interests. Like Unicorn (and Ariel's) unicorn-themed invites, this gendered presentation that reflects children's interests resounds with the commercialisation of water bottles (see Section 6.2.3).

Elsa proudly informs me about her invitations, again perhaps demonstrating the affective quality of being the host of a party or her desire to share this information with me specifically. However, this is qualified with her explanation that she had to limit who she invited, stating matter-of-factly “but I can't invite everyone”. Her reasoning is that they are going to a “café”. I interpret this as the limiting factor possibly due to space at the venue or due to the increased costs of inviting lots of guests. In this announcement, I find it interesting that Elsa switches between the pronouns “I” and “we”. Whilst she states that she (“I”) cannot invite everyone, she explains that if some people are unable to come then “we'll invite some other people”. This may be indicative of an intra-action between children's (facilitated) agency to invite who they choose – their friends – and

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<sup>36</sup> The teacher's name that Elsa used has been anonymised.



the guidance and limits imposed (presumably) by their parents/guardians who are organising the party (echoed in observations also noted by Pugh, 2011).

As part of involving children in the ongoing interpretation of findings (see Section 4.2.2), some children explained to me the circumstances around which invitees are chosen for birthday parties. For example, Walking Table clarified that it was his mum who contacted other parents to invite his friends to his birthday party. This highlights the adult-mediated nature of birthday parties for children at Parkside, and indeed in general. Like enrichment activities, children must negotiate their access to parties through their parents or guardians, often in agreement with other contextual factors such as financial and time limitations. This is echoed in research by Ridge (2011) and Mazzoli Smith and Todd (2019) where children in poverty describe how their experiences are intertwined with considerations about, and negotiations with, their families' circumstances.

As Elsa explains above, she “can’t invite everyone” which I infer is a limit imposed by her family, rather than a choice of her own. As part of a daily interpretation session<sup>37</sup>, I asked Elsa, Unicorn, Belle, Sheep and Rainbow to tell me more about parties, through which I learned more about Elsa’s, Unicorn’s and another child’s parties:

*00:10 TP: OK, so I'm here with (Unicorn) and (Belle) and (Elsa) and (Sheep) and (Rainbow) and I wanted to ask you a little bit about parties, so I've seen that sometimes...you do parties in the role play area.*

*00:26 Elsa: It's...It's nearly my party...and it's on the weekend but my birthday is on Wednesday*

*Unicorn is distracted by the fidget toys in the background. She begins handing them out to the other children.*

*00:34 TP: Oh I see. And what's happening with your party then?*

*00:36 Elsa: I'm having a butterfly party*

*00:41 TP: Oooh. And do you know about parties too (Belle)?*

*00:44 Belle: Yes. Um...I've...already been to a party*

*00:48 Elsa: Um, well, she is invited to my party*

*00:52 TP: So do you invite everybody to your party?*

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<sup>37</sup> The following transcript is separated into chronological sections so that it can be interspersed with explanatory notes.

*00:58 Elsa: Not everybody because we've already got 17 people that have said yes*

*Unicorn continues chattering about the fidget toys with Sheep and Rainbow.*

[Extract from a transcript of a daily interpretation session with Elsa, Unicorn, Belle, Sheep and Rainbow, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023]

In this opening excerpt, although I ask about parties in the role play area, Elsa immediately steers the conversation to her upcoming party. From the previous observations described, I infer that this is an important and exciting event for her, for example, by her description to Belle [Fieldnotes, 24th October 2023] or when she announces the arrival of her invites to me [Fieldnotes, 26th October 2023]. I am aware that her party will be at a “café” [Fieldnotes, 24th October 2023] but when I ask what will happen at her party (00:34), she forefronts it as a “butterfly party” (00:36). This is reminiscent of the resources in the classroom (see Section 7.3.2) through which parties come to matter in gendered ways (Blaise, 2014). The conversation continues and Unicorn makes an announcement:

*01:04 TP: OK, so you can't invite everybody (Elsa), but you just invite some people?*

*01:08 Elsa: Yes*

*01:13 Unicorn: [loudly with pride] UMM, you know, if I don't have my party at Wiggly Worms<sup>38</sup> I can have 20 people at my birthday party*

*01:23 TP: Oh I see...And what do you do then if you want to...[the other girls interrupt me]*

*Unicorn has suddenly become the focus of the group given her announcement about the spots available at her party. She appears to enjoy the attention, with a wry smile on her face, and agrees to invite the questioning girls by nodding when they ask “even me?”.*

*01:24 Other children interrupting/overlapping: Even me*

*01:24 Belle: And for me?*

*01:25 Elsa: And for me (Unicorn)?*

*01:26 Belle: Even me?*

*01:27 Sheep: Even me?...Even me?*

*01:28 Rainbow: Even for me?*

*01:29 Unicorn: Ummmmmm...yes [a little exasperatedly now]...*

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<sup>38</sup> A pseudonym for another soft play venue within driving distance from the school.

*01:30 Elsa: [interrupting again] even me (Unicorn)?*

*01:31 Unicorn: ...iiiiif I don't have my birthday at (Wiggly Worms)*

*01:32 Belle: [trying to get her attention] (Unicorn)! (Unicorn)!*

*01:32 Elsa: Um...(Unicorn, Unicorn)...*

*01:32 Belle: (Unicorn) am I coming?*

[Extract from a transcript of a daily interpretation session with Elsa, Unicorn, Belle, Sheep and Rainbow, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023]

Despite being fairly distracted by the nearby fidget toys until this point, Unicorn proudly proclaims the conditions for her party: that if she does *not* have it at Wiggly Worms, she will be able to invite 20 people (presumably more than if she were to host it at Wiggly Worms). I note that this is also higher than the 17 people Elsa specified, although it is not clear whether this is what motivated Unicorn's announcement. Whilst I had planned to explore the trade-off between venues that Unicorn had alluded to (01:23), the rest of the group had other plans, and I was drowned out by a flurry of questions in which the children enquired as to whether they were invited to Unicorn's (speculative) party (01:24 onwards).

This intense questioning continues as each child tries to get their individual assurance as to whether they will be invited, to the eventual exasperation of Unicorn (01:29). Whilst Unicorn appears to confirm their invitation(s) (01:29), it is not clear if this applies to them all as she clarifies that this will only stand if she does not have her party at Wiggly Worms (01:31). The children's repetitive questioning is replete with an increasing sense of desperation as they struggle to confirm their individual verbal invite, echoing Belle's questioning of Elsa about her party [Fieldnotes, 24th October 2023]. Harnessing the affective force of parties, Unicorn appears to be in control of the agential cuts that are performed in this scene as the children attempt to (re)form the separation to include themselves (as a confirmed invitee).

*01:34 TP: And what about you, (Sheep) and (Rainbow)? Do you like parties?*

*In the background Unicorn and Elsa continue their conversation:*

*01:34 Unicorn: Well I'm also invited to (Name)'s party...are you invited to (Name)'s party?*

*01:39 Belle: [triumphantly] yes!*

*01:40 Elsa: I am!*

*01:42 Belle: [surprised] What...all of us?...Even (Elsa)?*

*01:47 Unicorn: [confirms]*

[Extract from a transcript of a daily interpretation session with Elsa, Unicorn, Belle, Sheep and Rainbow, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023]

Interestingly, I did not hear the interaction between Unicorn, Belle and Else in the initial session, as I was talking to Sheep and Rainbow. Instead, when I was transcribing the audio file after school, I could hear it in the background of my conversation with Sheep and Rainbow. Unicorn does not answer Belle's final attempt to confirm her invite to Unicorn's party (01:32), instead steering the conversation to another child's party (01:34). Here, Unicorn appears to be performing a new set of agential cuts around children who are invited to this other child's party (which includes herself) by asking Belle and Elsa (01:34). Their enthusiastic responses (01:39/01:40) are in marked contrast to the anxious questioning about Unicorn's party only 15-seconds earlier (01:24).

Both sets of interactions (the girls' questioning versus their enthusiastic responses) illustrate the contested space of party invitations at Parkside Primary. There is the positive affect associated with receiving invitations on the one hand, contrasted with that which it excludes (those not invited) - "the constitutive outside" (Barad, 2007, p. 64). As such, those who have the capacity to decide on who these agential cuts include, i.e. who is invited to their party, are produced as powerful within the peer culture at Parkside, hosts such as Elsa and Unicorn. In her ethnography with nursery-aged children, Lyttleton-Smith (2019a) similarly observed the persuasiveness of party exclusion when a girl, pseudonymised as Katie, would not share some toy flowers with her peer, Chloe. Chloe angrily tells Katie "you're not going to come to my party" (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019, p. 228) to which Katie responds by sharing the flowers with Chloe. Lyttleton-Smith (2019a) reflects on how Chloe "achieves her goal by threatening to shut Katie out of her own zone of social privilege – her party" (p. 229).

As presented in Section 2.5.2.2, Kustatscher (2015) also notes how birthday parties/invitations can be used to influence children's friendships in her school ethnography with 5–7-year-olds. She describes parties as a "currency" (Kustatscher, 2015, p. 178), reflecting on how one child scrutinised the appearance of peers in her

class with the implication that it will inform her decision whether to invite them to her birthday party (p. 181). Kustatscher concluded that

[b]irthday parties ... where the birthday boy/girl invites a *limited number* of children, bring powerful popularity to those who hand out the invitations. The act of publicly (not) inviting is used by some children to make their relationships, inclusive or exclusive, visible. (Kustatscher, 2015, p. 186, my emphasis)

As suggested earlier, this limited number of invitees is integral to the contested space of invitations as described by Elsa (“I can’t invite everyone”) and Unicorn (“if I don’t have my party at Wiggly Worms I can have 20 people”). As Kustatscher (2015) suggests, this emphasises how children’s home lives are intrinsically woven with their friendships at school, particularly in terms of the involvement of their parents/guardians, as well as negotiating financial circumstances (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019; Ridge, 2011). Parties are not intrinsically exclusionary or inherently classed. However, the way children relationally construct meaning around parties at Parkside results in an exclusionary effect through invitations which – as I will explain in the following section – may be rooted in socioeconomic differences.

#### 7.3.4 Revisiting the research questions

1. What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?

Throughout this chapter, I have re-presented four entanglements through which I believe a specific type of party came to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary; that of the paid-for venue with physical invitations given out in class. Firstly, in the parties-Soft-Play-Shack-excitement-school assemblage, the affective force of the Soft Play Shack operates at a spatio-temporal distance to the classroom, coming to matter through children’s verbal interactions. Through its brand name, the Soft Play Shack is brought into being through moments unfolding in the classroom, enabling it to be geographically located as well as differentiated from other venues (Elliott and Leonard, 2004; Pugh, 2011). Agential cuts are formed *through affect*, separating the Soft Play Shack as distinctive and constituting the conditions through which it can

further be affective. By being a venue that matters, the Soft Play Shack brings parties into being in such a way that their locations matter.

In the second entanglement, birthdays-parties-classroom-learning, I discuss the classroom legitimacy which accompanies the mattering of parties in the classroom at Parkside. Through the practice of the birthday assembly, I consider the “worlding” (Barad, 2007, p. 181) of the classroom space in which parties come to matter. The prevalence of birthday parties at Parkside underscores their unproblematic integration into the classroom space, ultimately contributing to a discursive slippage between birthdays and parties. This synonymous blurring between the two is reinforced across classroom resources where parties – as the material ‘stuff’ of birthdays – are used to theme learning activities. The meaning of these physical resources is relationally produced by the children in intra-action with the wider classroom environment, bringing to the fore further understandings about Parkside-style parties. For example, the personalised – and often gendered – ways in which parties unfold in the classroom or the in/exclusive nature of invitations.

Through the vignette, two further entanglements are used to explore the contested space of invitations: parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations and parties-host-invite-friends. The parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations tangle demonstrates how the classroom practice of “the Going Home Box” forefronts invitations as mattering, as the physical ‘stuff’ of birthdays/parties. These invitations are individual – given to specific children – as well as a tangible and credible guarantee of a future party experience, demonstrating how their materiality in-forms their material-discursive becoming. The function of an invite, to ask a friend to attend a location (be it paid-for or otherwise) further foregrounds venues as mattering, creating the conditions for the Soft Play Shack to (re)emerge. Thus, invitations emerge *through affect*, producing agential cuts for those who receive invites (versus those who do not) as well as branded venues like the Soft Play Shack.

Finally, these previous entanglements are enfolded within the parties-host-invite-friends assemblage, which shows how party hosts can capitalise on the obverse of the affective reception to party invitations (Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011). The desirability of being invited is illustrated in Belle’s anxious questioning of Elsa, as well as the dynamics

prompted by Unicorn's announcement about her upcoming party (see also Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a). This affective force is symbiotic with the antagonistic anxiety that counterbalances the excitement which comes with receiving an invite. This assemblage is underscored further by the competition associated with the limited number of spaces at parties, possibly a byproduct of paid-for venues (see also Kustatscher, 2015).

## 2. In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

I have explored how these classroom moments are enabled by the affective capacity of parties for children in the peer culture at Parkside Primary. In the moments re-presented here, it is the Parkside-style party – as occurring at a paid-for venue such as the Soft Play Shack – as well as their hosts that appear to be distinguished from that which they exclude (Barad, 2007). Parties are also affective as they offer a vehicle through which children can express their individual interests via consumerism (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Iqbal et al., 2017; Pilcher, 2011; Steinberg, 2011; Stockstill, 2021), often in gendered ways (Hackley, 2017; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022). Such factors are reflected and reinforced through classroom resources and practices which collapse the distinction between birthdays and parties, allowing the popularity of the Parkside-style party to gain traction as unproblematic in the classroom space. These intra-actions produce power differentials for peers whereby hosts (and to a lesser extent, their attendees) can influence relationships between children in the class (see also Kustatscher, 2015; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a).

Like with children's water bottles (see Section 6.2.3), the affective register of parties informs the classroom practices observed, such as the birthday assembly or the way children use invitations to in/exclude others. In doing so, these practices also (re)produce the conditions through which parties can continue to be affective. For example, because parties are exciting (affective) they are talked about in the Birthday Assembly, and talking about parties in the assembly (re)produces them as affective; they have a space to be celebrated which makes them exciting. Likewise, parties' affective force means that children are able to successfully use invitations to influence friendships. In using invitations to in/exclude, parties are (re)produced as competitive and ultimately affective. As such, parties are an "ontopower" (Massumi, 2015, p. 110) as

they have “become-immanent” (p. 108) in the classroom space by “hijack[ing] affect” (p. 20) to (re)produce the conditions for their (re)emergence (see Section 3.4.4). These entanglements produce exclusionary power relations that advantage those children who are able to host (and less so, attend) parties at paid-for venues, notably the Soft Play Shack (also noted in the literature presented in Section 2.5.3.2).

Being able to host a party Parkside-style is arguably a position that is unavoidably linked with children and their families’ economic circumstances. In a poll of 2,104 British families with children aged between 4–10-years-old, 65% reported throwing a birthday party for their child every year, spending an average of £320.50 on the party and a further £175.80 on presents (vouchercloud, 2018). Indeed globally, children’s parties are suggested to be an industry worth an estimated \$12.9 billion (USD) in 2024, predicted to rise to \$23.6bn (USD) by 2033 (IMARC group, 2024).

A party at the Soft Play Shack, for example, is advertised on their website as ranging between £5.50 – £10 per child; the lower price includes admission only whereas the higher price includes food and party bags in addition to admission. To take the example further: As Elsa told me that all the children in the class were invited to a party at the Soft Play Shack and Sheep told me that there was party food there [Fieldnotes, 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023], the cost of this party would have been approximately £220. Likewise, the cost of other venues is similar: the restaurant mentioned by Elsa cites a figure of £215 for the hire of their space and food, and the Wiggly Worms soft play venue mentioned by Unicorn is £11 per child for admission and food. Taken together, these figures illustrate the considerable price tag that is associated with the Parkside-style party which is popular in the peer culture.

Of course, children’s birthdays do not have to be at paid-for venues, they may also be hosted at children’s homes. Whilst perhaps less expensive than a hired venue, parties at home still rely on sufficient space and the financial means to provide food/games/cake for guests, norms which are (re)produced in some of the classroom resources (Section 7.3.2). Nevertheless, as this chapter demonstrates, it is the configuration of parties at paid-for venues, notably the Soft Play Shack, which are productive of agential cuts *over and above other parties*. This is enfolded with the



concomitant power produced for party hosts, as having the capacity to include or exclude their peers from such experiences.

Indeed, it is not 'birthday parties' that are inherently indicative of socioeconomic distinctions; it is their tangling in intra-activity which results in effects which separate, such as the distinction provided by the Soft Play Shack. It is affect within these assemblages that produces "material capacities and incapacities" (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 511), tangling to create the conditions to be noticed by the parties that individuals host. Thus, the sociomaterial threads that enable the mattering of parties – such as the Going Home Box, the classroom resources and the discursive inseparability of birthdays-parties – are as much the producers of agential cuts between children as the parties themselves.

As shown, parties emerge in ways that are themed to children's interests: fairy or pirate invitation templates for literacy; Peppa and George's fancy dress party outfits; Topsy and Tim's "dino-butterfly" cake; Elsa's pink, sparkly invitations for her "butterfly party"; and Unicorn and Ariel's unicorn-styled invitations. This is intensified by the proliferation of children's brands, from classroom resources to clothing and entertainment (R. Butler, 2019; Hackley, 2017; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022). As Edwards (2014) points out, the saturation of consumerism around children's brands means that a child who interacts with the Peppa Pig brand as a story may ask for a Peppa Pig themed birthday party.

Personalised items – in this case, invitations or themed parties – can be seen as a way for children to construct their identity through their interests, or to connect with peers (R. Butler, 2019; Iqbal et al., 2017; Pugh, 2011; Rose, 1999; Stockstill, 2021); see also Sections 2.2.2 and 2.3.2.3. However, as discussed in Section 2.3.2.3, this is a posthuman performativity not open to all children in the same way, as more affluent children have the means through which to host a party, and moreover to 'style' it in a certain way through consumption (Earwaker, 2022; Pugh, 2011). Thus, like Skeggs (2012), I contend that there is a material aspect to the (re)production of class, as they are constructed *in negotiation with* material resources, specifically through children's brands and associated consumerism (see Section 3.2.1.3).

Such branding can unfold in gendered ways (Blaise, 2014; Davies and Saltmarsh, 2007). This is perhaps concerning, given the link with consumer industries, particularly where brands may (re)produce restrictive and repetitive heteronormative stereotypes (Hackley, 2017; Kline, 1993; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022). In particular, the blurring of pedagogic and commercial enterprises – Peppa Pig books in the classroom or fairy/pirate invitation templates for literacy – (re)produce a potentially problematic, capitalist iteration “of what it means to be gendered and literate” (Davies and Saltmarsh, 2007, p. 15). Following Skeggs (2012), I would add that ‘what it means to be gendered and literate’ is in negotiation with economic positions, intertwined with consumer industries (see also R. Butler, 2019).

To conclude, throughout this section I have re-presented moments which I consider to demonstrate how a specific type of party comes to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside Primary. Through affect, this Parkside-style party emerges creating agential cuts between the children who are distinguished by hosting parties and in/excluded as an invitee (Kustatscher, 2015; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a; Pugh, 2011). I contend that this unfolding of parties, with notions of distinction and in/exclusion, are indicative of class, as affective economic differences lived out through social and cultural practices (R. Butler, 2019).

## 7.4 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I trace the moments through which enrichment activities and parties come to matter in the classroom peer culture at Parkside. By applying a sociomaterial analysis to the findings, I hope to illustrate how the sociomaterial entanglements that encircle their mattering are an irremovable co-constitutor of these moments, underpinned by commonalities in their (re)construction as *experiences*. Indeed, these labels – enrichment activities and parties – are not static but endlessly (re)produced in relation to the material-discursive, spatial and temporal threads that surround them. This produces specific events-in-information which creates and are created by the children’s peer culture.

As elsewhere, such events are threaded through with affect (Massumi, 2015) resulting in distinctions between certain enrichment activities or parties and the children that are

associated with them; also noted elsewhere in the literature (Section 2.5.2.2). In these moments, the peer culture at Parkside Primary congeals in ways that allow children to be recognised by the enrichment activities they attend and the parties that they host (or attend to a lesser extent). I suggest that this is illustrative of notions of class, where a type of posthuman performativity valued in the classroom is not universally available (Skeggs, 2012). Hence, I conclude that, at Parkside, economic differences *are* translated into an affective register (Colebrook, 2002; Massumi, 2015; Walkerdine, 2017) and have fed back their conditions for (re)emergence (Massumi, 2015, p. 108) into the peer culture. This allows capitalist values (Braidotti, 2011; Walkerdine, 2021; 2021) to become inseparable from the construction of children's lives.

## 8 Chapter Eight: Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

Whilst this thesis has been shaped around two key research questions, many other questions and avenues of thought have been opening and closing around them. Throughout, I have considered these as interweaving threads producing “invitations” (Fox and Alldred, 2022, p. 499). As such, this chapter intends to draw together these threads, knitting them together, making the knots that I have woven explicit and visible in the hope that it will offer a platform for further thought and research. This responds to the metaphor posed by Margaret Walshaw (2007), as outlined in Section 3.4, that “every theory is simply a lens” (p. 1); in this chapter, I think through what my approach to this thesis – my lens – has brought into focus, as well as what perhaps remains just out of focus.

This chapter begins by exploring the collaborative response presented by the findings to the research questions (Section 8.2). This is followed by Section 8.3 which revisits the substantive and theoretical invitations introduced in Section 1.3 and explained through Chapters 2 and 3. By returning to these, this section makes explicit the original contribution to knowledge that this thesis endeavours to make. This chapter then reflects on how this thesis has and will become tangled with other opportunities to produce knowledge, through considering potential implications for children, practitioners, families and the Early Years sector (Section 8.4). As part of this tangling, I address the boundaries (limitations) and further invitations presented by this thesis (Sections 8.4.1 and 8.4.2) before closing the chapter in Section 8.5 with some concluding thoughts.

### 8.2 Responding to the research questions

This section will draw together the findings presented across Chapters 6 and 7 in response to the research questions. To appreciate the level of detail included in these chapters, the research questions were considered immediately in relation to the four “model cases” (Krause, 2021, p. 8), through Sections 6.2.3, 6.3.3, 7.3.4 and 7.2.4.

Indeed, the peculiarities of these events are deliberately not repeated in this concluding chapter. This is an attempt to resist the generalisation so often sought after in positivist research paradigms (Berg and Seeber, 2016; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017); the question of how these matters emerge cannot and should not be easily summarised. It is the finer detail of these micro-moments in their plurality that answers the question of *how* things come to matter. Nevertheless, there are interesting commonalities and comparisons that can be drawn from across the chapters. In this section, I build on these discussions, tangling the threads across the four model cases to consider the collaborative response they offer to each of the research questions in turn.

### 8.2.1 RQ1. What comes to matter in the peer culture at Parkside Primary and how do these matters emerge through material-discursive, spatial and temporal moments in the classroom?

As Chapters 6 and 7 illustrate, through observations and discussions with the children, I suggest aspects of classroom life that come to matter through their daily meshing with children and adults at Parkside. The chapters are organised around four model cases that the analyses rest on: water bottles, wellies, enrichment activities and birthday parties. Whilst I suggest that these four aspects come to matter in the classroom, they are only able to matter through the sociomaterial conditions that make this possible. As the classroom moments re-presented throughout the chapters highlight, the sociomaterial entanglements are as much the producers as the ‘products’ themselves. In this sense then, the sociomaterial conditions related to how the model cases emerge presented throughout each chapter *also matter*.

Perhaps best captured by Deleuze and Guattari’s (2003) quote, these four model cases are “reducible neither to the One nor the multiple” (p. 21); they are entangled with other classroom aspects and it is through this that they come to matter. I represent these “multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2003, p. 21) through the hyphenated section headings across the findings chapters. These headings are deliberately reproduced at length below to highlight how these four model cases do not matter in their singularity, but through tangling with all the other matters in the classroom – ‘each one is several’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 3):

## **Belongings**

### **Water bottles**

- Centre-stage: snack-time-carpet-space-bottles
- A vignette: Friends who drink together
  - The ‘arena of appreciation’: bottle-cloakroom-morning-children
  - Drinking forever: drinking-rules-classroom-bottles-children

### **Wellington boots**

- Wellington boots in Reception: Wildlife-Area-cloakroom-wellies
- A vignette: Negotiating friendships with wellies
  - Desirable footwear: cloakroom-wellies-Frozen-friends
  - Elsa’s solution: cloakroom-wellies-friends-sharing

## **Experiences**

### **Enrichment activities**

- Activities at Parkside: writing-table-activities-children
- Collaborative projects: activities-children-skills-body-confidence
- A vignette: Enrichment activities that distinguish
  - Competition: children-swimming-gymnastics-writing-table-competition

### **Birthday parties**

- Partying Parkside-style: parties-Soft-Play-Shack-excitement-school
- Classroom legitimacy: birthdays-parties-classroom-learning
- A vignette: The contested space of invitations
  - To be invited: parties-Going-Home-Box-invitations
  - To invite: parties-host-invite-friends

Re-presenting the findings in this way not only synthesises them in response to the research question above, but enables a consideration of the collaborative reply they present. In hyphenating their emergence through classroom matters, it is possible to see that the question of “What comes to matter...” is at the same time a question of “how do these matters emerge...”. These four model cases are not static or inherently

invested with meaning or value. As the headings recount, these belongings and experiences are endlessly (re)constructed in relation to the material-discursive, spatial and temporal threads that surround them. This produces specific events-in-information which creates and are created by the children's peer culture. Inspired by R. Butler (2019; see Section 2.2.4), this shows *what* comes to matter at Parkside and under *which* circumstances.

Through the conditions of daily classroom life, I interpret certain belongings and experiences as important to the children at Parkside. The two cases thematically organised as children's belongings, water bottles and wellies, are physical objects in the classroom. Conversely, the cases denoted as experiences, enrichment activities and birthday parties, occur at a distance to the school (both in time and place). Taken together, these two sections can be contrasted to illustrate similarity and difference in how they emerge in the classroom, which I suggest is highlighted through their loose categorisation as a physical belonging or an out-of-school experience.

The physical belongings explored in Chapter 6 emerge in ways that I propose are most notably linked to their immediate materiality in the classroom. The moments re-presented in the chapter emphasise commonalities in their emergence that relate to their ability to be held and physically possessed in certain areas of the classroom. For example, at snack-time (Section 6.2.1), in the cloakroom (Section 6.2.2.1, 6.3.1, 6.3.2.1 and 6.3.2.2) and inside the classroom (Section 6.2.2.2); areas identified in the entanglements listed above. This difference of immediate physicality between belongings and experiences also brings into focus the role of visual appearance in the former. Through their capacity to display branding/recognisable characters, water bottles and wellies come to matter in ways that draw on these aspects, for example, the Disney 'Encanto' water bottle in Section 6.2.2 and the Disney 'Frozen' wellies in Section 6.3.2.

In contrast, the experiences in Chapter 7 arise with an increased emphasis on verbal interactions. Whilst the classroom space still in-forms the experiences re-presented above, notably via the writing table (see Sections 7.2.1 and 7.2.3.1), this is not foregrounded in the same way as belongings because of what I contend is a difference

in their immediate physicality in the classroom. Enrichment activities and birthday parties occur at a spatial and temporal distance to the school producing their (re)construction in the classroom as predominantly verbal. Nevertheless, materiality remains integral to how these experiences emerge at Parkside. This contrasting thematic arrangement of the findings also highlighted the traces of materiality for these experiences in the classroom poking through: for example, through physical bodies acting (Section 7.2.2), classroom resources and books (Section 7.3.2) and party invitations (Section 7.3.3.1).

Indeed, there are themes that echo throughout both chapters, with materiality being at once a point of difference and similarity. Perhaps unsurprisingly because of the location of the fieldwork, I understand the legitimacy of the four model cases in the school and the classroom to constitute another similarity integral across the unfolding of observed moments. By legitimacy, I mean the ways in which these belongings and experiences are integrated into daily classroom life because of their perceived value. For water bottles, this is the discursive health benefits discussed in Section 6.2.1 whereas for wellies, it is their function as necessary equipment for the Wildlife Area (see Section 6.3.1). Similarly, for enrichment activities this relates to their link with child development (see Section 7.2.2) and for birthday parties, this is their integration with classroom resources (see Section 7.3.2).

This theme of legitimacy appears sedimented into the classroom spaces in which physical belongings are allowed according to school rules; water bottles in the classroom versus wellies in the cloakroom. Again, I suggest that this ties with their materiality as objects that can be handled, worn and ultimately, physically possessed. Conversely, I did not observe the same spatial organisation in terms of legitimacy in relation to how enrichment activities and birthday parties emerge. Whilst the writing table was integral for enrichment activities, I link this to their unfolding through verbal interactions, rather than their legitimacy in certain classroom spaces.

A final collaborative response to the question of how these four model cases came to matter, indeed how they emerged in the classroom, is their involvement in the circular dynamics of power at Parkside. As outlined in Section 3.4.2.5, I consider power to be an



*outcome* of intra-action, a consequence of these entanglements (Barad, 2007; Tembo, 2022). Initially, discussing an outcome seems to be at odds with the question of *how* these model cases come to matter in the classroom. However, as we can only ever be in the middle of things, *in media res* (Latour, 2005, p. 206) (see Section 3.4.2.4), power – past, present and future – is already circulating in the moments that unfold in the classroom at Parkside. Indeed, the vignettes across the four model cases attempt to illustrate the productive and repressive roles that power plays in what matters, and how these emerge through classroom events.

Throughout, this appears to be events enfolding back onto each other. For example, in the “Friends who drink together” vignette, the power produced by the intra-action of the ‘Encanto’ water bottle in the classroom is drawn into two moments that unfold to produce further power delineations between the children involved. Similar dynamics are at play for certain types of wellies in the “Negotiating friendships with wellies” vignette. Likewise, for enrichment activities, the desirability of swimming and ballet invests these enrichment activities with power and in “The contested space of invitations”, it is parties that enable power to be exercised. Like the sociomaterial conditions that give rise to *what* matters, these power differentials motivate *how* these events emerge in the classroom at Parkside.

### 8.2.2 RQ2. In what ways do these matters (re)construct social class?

As explored in Sections 6.2.3, 6.3.3, 7.2.4 and 7.3.4, I propose that these matters *do* (re)construct social class through their unfolding in daily classroom life. In this thesis, I consider social class as a performative ‘doing’ (see Section 3.5) (Barad, 2007; R. Butler, 1996), practices that are economically rooted but *lived out through symbolic and cultural social experiences* (R. Butler, 2019). As such, through Chapters 6 and 7, I link the four model cases to their economic roots which are lived out through (affective) micro-moments between peers in the classroom. In a similar way to the responses presented to the first research question, the loose thematic partition between belongings and experiences offers a useful lens through which to consider how these matters (re)construct social class.

For water bottles and wellies – personal belongings allowed in the school – their immediate physicality is again entwined with how they emerge in the classroom, this time in relation to how class is constructed. In both cases, it is their visual branding with characters aimed at children that play into neoliberal principles of self-expression and capitalist ideals of consumerism introduced in Section 1.1 (Braidotti, 2011; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Steinberg, 2011; Walkerdine et al., 2001). For example, their decoration with popular interests provides visual expressions of children's individuality through personal property (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Stockstill, 2021; Pugh, 2011), contra to the otherwise controlled Parkside school environment where resources are shared and children's uniforms are standardised. In addition, as described through snack-time and cloakroom events, daily life within the classroom congeals in ways that allow children to be recognised by the goods that they own (Baudrillard, 2016; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Pilcher, 2011). This accentuates differentiation *through* personal and possessable individual property, thus illustrating the sociomaterial threads *beyond* the specific belongings that produce social class at Parkside.

Like belongings, I suggest that elements of experiences – enrichment activities and birthday parties – also emerge through commodified self-expression via consumerism (Braidotti, 2011; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Steinberg, 2011), thus constructing class. This is through certain enrichment activities and birthday parties being constructed as desirable over and above others, (re)constructing the norms of what it means to be a child at Parkside. As Pugh (2011) observed (see Section 2.5.2.1), I suggest that children reach to be part of these norms and in doing so, (re)produce them as desirable. This is a convergence of experiences which are affective with the conditions through which they can be affective; like the water bottles at snack-time (Section 6.2.1), birthday parties are a channel for self-expression in part due to their recognition in the classroom (Section 7.3.3.1).

Across belongings and experiences, the 'doing' of social class can unfold in gendered ways. For example, 'the girls' desire for Disney princesses on water bottles (Section 6.2.2.1) and wellies (Section 6.3.2.1), ballet as a desirable enrichment activity for girls (Section 7.2.1), and parties with butterflies and fairies for girls and dinosaurs and pirates for boys (Section 7.3.2). This connects with literature that emphasises the intersectional

quality of social class (Section 2.5.1) and the commodification of identities where to express yourself is unavoidably a capitalist activity (hooks, 2000), particularly in the “Disneyverse” (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; see also Coyne et al., 2016; Rutherford and Baker, 2021). Such gendered discourses are not static reproductions and elsewhere, research illustrates children’s critical reworkings of stereotypes (Wohlwend, 2009; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017). Nevertheless, these matters can also be suggested to construct social class in ways that are gendered.

In relation to the classroom legitimacy already considered, at Parkside certain ‘appropriate’ belongings and experiences can enter the classroom (physically and verbally), a space where personal differentiation is usually minimised (Mazzoli Smith and Todd, 2019). Arguably, businesses have capitalised on this ‘school-approved’ legitimacy, commodifying and marketising children’s lives (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Raj and Ekstrand, 2022; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017). For example, the pressure on families to ‘buy into’ enrichment activities to engage in ‘good’ parenting practices (Vincent and Maxwell, 2016; Wilson and Worsley, 2021). Likewise, the drinks bottles targeted at children with popular characters, noted in the proliferation of Disney in my fieldwork (and elsewhere in the literature, see Sandlin and Garlen, 2017).

At Parkside, this consumerism is exacerbated by the power afforded to novel belongings – both in terms of current trends and as new purchases – promoting an inexhaustible type of consumerism alongside neoliberal competitive individualism (Rose, 1999; Walkderine, 2020). These are hooks’ (2000) “imprints of a consumer capitalist socialization [*sic*] that teaches us all to spend much and value little” (p. 157). As such, it is in intra-action with this marketisation of childhood that social class is (re)constructed at Parkside (Buckingham, 2000).

As experiences emerging through primarily verbal interactions, children produce specific versions of enrichment activities and birthday parties that I suggest, may also (re)construct social class through their entanglements with classroom life. As shown throughout Chapter 7, at Parkside, norms are (re)constructed around enrichment activities – as paid-for “clubs” outside of school – and parties – at paid-for venues like the Soft Play Shack. These specific iterations about what it means to attend enrichment

activities or host recognisable birthday parties produce a type of associated performativity that not all children may be able to access (Skeggs, 2012; Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011). Implicit within these norms are economic differences lived out as cultural practices (Lareau, 2011; Kustatscher, 2015), defined as much by what they include as what they exclude (Barad, 2007).

However, this is not to suggest that any of these four model cases are intrinsically valuable as the ‘stuff’ that makes up class at Parkside. As I have shown, the sociomaterial threads that enable water bottles, wellies, enrichment activities and birthday parties to matter are as much (re)producers of social class at Parkside as the ‘stuff’ itself (Barad, 2007; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a). These model cases only (re)construct class in their tangling with daily classroom life at Parkside: Through convergences such as drinks at snack-time (Section 6.2.1), mornings in the cloakroom (Section 6.2.2.1), getting changed for lessons in the Wildlife Area (Section 6.3.2.1), exploring time at the writing table (Section 7.2.3.1) or handing out papers from the Going Home Box at home-time (Section 7.3.3.1). It is in these *specific ways* in which cultural practices are lived out in the classroom at Parkside that (re)produces their roots in economic differences in ways that matter to the children. Thus, I contend that it is only through these intra-actions that the four model cases matter, and in doing so, construct social class.

Yet, these moments are only made possible by the affective force of water bottles, wellies, enrichment activities and birthday parties at Parkside. This is not in the sense that such belongings and experiences *are* inherently affective, but more that classroom life at Parkside flows together to produce the conditions through which they *can be* affective. As such, I contend that these matters produce social class in their unfolding in daily classroom life, but this is *through* an affective register (see Sections 6.2.3, 6.3.3, 7.2.4 and 7.3.4). As Massumi (2015) explains, capitalism enters the frame as an ontogenetic (productive) force through its translation into an affective register (Colebrook, 2002; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017). As shown by the moments at Parkside, affect has been “hijacked” (Massumi, 2015, p. 20) by capitalism in the sense that the children’s interests *are* capitalist interests (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Steinberg, 2011), shown by links to their roots in economic differences and neoliberal principles of self-

expression via consumerism (see also Colebrook, 2002; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Walkerdine, 2017).

In this sense, I suggest that social class at Parkside is (re)produced because capitalism has “fed its operations back into the field of emergence of bare activity so integrally as to *become-immanent* to it” (Massumi, 2015, p. 108, my emphasis). As noted above, this is not just the alignment of children’s interests with capitalist interests (via commodification and consumerism) (Bradiotti, 2011; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Steinberg, 2011), but the complimentary sociomaterial conditions that give rise to their mattering. As Giroux and Pollock (2010) suggest, cultural consumerism “represents the new face of neoliberal power” (p. xv) where children’s “identities, desires, and subjectivities” are shaped (p. xv). In doing so, corporations capitalise on children’s affect, shaping not just what we know (i.e. Disney’s gender stereotypes), but what we are becoming through our engagements (i.e. known through the goods that we own) (Sandlin and Garlen, 2017). Thus, at Parkside, capitalism is an “ontopower” that “augments the powers of existence” (Massumi, 2015, p. 110), *producing* the conditions for its continued (re)emergence. Thus, it is *through* affect that social class is (re)constructed.

Most notably, these conditions for capitalism’s continued (re)emergence are a tangle of intra-activity (that includes affect) which results in effects that separate matters at Parkside; water bottles, wellies, enrichment activities, birthday parties *and children*. Throughout Chapters 6 and 7 and most notably in the vignettes, I have attempted to illustrate how these entanglements result in distinctions that maintain certain iterations, or norms, related to the model cases: a more up-to-date branded water bottle versus a ‘classic’ one (Section 6.2.2.1); Disney’s ‘Frozen’ wellies above others (Section 6.3.2.1); swimming and ballet versus other enrichment activities (Section 7.2.3.1) and parties at the Soft Play Shack (Section 7.3.1). In such moments, these model cases – as well as the children exercising their associated affect – are distinguished in the peer culture at Parkside, creating conditions in which children can be recognised through the belongings they have or the experiences they consume (Baudrillard, 2016; Pilcher, 2011).

In summary, I conclude that, at Parkside, socioeconomic differences lived out as cultural practices *are* translated into an affective register (Colebrook, 2002; Massumi, 2015; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017; Walkerdine, 2017) and successfully (re)produce the conditions for their continued (re)emergence (Massumi, 2015) in the Parkside peer culture. What it means to be a child at Parkside is intertwined with capitalist consumerism and neoliberal ideals (Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017): a healthy child who drinks water, has equipment for the Wildlife Area, engages in enrichment activities and hosts birthday parties. For most of the children at Parkside, their school life can only be known through recourse to capitalist activities. This allows capitalist values (Braidotti, 2011; Walkerdine, 2021; 2021) to become inseparable from the construction of children's lives (Giroux and Pollock, 2010). I propose that this is illustrative of social class, where the specific types of posthuman performativity valued at Parkside are not universally available based on socioeconomic background (Skeggs, 2012). Here, it is class at the micro-level, as "innumerable everyday practices" (Reay, 2004, p. 1019), that enables us to "trac[e] the print of class in areas where it is faintly written" (Savage, 2003, pp. 536-537).

### 8.3 Revisiting the invitations

In addition to the responses presented to the research questions above, this section revisits the substantive and theoretical invitations introduced in Section 1.3 and laid out in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. These invitations are considered like optical lenses (inspired by Walshaw, 2007), bringing into focus the substantive and theoretical contributions that this thesis attempts to make, in addition to the research question findings. As outlined in Section 2.1, the rationale for this thesis rests on two core and interrelated points, the first captures the substantive contribution that this thesis intends to make, and the latter concerns the theoretical contribution:

- 1) Theories of social class, informed by Marxism, have intersected with discourses of developmentalism and innocence in childhood to shape young children's involvement in existing social class research. This has led to a continued focus on developmental outcomes and little exploration of particularly young children's contributions to social class.

- 2) The ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning social class as a theoretical concept, informed by Marxism, make it methodologically problematic to study with particularly young children.

### 8.3.1 Substantive contribution

As explicated in the first rationale point, understandings of social class and childhood have tangled in a way that has left the construction of class in young children's social lives distinctly absent from existing research. In this thesis, I explore how social class can be constructed via commodification in the lives of 4-5-year-old children. In doing so, I have attempted to challenge the dominance of discourses that have historically excluded children from such research and suggest how class can be *known differently* beyond adult-centric measures. When taken together, the responses to the two research questions suggest that, by not pre-defining class through adult measures, it is possible to explore how constructions of class may be lived out in young children's day-to-day lives. That is, through translating economic differences into commodified goods and experiences that are affective for children at Parkside. By considering what is valued by the children in the classroom where economic capital may not be directly present (Alanen and Siisiäinen, 2011; Hadley, 2009; Pugh, 2011; Stockstill, 2021), I have attempted to show that their lives are not innocent of the distinguishing judgments of capitalism, despite what discourses of childhood may suggest (Connolly, 1998; Millei and Kallio, 2018).

In doing so, this thesis illustrates how Parkside children's experiences of social class conceived in this way can have immediate consequences for their daily school lives in the here-and-now, rather than simply for their future selves. This contests the existing over-emphasis on developmental outcomes for young children in social class research that focus on futurity and emphasise their status as "adults-in-the-making" (Thorne, 1993, p. 3). This is an attempt to show how "[c]hildren's interactions are not preparation for life; *they are life itself*" (Thorne, 1993, p. 3, my emphasis). Indeed, this thesis aims to make a substantive contribution to a body of literature that has not previously considered how young children may creatively construct class with consequences for their lives in the present (see Section 2.3.2).

This thesis connects with the literature summarised in Sections 2.2.4, 2.3.3, 2.4.2 and 2.5.3. Notably, this is the exploration of social class through lived experiences in the social domain that illustrate how economic conditions are lived out on a symbolic and cultural level (Bradley, 2015; R. Butler, 2019), through “innumerable everyday practices” (Reay, 2004, p. 1019). As shown at Parkside, such micro-practices focus on distinction through value-judgements, sometimes through commodified self-expression (Braidotti, 2011; Giroux and Pollock, 2010; Massumi, 2015; Sandlin and Garlen, 2017), which often leave implicit a ‘deficient’ relational “other” (Reay, 2007, p. 1042). The vignettes in the findings chapters show how these distinctions are ontologically emotional/affective, making links to wider research into class (R. Butler, 2019; Iqbal et al., 2015; Kustatscher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Reay, 2017; Ridge, 2011; Walkerdine et al., 2001).

This thesis also shows similarities with existing research exploring social class with older children (see Section 2.5.2) and social identity research with young children, albeit with a focus on gender and race/class (see Section 2.4.2). In the literature review, Section 2.5.2 describes how consumable products and certain lifestyle experiences can form part of children’s lived experiences of socioeconomic conditions lived out through symbolic and cultural practices (Bradley, 2015). Alongside Section 2.4.2, this literature demonstrates how these products and experiences, as well as children’s social identities, can be used as a resource when negotiating classroom relationships (Kustascher, 2015; Pugh, 2011; Ridge, 2011). Similarly, in this thesis, the vignettes exemplified in the findings chapters illustrate how the affective model cases became the ‘stuff’ of friendships in the peer culture at Parkside, being used to negotiate interactions and relationships. In doing so, this thesis shows how young children ‘do’ class through their agential work, creatively meeting the requirements of their immediate social environments.

Building on the insights of literature into young children’s social identities (Section 2.4.1.4), this thesis brings into focus what was left out by existing research into older children’s social class (Section 2.5.4): how the materiality and context of children’s environments co-constructs how class is produced. Through the first research question, I have attempted to explore how all matters – spatial, temporal and physical – converge to produce social class in young children’s lives at Parkside, as shown in the



hyphenated section headings summarised in Section 8.2. Whilst these events include children's agential work – linguistic or otherwise – this thesis goes beyond existing literature to show how any and all matters may enter the frame in the construction of social class.

Taken together, these findings attempt to answer the invitations set out in Section 2.6: to suggest how we can *know class otherwise* in order to show how it may be part of young children's lives.

### 8.3.2 Theoretical contribution

By illustrating how class may be known in young children's lives, this thesis questioned the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning social class as a theoretical concept. These are assumptions which I suggest have made class methodologically problematic to study with young children. In response, the theoretical contribution of this thesis is a unique attempt to understand class through posthuman performativity with young children. In doing so, I attempt to take up the theoretical invitations set out in Section 3.3 to consider how class can be known differently, both ontologically and epistemologically. To recap, these invitations were to:

- build on J. Butler's performativity to consider the ontogenesis of class as *doing*;
- epistemologically de-centre the subject to bring all matters into focus;
- and to allow theoretical space for young children's agential contributions to phenomena-in-formations by avoiding an overreliance on language.

Throughout the findings chapters, this thesis explored classroom events in an attempt to show how class unfolds through the micro-level of everyday interactions. In doing so, it has appealed to a posthuman performative understanding of social class; that is, class not only unfolds at the micro-level, but actually does not exist beyond this 'doing' (J. Butler, 1996). Such an understanding of class posits that the children at Parkside do not just ascribe meaning to different belongings or experiences, but that these belongings or experiences are *brought into being as different* through this action (J. Butler, 1996, p. 36; see also Barad, 2007; Mulcahy, 2012). A posthuman iteration of performativity ensures that this action considers all matters in intra-action, rather than just the

(linguistic) work of the children (as humans). Whilst applying Barad's theory of posthuman performativity to young children's social lives is not an original contribution (see Section 2.4.1.4), its application for understanding class in this way may be considered as such (see Fox and Alldred, 2022 for a novel account with older children).

As explored throughout the findings chapters and the vignettes in particular, the children and other classroom matters at Parkside (re)construct belongings and experiences in ways that meaningfully distinguish their differences. This attempts to illustrate what social class *can be*, through revising the material research objects that have come to constitute it (Krause, 2021) (see Section 5.4). For example, a more up-to-date Disney-branded water bottle versus a 'classic' Disney princess one, distinguished through the children's actions in the morning cloakroom routine (Section 6.2.2.1). Whilst these differences can be suggested to exist prior to the children's action, so do innumerable others; such as the water bottles' height, width, sound, material, contents, texture and type of lid. Yet in the scenarios at Parkside, it is specific differences – in this case, the water bottle's branding – that are constructed as the differences that matter. These various enactments of class are therefore not pre-existent of this action, they *are* the 'doings' that construct social class. Yet, these 'doings' are not the work of the children alone. As Section 8.2 shows, it is all these matters working together that I suggest produce class through these specific moments, by enabling the connection of affect with capitalist commodification (discussed below).

Whilst Fox and Alldred (2022) suggest some of the non-human matters that constitute class in their review of an historical empirical study with older children (see Section 3.4.4), this has not been applied to the field of young children's social class (which also maintains a focus on childhood development). As such, this thesis attempts to make an original contribution to the theoretical literature surrounding young children's social class by attempting to show, not just that class may be present in young children's lives, but how matters beyond humans alone can construct it as a phenomenon. I propose that this is productive for the study of class more broadly, where previous performative accounts often suggest a "voluntary free fall" (Skeggs, 2012, p. 12) through subject positions (see also Walkerdine et al., 2001). This implies a universality to performativity

that overlooks how not all constructions of class are materially accessible to the children in the same way (Skeggs, 2012).

For example, in this thesis, Rainbow's 'wrong' water bottle was a point of difference for Isabella and Sheep, who excluded Rainbow (Section 6.2.2.2). Although many of the children have different water bottles at Parkside, the difference between Rainbow's Disney princess branding is the one that is brought into being in the classroom for this purpose. As such, without the 'right' bottle matching Isabella and Sheep, this friendship is performed in a way that that is not materially accessible to Rainbow. Conversely, Elsa and Unicorn's positioning as party hosts (Section 7.3.3.2), not materially accessible for all children, affords them a social power amongst their peers. These examples are illustrative of how economic differences lived out through commodified goods and cultural practices can be affective for young children; what I interpret as the process through which class may be constructed in the classroom. The focus here is on *how* class can be constructed; through the affect woven into commodified goods and cultural practices that serve the interests of capitalist consumption.

Such a framework also untethers agency from the human-domain, enabling it to take other forms, but more importantly, non-linguistic forms (see Section 3.2.3) (Barad, 2007; Coole and Frost, 2010). This is notable for the study of class that has historically struggled to find theoretical equilibrium between discursive or material ontologies (see Section 3.2.1) and understand children's agential work within this (see Section 2.5.3.1). By applying a sociomaterial framework that considers all matters in the formation of events, this thesis considers how class constructions are the agential work of all tangled matters, including children, rather than a binary trade-off between structures/individuals (Chesworth, 2018; Fenwick et al., 2011; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). Indeed, as the findings show, it is not specific belongings, experiences or even children that possess inherent value or class; it is their tangling in intra-action with all aspects of the classroom through which class emerges. The children at Parkside are an equal part of this sociomaterial phenomenon and distributed agency, rather than actors who struggle to demonstrate their agency linguistically.

Utilising the concept of affect with this framework, whilst not novel with young children (see Broadfoot and Pascal, 2020; Renold and Mellor, 2013; Tembo, 2022), may be considered original for the study of class in this way with young children (see Fox and Alldred, 2022 for a novel account with older children). This offers a productive lens because, as this thesis has shown (see Section 8.2), I suggest that affect is the force through which distinctions between matters are made in the classroom at Parkside. As Tembo (2022) explains, such a lens demonstrates “how particular affects connect thoughts together with bodies and things” (p. 66; see also Colebrook, 2002). In this thesis, this novel application to young children’s posthuman performatives of class is the crux of how economic differences lived out as cultural practices come to matter to the children at Parkside, through their translation into an affective register (Massumi, 2015).

## 8.4 Tangling with this thesis

It is hoped that these findings have useful implications for wider communities of practice in addition to the substantive and theoretical contributions outlined above. However, this is not without a reflexive consideration of *why* such implications should be included in this thesis and where they may have come from; an application of the “self-reflective tool of enquiry” (Barley, 2013, p. 85) woven throughout this thesis (see Section 4.5). Indeed, the notions of impact and implications for practice have been critiqued for intending to produce educational lessons (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015) from findings, whether aimed at children or childcare professionals.

Berg and Seeber (2016) suggest that this may stem from an adult-defined, institutionalised and positivist notion of ‘impactful’ research where representative findings are generalised to the wider population, and thus made universal (see also Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017 and Section 4.4.4). As introduced in Section 1.1, such lessons can feed into developmental constructions of children as immature in need of improvement (Lundy et al., 2011; see also Section 2.3.1). Johannsson (2011) posits that implications should not replace one form of adult domination (what the thesis criticises) with another (‘child improvements’ from the thesis) (see also Bluebond-Langer and Korbin, 2007).

Instead, researchers can consider how “new ways of knowing are [and can be] produced” (Pink, 2011, p. 271; see also Murphy, 2021; Walshaw, 2007) as part of the thesis. In the spirit of my sociomaterial framework, I propose that this is a process of tangling with this thesis, one that has already happened through the fieldwork, is happening as you read and will happen hopefully beyond its publication (Barad, 2007). Yet, these can only be “hoped-for benefits” (Alderson and Morrow, 2020, p. 97): my intentions can only ever be partial and will depend on others intra-actions (Barad, 2007). In this section, I consider the different perspectives that may tangle with this thesis, and how that tangling can be promoted to produce new ways of knowing (Pink, 2011) for children, families, practitioners and perhaps even for policy makers.

At the local level, I have already attempted to provide useful entanglements for children with this thesis. By employing collaborative methods (see Sections 4.2.2-4.2.4), I strove to include children in the information that is being produced about their lives (Steinberg, 2011). This is a collective endeavour in which new ways of knowing, and being, are produced; young children as research collaborators whose voices shape the conversation rather than just exist in it (Kay and Tisdall, 2015; Spyrou, 2011; Sutton et al., 2011). This was supported by a cycle of interpretation and information sharing throughout this thesis; from the daily interpretation sessions (Section 4.2.2) to the discussion of findings session (Section 4.2.4) and the dissemination of findings back to the children at Parkside (4.4.4). Thus, I hope that this thesis has had a positive impact on Parkside children’s experiences of participating in research projects exploring their life experiences. In doing so, I reject a chronological view of research to impact by contending that benefits may come from the process as well as the product of a thesis (inspired by Barad, 2007 and Pink, 2015).

As critiqued by the introduction (Section 1.1), I do not wish to teach children an educational lesson from this research (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). Through disseminating the findings back to the children (see Section 4.4.4), I intended to share the findings in a way that did just that – share the findings, rather than share what the children *should* do with the findings. In the same way, I am reluctant to suggest how these findings should generate implications for the children’s lives in this section, beyond the sharing of this information. Whilst I have shared with the children at

Parkside how they negotiated (for better or worse) friendships with affective belongings and experiences (see Appendix 4), my intention was always to show the *how* of this, rather than the *why* (Deloria, 2012; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a). Indeed, I accept ultimate responsibility as the author who set the overarching agenda of this thesis (Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022), but I challenge the perhaps misplaced conception that I should define how it is used as well (Johannsson, 2011).

I also disseminated the findings of this thesis to the practitioners and parents at Parkside (see Section 4.4.4). This was an attempt to improve the accessibility of this thesis, as an almost 100,000-word document that is rooted in philosophical and academic study. In doing so, I hoped to illustrate to parents and practitioners examples of how young children are capable of engaging in processes that re-present and affect their lives (Steinberg, 2011). In a past sense, I suggest that this may have already happened through agential cuts I have helped to enact throughout my time in the field (see Section 4.5.1.2). For example, as one teaching assistant queried about why I was gathering assent from the children, “What do you do if they all say no?” [Quote from staff member, fieldnotes, 28th September 2023]. This prompted a discussion that I hope produced new ways of knowing (Pink, 2011) about authentically respecting children’s decision-making autonomy (Dockett et al., 2013).

Beyond this, policy-makers and others who are involved in research and legislation that affect children’s lives may usefully consider how children’s voices may be heard as part of this process (Spyrou, 2011). The methodology chapter of this thesis (Chapter 4) is intended to address the relative absence of *practical* information when involving young children in research and collaboration (Moore et al., 2018). The findings chapters, specifically Section 7.2.2) illustrate how children’s involvement is not necessarily as ‘privileged commentators’ on their lives (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019, p. 3), but through tangling their interpretations to disrupt exclusively adult explanations (Dockett et al., 2009; Ólafsdóttir and Einarsdóttir, 2021; Thomson, 2008). This appreciates “children’s ways of being as knowledge” (Yoon and Templeton, 2019, p. 57, emphasis original), and has been explored on smaller scales through Participatory research (Clement, 2019; Eckhoff, 2019) and Children’s Research Advisory Groups (Lundy et al., 2011).

By illustrating how capitalism is affective in the day-to-day in young children's lives, I hope to challenge discourses of innocence and immaturity that have excluded children from such research and constructed their lives as apolitical (Millei and Kallio, 2019; Steinberg, 2011). Related to children's collaboration in projects, these findings are intended to contest the belief that children's lives are somehow exempt from capitalist interests. For children, this may bring an awareness of how economic differences may exclude certain children (as shared in the dissemination document, see Appendix 4), prompting a critical reflection on whether they think that is right. Similarly, for practitioners, parents and carers involved in the project, this provides an insight into what matters for children at school and how these may be linked to economic differences (shared in a separate dissemination document, see Appendix 5); information that may not have previously been discussed with children due to impressions of irrelevance. Moreover, for practitioners at Parkside, these findings suggest potentially in/exclusionary ways that classroom practices may (re)produce economic differences in ways that matter to the children, again providing insights that can be critically reflected upon in relation to current classroom practices (discussed further below).

With regards to children's lives as constructed through policy documentation, the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (2024), whilst focused on children's developmental outcomes, does suggest that the EYFS should provide "[e]quality of opportunity and anti-discriminatory practice, ensuring that every child is included and supported" (p. 7). Yet, characteristics that may affect inclusion are notably absent, despite their basis in research; this includes gender (Lyttleton-Smith, 2019b; Yoon, 2020), ethnicity/race (Barley, 2019; Barron, 2007) and now, I would tentatively contend, social class. Furthermore, whilst gender and race are protected by the Equality Act (2010), social class remains nameless (Bradley, 2015). I hope that, by contributing evidence to show that some of the youngest people in society are affected by lived economic differences in their day-to-day lives, this thesis can (re)construct children's lives as undeniably classed.

Yet, the classed 'doing' of children's lives involves much more than the four model cases summarised through Chapters 6 and 7. This thesis presents evidence for how class is 'made' through micro-moments in daily life (Section 8.1), highlighting the

benefits of understanding phenomena through performative and sociomaterial ways of knowing. As explained in Section 8.2, belongings and experiences at Parkside are not inherently classed, they become entangled in intra-activity which results in classed effects, or socioeconomic distinctions. As such, meanings are not possessed or represented by objects (MacLure, 2013) and as such, practical implications should not be to include/remove them but instead focus on the processes in which they are entangled, for example, as used to exclude (Barad, 2007; Lyttleton-Smith, 2019a).

Instead of endlessly relativising class to specific sociomaterial enactments, this thesis intends to “actually expand the possibilities for the practice of agency” (Fenwick et al., 2011, p. 174; see also Chesworth, 2018; Papadopoulou and Sidorenko, 2022). For example, suggesting that class is the result of the unequal distribution of wealth narrows all interventions to focus on the redistribution of wealth. Instead, a sociomaterial (and posthuman performativity) framework enables a consideration of the many other matters that shape how class is performed, thus opening-up more sites for intervention. For example, as noted in the response to the research questions (Section 8.2), class can be (re)constructed through belongings entangled with classroom routines and the commodification and marketisation of children’s lives. In contrast to *just* redistributing wealth, possible points of entry into how class is made are now three-fold.

Nevertheless, this is not to propose such points of entry should be universally applied (Ball, 2013; Gewirtz, 2001), the implications are for the new ways of knowing that sociomaterialism offers, rather than the results it has previously produced.

#### 8.4.1 Boundaries – challenges and limitations

There are certain limitations to my study that I suggest create boundaries for how these findings should be interpreted. To mount certain critiques of representativeness/generalisability would not be appropriate given the paradigm that I have situated my work in (see Chapter 4) (Russell and Barley, 2020). I have already engaged with questions of how quality can be considered throughout my methodology chapter. Specifically, this is in relation to defining class (Sections 2.2.3 and 2.3), positivist notions of ‘objectivity’ as a precursor to valid research (Section 4.2), ‘authenticity’ and ‘truth’ (Section 4.2 and 4.4.1.3), transparency (Sections 4.5 and 4.6),



and subjectivity and the re-presentation of experiences in this thesis (Sections 4.5 and 4.6).

Nevertheless, a limitation that forms a boundary for my findings relates to the use of opt-in processes which resulted in a relatively small number of children participating in comparison to studies using opt-out procedures (Barley, 2013; Kustatscher, 2015). The final sample of 14 children included in this study only represents around a third of the total children enrolled in Reception at Parkside. As discussed in Section 4.4.1.3, whilst I do not suggest that this threatens the validity of my study from a representative standpoint (Skeggs, 2003; Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017), this did create a specific configuration for the participating children which I suggest should mark a boundary to my thesis. For example, whilst I refer to the “classroom peer culture” throughout this thesis, I recognise that these findings relate more to the classroom peer culture constructed by these 14 children, rather than a group of 45 children.

Furthermore, as acknowledged in Section 4.4.1.3, there were more girls than boys in the final sample (11 to 3 respectively). Although this is unbalanced, this does reflect a similar composition across the Reception classes at Parkside. Again, I do not wish to critique this from a standpoint that suggests that these findings should have constructed a sample which has equal numbers of girls and boys. Not only does this reinforce gender as an essential property with binary opposites (J. Butler, 1996), but it ascribes to a view of research that ensures representativeness in order to be universally generalised (a perspective already eschewed in Section 4.7) (Crang and Cook, 2007; Delamont, 2020). Nevertheless, in the same way as the first boundary, when speaking about the peer culture at Parkside it may be useful for readers to consider this context as in-forming the findings. For example, the findings focus on many cultural references discursively framed as ‘female’, like Disney princesses (Sections 6.2.2 and 6.3.2), ballet (Section 7.2.1) and pink sparkly envelopes with butterfly stickers (Section 7.3.3). This does not threaten the validity of the findings but instead offers a boundary for their interpretation (Tracy and Hinrichs, 2017).

### 8.4.2 Further invitations

Reflecting on the contributions of this thesis in Section 8.3, I now consider what still may be out of focus for the study of young children's social class. Most pressing, as I attempted to demonstrate in Section 2.3.2, is the lack of research into how particularly young children's (around 5-years-old) lives may be infused with class. Whilst this thesis has attempted to challenge the discourses of class and childhood that have shaped this patterning (see Section 2.3.1), the conclusions I draw are tentative first steps into a field which is still in the early stages of being ordered. I would contend that there is still a need for further research to bring into focus how particularly young children's lives may be classed in other ways, from a social perspective rather than a developmental one.

Similarly, the exploration of social class through performative (Kustatscher, 2015) and sociomaterial (Fox and Alldred, 2022) frameworks is still nascent (see also Walkerdine et al., 2001, for a related exploration of subjectivities). As outlined in Section 8.3.2, such theorising has much to offer the study of social class that this thesis has only begun to scratch the surface of. Further research could tangle these threads further, responding to the invitations in this thesis to consider the spatial, temporal and physical matters that construct class as 'doing' (Barad, 2007; J. Butler, 1996).

Indeed, such an invitation to consider all matters prompts the question of what other matters, with who and under which circumstances (inspired by R. Butler, 2019). This thesis focused on constructions of social class in a classroom setting and, whilst children spend a lot of their time in school, this is not where they spend all their time. Further research could usefully explore sociomaterial constructions of class in other contexts, such as in a child's home or out-of-school settings, where the conditions that give rise to classed performatives will be different.

## 8.5 Concluding thoughts

In the introduction, I set this research within a context that expresses concern for neoliberal and capitalist ways of being, particularly for children (Braidotti, 2011; Massumi, 2015). To think that capitalism is (re)constructed by young children at the level of the 'soul' (Rose, 1999) leaves me somewhat despairing, creating interests that

are capitalist but enacted with a genuine “passion” or desire (Massumi, 2015, p. 85; see also Colebrook, 2002; Walkerdine, 2017). Indeed, as suggested by the post-Christmas classroom scene at the start of this thesis (Section 1.1), in exploring these concepts I reflected on my own interests and desires, unsure of how to know myself without recourse to affective capitalism.

My intention is not to pose a moral crisis like the news articles and parenting blogs set out in Section 1.1. Instead, by hauling under the spotlight how social class can be known through micro-moments unfolding in a classroom in Northern England, it becomes possible to see how it can be *known differently*. Bringing into focus the “innumerable everyday practices” (Reay, 2004, p. 1019) that work to construct class also carries with it innumerable everyday opportunities for change, diversifying and democratising ways to respond to capitalism that go beyond top-level, system change. This can be any one of any age rejecting or embracing new ways of knowing (Pink, 2011), perhaps in ways that are not even visible.

As I twist these threads into a concluding knot, I feel fortunate to have had the space to explore such ideas with the children at Parkside. This was a process that, although not beyond or outside of capitalist discourses, was still able to happen and produced moments entwined with a spectrum of emotions, positive and negative. In doing so, I hope to show how “life itself” (Thorne, 1993 p. 3) for children is not only lived in the here-and-now, but *felt*.

## 9 Appendices

Appendix 1: Staff information sheet and consent form

Appendix 2: Children's information sheet and initial assent form

Appendix 3: Parent/guardian information sheet and consent form

Appendix 4: Dissemination leaflet for the children involved in the study

Appendix 5: Dissemination leaflet for families and practitioners at the school

## **Appendix 1: Staff information sheet and consent form**

### **Staff Information Sheet**

Hello, my name is Tara Paxman and I am a second-year student studying for my PhD at Durham University. I would like to invite you to take part in a research project that I am completing in Reception at **ANONYMISED**. To help you decide on whether you would like to take part, you can read the following information to understand what is involved in the project before filling out the consent form. If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please don't hesitate to contact me.

**Project title:** Exploring young children's understanding of the social world

#### **The research project**

Recent events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing 'cost-of-living' crisis, have changed the way many of us experience different aspects of social life. I would like to explore how children understand and view the social world in their day-to-day interactions with their classmates. For example, their ideas about hard work and owning toys, or their thoughts about different types of jobs or hobbies. The activities involved in the project (outlined below) are all designed to help the children to speak from their point of view, supporting them to join in with the project using activities chosen by the children themselves.

As a fully-qualified teacher, I have previously taught in Nursery, Reception and Key Stage 1 and hope to use these skills to support the children whilst I am in school. It is hoped that the activities included in the research project will be enjoyable for children, enriching their school experience and offering them an opportunity to build on their skills in communication, teamwork and self-awareness. The study has received ethical approval from the Education Ethics Committee of Durham University.

#### **What does the project involve?**

The focus of this study is on children's interactions with each other. As some of these interactions may include members of staff, information may need to be recorded about what these adults are also doing during these events. This will only be when staff are involved in interactions with the children that are being observed to allow events to be put into context.

The children will be invited to be involved in the activities outlined below. As a member of staff, if you consent, notes will only be captured if you are part of interactions with children that are being observed during these activities.

1. From September 2023 to February 2024, I plan to come into school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. During this time, I will take part in classroom life by observing and joining in activities that the children do, much like a teaching assistant would.
2. During this period, I would also like to involve the children in helping me understand the information I have collected over the course of each day from their point of view. This will involve 10-minute discussion sessions where I invite them to speak to me about things that have happened that day.
3. In November and January, I plan to work with some of the children to complete two short projects which involve them in selecting classroom activities to help collect information. For example, this might be drawing pictures or building models and then discussing them in groups.

4. Finally, after finishing the first three parts by February, I plan to go away and bring together the information. I would then like to come back into the school in July 2024 to share the information and get the children's thoughts on it.

### **Do I have to take part?**

Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time up to the intended date of publication, without giving a reason, by contacting me by email or in person at school. Any information included prior to your withdrawal will usually be included in the study but should you have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

### **What data will be collected and what will happen to it?**

As part of the discussion sessions (points 2, 3 and 4), I hope to use a child-friendly audio recording device for the purposes of writing up my notes. The children will be asked if they agree to this at the start of each session and if they do not, then only handwritten notes will be used. These sessions will be typed up within one month of being recorded and then the audio file will be deleted. In the meantime, they will be stored securely using password-protected files. Staff members will **not** be recorded as part of these sessions.

All the information collected as part of this research project will be written up as part of my PhD thesis. The identities of the children as well as the school and staff will remain anonymous using pseudonyms and non-identifiable events, and all information will be kept confidentially. Any physical notes will be locked in a secure place and any electronic data will be stored securely using password-protected files. All files used in the data analysis will be deleted upon completion of my PhD (estimated as 2025/2026). You can find more information about the University's responsibilities for data protection and your rights under data protection legislation in the University's [privacy notice](#).

### **What will happen to the findings from the project?**

First and foremost, the findings will be shared with the children and staff and, where possible, the families involved with the research project before the end of the academic year 2024/25. For children/staff that have left or will leave the school, I can be contacted by email to obtain a copy of this information. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives. The thesis will be published with open access to the public after summer 2025 and findings may be shared in academic publications.

### **Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to me via email or I will be available in the classroom before and after school. Alternatively, you can email my supervisor Dr Anna Llewellyn (**EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD**), or, if you wish to make a formal complaint, you can do this via [research.policy@durham.ac.uk](mailto:research.policy@durham.ac.uk).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

## Consent Form

**Project title:** Exploring young children's understanding of the social world

**Researcher:** Tara Paxman

**Department:** Education

**Contact details:** EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD

**Supervisor name:** Dr Anna Llewellyn

**Supervisor contact details:** EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD

This form is to confirm that you understand the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 19/09/2023 for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to information about me and how the information will be used.	
I agree that notes on interactions with children that include me may be written up as part of the research.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
I understand that anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) versions of my data will be stored securely throughout the project and deleted upon completion of the PhD (2025/26).	

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix 2: Children's information sheet and initial assent form




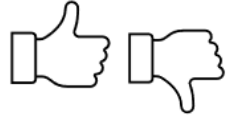



Hello!



Tara

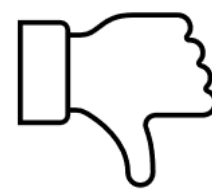




<div>Today</div> <div></div>	→	<div>Next time</div> <div></div> <div></div> <div></div>
<div>Tuesdays Thursdays</div> <div>PHOTOGRAPH OF THE SCHOOL</div> <div></div>	→	<div>At the end of Reception</div> <div></div>
		

My name is:

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You can call me:

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## **Appendix 3: Parent/guardian information sheet and consent form**

### **Parent/Guardian Information Sheet**

Hello, my name is Tara Paxman and I am a second-year student studying for my PhD at Durham University. I would like to invite your child to take part in a research project that I am completing in Reception at **ANONYMISED**. To help you decide on whether you would like your child to take part, you can read the following information to understand what is involved in the project before filling out the consent form. If there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please don't hesitate to contact me.

**Project title:** Exploring young children's understanding of the social world

#### **The research project**

Recent events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing 'cost-of-living' crisis, have changed the way many of us experience different aspects of social life. I would like to explore how children understand and view the social world in their day-to-day interactions with their classmates. For example, their ideas about hard work and owning toys, or their thoughts about different types of jobs or hobbies. The activities involved in the project (outlined below) are all designed to help the children to speak from their point of view, supporting them to join in with the project using activities chosen by the children themselves.

As a fully-qualified teacher, I have previously taught in Nursery, Reception and Key Stage 1 and hope to use these skills to support the children whilst I am in school. It is hoped that the activities included in the research project will be enjoyable for children, enriching their school experience and offering them an opportunity to build on their skills in communication, teamwork and self-awareness. The study has received ethical approval from the Education Ethics Committee of Durham University.

#### **What does the project involve?**

Your child has been invited to join this project as part of the Reception intake for September 2023 at **ANONYMISED**. I hope to work with children throughout their time in Reception, mostly from September to February and returning in July 2024. The project involves four aspects of collecting information. If you would like your child to take part in one of these parts but not the others, you can indicate this on the consent form.

1. From September 2023 to February 2024, I plan to come into school on Tuesdays and Thursdays. During this time, I will take part in classroom life by observing and joining in activities that the children do, much like a teaching assistant would. For your child, this should feel like a normal school day.
2. During this period, I would also like to involve the children in helping me understand the information I have collected over the course of each day from their point of view. This will involve 10-minute discussion sessions where I invite them to speak to me about things that have happened that day.
3. In November and January, I plan to work with some of the children to complete two short projects which involve them in selecting classroom activities to help collect information. For example, this might be drawing pictures or building models and then discussing them in groups.
4. Finally, after finishing the first three parts by February, I plan to go away and bring together the information. I would then like to come back into the school in July 2024 to share the information and get the children's thoughts on it.

### **Does my child have to take part?**

Your child's participation is voluntary and you do not have to agree for them to take part. If you do agree for them to take part, you can withdraw your child at any time up to the intended date of publication, without giving a reason, by contacting me by email or in person at school. Any information included prior to your withdrawal will usually be included in the study but should you have any concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Your child's participation will also depend on their agreement to take part in the study. At the start of the project, I will discuss the research with them and offer them the opportunity to ask any questions. Throughout the project, I will also check with your child on a day-to-day basis whether they want to continue to take part in the study, reminding them that they can opt-out at any time without giving a reason.

As the study is largely in line with normal school practice in the Early Years, it is not anticipated that taking part will cause your child any discomfort. Nevertheless, it may be that speaking about certain events in the classroom may bring out different feelings for some children. It is hoped that the 10-minute discussion sessions will offer children the opportunity to speak about any different feelings they have experienced, just as they would in a 'Circle Time' or similar activity at school. As described above, they can also opt-out at any time. As a trained teacher, if I have any further concerns I will notify the class teacher. If your child raises a safeguarding issue, I will follow the appropriate school procedures at **ANONYMISED**.

### **What data will be collected and what will happen to it?**

As part of the discussion sessions (points 2, 3 and 4), I hope to use a child-friendly audio recording device for the purposes of writing up my notes. The children will be asked if they agree to this at the start of each session and if they do not, then only handwritten notes will be used. These sessions will be typed up within one month of being recorded and then the audio file will be deleted. In the meantime, they will be stored securely using password-protected files. If you would like to specifically opt-out of audio recording, you can do so on the consent form.

All the information collected as part of this research project will be written up as part of my PhD thesis. The identities of the children as well as the school and staff will remain anonymous using pseudonyms and non-identifiable events, and all information will be kept confidentially. Any physical notes will be locked in a secure place and any electronic data will be stored securely using password-protected files. All files used in the data analysis will be deleted upon completion of my PhD (estimated as 2025/2026). You can find more information about the University's responsibilities for data protection and your rights under data protection legislation in the University's privacy notice: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/governance/information-governance/privacy-notices/generic-privacy-notice/>.

### **What will happen to the findings from the project?**

First and foremost, the findings will be shared with the children and, where possible, the families involved with the research project before the end of the academic year 2024/25. For children that have left or will leave the school, parents can contact me by email to obtain a copy of this information. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives. The thesis will be published with open access to the public after summer 2025 and findings may be shared in academic publications.

### **Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?**

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to me via email or I will be available in the classroom at the end of the school day, over the course of the coming

weeks. Alternatively, you can email my supervisor Dr Anna Llewellyn (**EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD**), or, if you wish to make a formal complaint, you can do this via [research.policy@durham.ac.uk](mailto:research.policy@durham.ac.uk).

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

### Consent Form

**Project title:** Exploring young children's understanding of the social world

**Researcher:** Tara Paxman

**Department:** Education

**Contact details:** **EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD**

**Supervisor name:** Dr Anna Llewellyn

**Supervisor contact details:** **EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD**

This form is to confirm that you understand the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy for your child to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 19/09/2023 for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to information about my child and how the information will be used.	
I agree that my child can take part in the following parts of the project, subject to my child also agreeing on an ongoing basis (this refers to activities 1-4 on the information sheet):	
1. Classroom observations: September - February	
2. 20-minute discussion sessions: September - February	
3. Two child-directed projects: November, January	
4. Review session: July 2024	
I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
I agree that my child can be audio recorded as part of activities 2, 3 and 4, for the purpose of taking notes, subject to my child also agreeing.	
I understand that anonymised (i.e. not identifiable) versions of my child's data will be stored securely throughout the project and deleted upon completion of the PhD (2025/26).	

I am the parent/guardian of \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/guardian's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

#### Appendix 4: Dissemination leaflet for the children involved in the study



### Research project findings



Hello, you might remember me. My name is Tara and I am a student at Durham University. When you were in Reception, I came in to work with you on my research project. I wanted to learn about what is important to you when you are playing with your friends in the classroom. This is what we found out!

**I listened to you. I thought these things sounded important:**



Water bottles



Wellies



Clubs



Birthday parties

These things were important in the classroom when you talked to other children. You used them to make friends and be kind. But sometimes, children who do not have these things may feel left out.

If you said yes to taking part, I will use this information to help me write my book using the pretend names that you chose to keep your real name private. If you want to ask me a question, you can ask your teacher or your parent to email me (**EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD**).



## Appendix 5: Dissemination leaflet for families and practitioners at the school



### Research project findings:

#### Exploring young children's understanding of the social world

Hello, my name is Tara Paxman. In September 2023, I began a research project in Reception at **ANONYMISED**, designed to explore children's understanding of the social world. This information sheet is one of two documents created to share the findings from that study; the other given to the children who were in Reception in 2023-2024.

#### What was the project about and who took part?

The aim of the project was to explore how children understand and view the social world in their day-to-day interactions with their classmates; what things matter to children in the classroom. The activities involved in the project were: observations of classroom life; discussion sessions with the children and creative projects.

All children who were in Reception in September 2023 were invited to take part. Children were only included in the study if their parents gave their consent and the child also agreed to participate. The identities of the children as well as the school and staff will remain anonymous using pseudonyms.

#### What were the findings?

Four things emerged as important to the children and could be used to negotiate relationships in the classroom. These were: water bottles brought into school; wellies used for the Wild Area; experiences of enrichment clubs; and birthday parties. Although these things seem to exist on their own, it was how they were involved in daily classroom life that made them matter to the children. These things can be linked to financial differences which may suggest ways that money matters to the children.

This project also aimed to help children speak from their point of view. The findings demonstrated the children could give their views and help adults understand information about their lives.

#### How can these findings be used?

It is hoped that these findings can be used practically to help adults think about how things involved in daily school life might matter to children in a way that affects peer relationships. For children, these findings show that they can be part of the conversations that produce information about them and that somethings that matter in the classroom may not be the same for all children.



#### What will happen to the findings from the project?

On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited in the University archives and findings may be shared in academic publications. More information is available in the University's privacy notice:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/about-us/governance/information-governance/privacy-notices/generic-privacy-notice/>. If you have any further questions about this study, please email me (**EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD**) or my supervisor Dr Anna Llewellyn (**EMAIL ADDRESS WITHHELD**).



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