An exploration of early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

This research examined Australian early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identity development, and the content on gender in the Australian Government’s Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2009). While the EYLF provides outcomes for best practice, it does not provide any detail on best practice in relation to gender. In this thesis, the theoretical position adopted is feminist post-structuralist and queer theory, because these theories are comprehensive, take into account societal beliefs about gender identities, and allow for context and children’s agency.

The methodology and study design were based upon qualitative phenomenological research methods. The participants consisted of 12 early childhood educators who worked in kindergarten and long day care settings, and two EYLF developers. The data was collected through semi-structured focus groups, semi-structured interviews, a follow-up questionnaire and the collection of artefacts for the educator participants, in addition to semi-structured interviews for the EYLF developer participants. This research not only endeavoured to analyse the stories that early childhood educators tell about gender but also aimed to provide them with a voice about their understanding of the construction of gender identity in children. It also aimed to provide them with an opportunity to analyse their own gender identities and their current approaches to gender in early childhood. It provided the EYLF developers with an opportunity to explain the process involved in developing the framework, why particular content was chosen or excluded, and what the participants would change if given the opportunity.

The educator participants’ responses were examined closely, and themes were identified through thematic analysis. The most prevalent themes were selected and grouped into ‘key thematic groupings’. The same process was conducted for the educator participants’ artefacts, and for the EYLF developer participants’ interview responses. The most prevalent discourses were analysed using feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA). This analysis focused on the discourses deployed in the participants’ responses, and the discursively produced behaviours that stemmed from them. It explored the ways in which these behaviours and actions were performed in their lives and in early childhood settings, and how these discourses were deployed in a context that enabled them and produced them.

The research findings suggested a high level of reflexivity among the educators, while the EYLF developers articulated the constraints faced when trying to develop a national voice, particularly on a topic considered contentious. Many educator participants expressed the need for more guidance on gender and displayed an active interest in building their knowledge in this area. One key implication of this research was that educators need to address the context they are providing for children in order to enable an expansion of representations of gender and diverse ways of being gendered. Another implication of the research was the need for further support and guidance for educators, through policy and curriculum, resources and teacher education.
Chapter One – Overview

In this chapter, the contexts for this research study into how early childhood educators’ views on gender impact their practice were provided. A number of theories on the development of gender and the ways that children come to recognise gendered identities are highlighted. These theories examine gender identities, perceptions of gender, gender development in children, and various historical, psychological and sociological studies into gender roles. Educators’ understandings of gender are constructed through their personal contexts, teacher education and early childhood policy documents. They are examined in relation to how these areas might impact their practice. The chapter examines the lack of recent studies in these areas, which demonstrate a conclusive need for further research.

In addition to providing background information and justifying the need for research in this area, the theoretical approaches chosen to guide this research, and the methods used for participant recruitment, are explained. The chapter also presents the qualitative methods of data collection used, and the possible limitations, issues and ethical considerations that needed to be addressed and how these were countered as the research was conducted. In this chapter, the processes followed to ensure that the research was ethically sound and safe for all participants are outlined.

1.1 Background and significance of this research

Gender is a diverse and sensitive area, and there are a wide range of opinions on how gender is formed in individuals and the role it plays in society. Some researchers use social learning theory or socialisation to explain how children develop gender roles (England, 1993; Reich & Vandell, 2011). Taking a feminist post-structuralist approach, some researchers believe that while children are impacted by those around them, these children have agency over accepting or rejecting different influences (Halim & Lindner, 2013; MacNaughton, 1998). These researchers stress that the societal understanding of gender roles can be limiting and it is important to take steps to ensure that harmful messages are not passed onto children (Davies, 1989; Sedgwick, 1990). Some researchers who take a queer theory approach believe that gender is derived and maintained through performativity (Butler, 1990, 2004; Sedgwick, 1990). According to this theory, gender is produced through the actions and behaviours of an
individual, and is thus considered a ‘performance’. Butler (1990) stresses that it is important to recognise that gender is not a natural process, but is impacted by repeated behaviours and cultural influences. In this thesis, the theoretical standpoint adopted is feminist post-structuralism and queer theory because these theories have a comprehensive view of gender, and acknowledge the societal beliefs about gender identities, and the context and agency of children.

A review of the literature indicates an expansion of research into the development of gender identity over the last forty years, (e.g., Sims, 1997). However, during the last decade, research has partially turned towards different topics and there appears to be less attention paid to gender as a ‘concern’ or area of focus in early childhood settings, teacher education and policy documents. The role of gender in early childhood has received less attention than other education sectors (Robinson & Diaz, 2006). The issue is that regardless of whether there is a dedicated focus on gender identity in early childhood, children will become aware of gender and endeavour to understand it (MacNaughton, 1998; Rainey & Rust, 1999; Scarlett, 2016). Through the lens of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory, gender and sexuality are viewed as parts of young children that they must construct. Children will develop an understanding of their gender identities through those around them and their environment. Despite these views, there is no specific teacher education or suggestions for educators on how to guide children’s understanding of gender identities.

This research examined Australian early childhood teachers’ (referred to in this research as educators) understandings of gender identities, and their role within early childhood settings when working with young children. An important part of this context has been the introduction of Australia’s first national curriculum document. The Australian Government’s ‘Early Years Learning Framework’ (EYLF) (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) was developed to support educators in providing quality care nationwide. While the EYLF provides outcomes for best practice, it does not list any practical ways that educators can make a difference in the area of children developing a sense of their gender identities. Indeed, this could be regarded as one of the omissions in the framework. This may lead to educators providing ‘gender-neutral’ resources without the supporting interactions, observations and verbal discussions that should accompany them. It may also impact on educators’ confidence in engaging in work around gender with children.
Fear and confusion around gender and sexuality continue to dominate mainstream media. The media has played a role in helping the public imagination surrounding gender develop in ways that are often misleading (Rush & Le Nauze, 2006). In Australia, this was evident in the reaction to the Safe Schools program (Louden, 2017), which was a national network of organisations that worked with schools to “create safer and more inclusive environments for same sex attracted, intersex and gender diverse students, staff and families” (Safe Schools Coalition, 2018, para. 1). In 2017, the government pulled funding for the program in response to media and public backlash (Safe Schools Coalition, 2018). Research into the impact of this discourse on the early childhood education sector is non-existent at the time of writing this thesis.

Much of the dialogue about gender development, identities and inequalities has occurred amongst academics and through research, much of which is dated while there are some more recent studies (Louden, 2017; MacNaughton, 2001). This information is often inaccessible to early childhood educators due to institutional access restrictions on peer-reviewed journals and, potentially, the use of jargon in academic writing, which may leave educators reliant on few outlets for knowledge about gender. The first of these outlets is personal experience, which can be fraught with bias (MacNaughton, 2000). The second is through their higher education degree or other qualifications, as well as any professional development they may have participated in; however, in many cases there is limited content or resources provided on gender (Robinson & Diaz, 2006). Even when gender content is delivered, pre-service educators may not engage or may struggle with such content, since it can be a sensitive area for teachers and students, leaving a great deal of room for error (Hogan, 2012). A third avenue for educators to develop their understanding of gender development and identity is through their peers and colleagues. This can be a difficult way to gather information as each educator receives different content through teacher education, and has varying years and types of experience in the field. It is possible that educators may encounter biases that differ from their own and potentially may encounter indifference. Some educators may be unaware of the changes in research knowledge about children’s gender identity formation, and the implications this may have for children themselves in these formative years.

As discussed above, despite an influx of research into the area of gender in early childhood from the 1980s onwards, this focus has partially shifted elsewhere. The minimal references to gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), the misleading representations of gender and sexuality
in the media in relation to children, and the inaccessibility of research on gender for early childhood educators, may make it difficult for educators to gain a complete understanding of the ways in which children develop and understand their gender identities. It is apparent that educators need access to more information on gender in early childhood. To address the needs of early childhood educators, it is important to gather and interpret educators’ understandings and perceptions of gender and consider the implications for their practice. This thesis set out to examine how early childhood educators use the EYLF in their practice, and their understanding of the ‘sense of identity’ outcome, in order to build an understanding of the ways that they draw on the framework to support their work around gender.

This research aimed to address the following question:

How do early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identity influence their practice?

The research question was explored and expanded on in relation to five sub-questions:

- Where do educators believe that their understanding of gender identity has come from?
- How do educators believe that children develop their gender identities and what do they believe their role should be in this development?
- What interactions and issues have educators encountered in relation to gender equity in early childhood settings?
- How can educators be supported, and what is required to provide practical solutions for change?
- Why is there silence surrounding gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009)?

This research not only endeavoured to analyse the stories that early childhood educators tell about gender but also aimed to provide them with a voice about their understanding of the construction of gender identity in children. It also aimed to provide them with an opportunity to analyse their own gender identities and their current approach to gender equity in early childhood. In order to effect change in gender imbalances in society, and in particular in early childhood settings, one must assess their own place in the gender hierarchy and recognise the
limitations it may have created in their lives (Hogan, 2012). This self-reflection can be challenging but necessary for early childhood educators to allow them to understand the limitations surrounding children when accepting and adhering to common beliefs about gender identities (Fleer, 1998). Alloway (1995) suggests that being involved in research can lead educators to become more aware of unequal power relations in their education settings. Through involvement in this research, educator participants may have developed a greater awareness of their own perceptions of gender, and the potential presence of varied gender dynamics and inequalities in their settings.

By collecting and analysing educators’ responses on gender in early childhood settings and in their own lives through the lens of performativity, this thesis has provided new insights into previous research on gender identities, early childhood educators’ understanding of gender, and the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) as a context. It identified discourses and contexts that may constrain or enable expansive work around gender in early childhood settings, and provided suggestions for integrating gender across all aspects of practice, including reflective practice. Reflective practice is a principle in the EYLF, along with respect for diversity, high expectations and equity, partnerships, and secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. In examining these principles from the EYLF alongside the four enabling discourses identified in this thesis, this research has implications for early childhood teacher education and professional practice.

1.2 The researcher’s perspective

My interest in gender roles and gender identity began early. Born into a religious family with eight children, I was raised in an environment with traditional views about gender identities and roles. As the oldest girl, I was expected to help around the house and with the other children. My brothers were less involved in the running of the home. I found this frustrating and could not understand why the standards were different for the boys in my family. This was also evident through our religious institution, where males were allowed to be involved in all areas of practice but females were relegated to home keeping and family making. Despite my occasional frustration, I accepted this as a way of life.

In 2006, I had the opportunity to begin working as a support aide in a kindergarten classroom, with a child with autism. This was my first professional experience of working with children.
and I found it very rewarding, fulfilling and interesting. It also led to me undertaking a Certificate III in Children’s Services. This year long program is where I first discovered gender equity as a concept. One subject, one teacher and one afternoon was all that it offered on this topic, but this impassioned me to dig deeper into the dynamics that I had simply accepted during my childhood. In the years that followed I completed my Diploma in Children’s Services and Bachelor of Early Childhood Education but did not encounter this experience again. While both courses touched briefly on treating children equally and using appropriate language, neither were in-depth. This led to me completing my own research into the area of gender equity in early childhood settings. During my Honours year I completed research in early childhood settings, observing children and interviewing educators to explore the link between their perceptions and how the children played.

In 2011, I discovered and was fascinated by an article about Egalia (Södermalm, 2015) in Sweden. Egalia is a preschool in Stockholm that is proudly ‘gender-neutral’. The preschool will not use the pronouns ‘him/her’ or ‘he/she’. Instead they adopt the genderless pronoun ‘hen’. This term was developed in Finland but has become increasingly widespread in these gender-neutral preschools. The concept may be critiqued for overlooking the fact that these environments can be considered gendered spaces (Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Doan, 2010). Egalia uses gender-neutral terminology with the children; however, it also actively counters gender stereotypes present in their settings. Egalia ensures that all books given to the children do not consist of traditional representations of gender roles. Children are provided with the usual toys found in preschools but are encouraged to use any materials that they want and to explore toys that are often seen as stereotypically belonging to children of the opposite sex. Egalia aim to educate children that biological differences do not and should not have anything to do with their interests and abilities. These ideas were unlike anything I had encountered during my studies or in any of the settings in Australia I had taught in.

Egalia was considered to be an extreme example of a gender-neutral preschool, however the ‘Swedish National Curriculum for Preschools’ (Swedish Ministry of Education and Science, 1998, 2010) has emphasised gender equity in all early childhood settings since 2002, and the majority of education settings in Sweden have hired specialist government trained ‘gender pedagogues’, whose role is to advise settings on the language and behaviours that may reinforce gender stereotypes. The goal of the government was to have at least one specialist in every setting by 2004 (Nilsson, 2007). In the years that followed, I became aware of the
Swedish approach to early childhood education which had developed a strong focus on equality for children.

There was controversy in the Swedish media about the move towards enforcing gender equality in early childhood education, stating that it was extreme and may be harmful to children. However, it seems that overall the country has embraced working towards gender equity for children and adults alike. In fact, the 2013 Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2013) named Sweden as a world leader in equality. In April 2015, Sweden officially added the pronoun ‘hen’ to their Swedish Academy’s Dictionary (Svenska Akademiens Ordboksservice [SAO], 2015). Hen is defined as “[a] description/name/ pronoun of a person who does not want to or cannot categorise as a man or a woman”. Not only is ‘hen’ becoming widespread in Sweden’s early childhood settings, but it is likely to become a larger part of the country’s dialogue.

It amazed me to discover that despite the gender equality programs that Sweden has established, it only ranked fourth on the list of countries that are closing the gender gap worldwide (World Economic Forum, 2013). Sweden was beaten by fellow Scandinavian countries including Iceland, Finland and Norway. Australia did not appear anywhere on this list. Across Scandinavia, gender identity and the gender gap are treated as crucial issues to be addressed. There is much that we can explore from these actions. If Australia wants to benefit from working on closing our gender gap and to start recognising the value in implementing gender equity programs and policies, there are examples to be investigated. As with Sweden, starting with young children through their education programs would be a positive beginning as experiences in the early years would make the biggest difference (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Tarwick-Smith, 2018). These programs could address gender equity through the lenses of equality and difference (Fraser, 1996/1997), by promoting equality between the sexes, and emphasising difference rather than normative views of gender roles.

Having completed this research, the data from the educator participants resonated with my personal experiences. While the experiences from each participant varied, there were elements of my personal story that were reflected in their responses. Some similarities included family dynamics around sibling roles in the household and the impact of religious/traditional views on expectations around gender roles. Another similarity was apparent in the participants’ tertiary education surrounding gender. Only a few participants
reported positive experiences in this area, and most of these participants studied at non-Australian institutions. For many, they reported minimal coverage of gender in their tertiary education and expressed the desire to know more about it. (These elements of the participants’ stories are unpacked in Chapters Four, Five and Six.)

1.3 Methodology and study design

The methodology and study design were based upon qualitative phenomenological research methods (Barnacle, 2001; Vagle, 2014). The participants consisted of 12 early childhood educators from kindergarten and long day care settings, and two EYLF developers. The early childhood educator participants were chosen to provide an array of experiences and perceptions across a range of years in the field. The participants were grouped by their number of years in the field in order to capture the generational logics (van der Tuin, 2009) of the early childhood sector in relation to gender. This has been discussed further in Chapter Four (see table 4.3) and Chapter Five. The two EYLF developers were chosen to gain perspectives on how the framework was developed. The data collection utilised a feminist post-structuralist approach and lens. The data was collected through a combination of semi-structured focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The educator participants were involved in both interviews and focus groups, while the EYLF developers were involved in interviews only. For the educator participants, body language and other communicative strategies were noted during focus groups. In both interviews and focus groups, the educator participants were asked to present and identify an artefact that they considered important to them and relevant to the enquiry.
1.4 Thesis design

The thesis chapters are presented in the following order:

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Chapter Two – Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This research investigated early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities and how they perceived these to be formed. An aim pursued in this thesis was to explore how early childhood educators’ views on gender impact practice and influence children’s sense and understanding of gender identity. This aim was addressed through five sub-questions, which included: educators’ beliefs around gender identity formation; children’s understanding of gender; their role in children’s gender development; the issues encountered in relation to gender equity in early childhood settings; support required by educators in order to provide practical solutions for change; and finally why there is silence surrounding gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

In order to address these questions, this literature review examined theoretical perspectives on gender development in children, educators’ views on gender in relation to children’s sense of identity and the possible impact these can have on children's sense and understanding of gender identity. It also explored the impact that teacher education can have on educators’ perceptions of gender and examined the EYLF policy document and its representation of gender. In this chapter, current and past studies carried out in key areas of the research topic will be highlighted, in order to address key questions. The literature discussed is historical and chronological where possible. The literature is mostly drawn from Western scholars, practices and perspectives, as this is the context of the current curriculum and policy documents that frame early childhood education in Australia. Although there are a myriad of studies of gender and early childhood that have been conducted in recent years, much of the relevant research in the area of gender, used in this thesis, was conducted during the last two decades. At times newer research was not available to support sections of the literature review. The researcher endeavoured to include current research where available and relevant.
2.2 Theoretical views on the development of gender

2.2.1 Developmental and socialisation theory

Developmental theory is widely used and accepted among theorists in relation to child development. In fact, developmental stages form the basis for a number of widely followed educational theorists including Rousseau, Freud, Gesell, Erikson and Piaget (Nolan & Raban, 2015; Weber, 1984). Widespread acceptance of developmental theory, and the understanding and use of stages of development have evolved since the 1970s. Initially these stages were accepted as a growth factor but educators now use them as guidelines or ‘analogies’ for how a child might have developed at a certain age (Pieterse, 2009; Weber, 1984). One particular use of developmental theory, based on Piagetian ideas, is called Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (Bredekamp, 1987), which focused on building children’s skills to aid in their natural development and extend their learning to foster this development. Over time DAP has been extended to include a more contextual and cultural view of development (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). DAP focuses on a variety of developmental areas, but does not emphasise children’s sex, gender and sexuality (Blaise, 2009) or recognise their impact on children’s life experiences, learning or development (Blaise & Andrew, 2005).

Developmental theories, in particular DAP, have been critiqued for universalising the child and childhood (Burman, 1994, 2007; Fleer, 1995; Henriques, Holloway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; James & Prout, 1997; Walkerdine, 1990). DAP reinforces the view that childhood is “natural, universal and biologically inherent”, which is produced through an underlying discourse of childhood innocence (Robinson, 2008, p. 115). This notion of childhood innocence is equated with sexual immaturity, in which children are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection (Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Davies, 2016). While children are safeguarded from aspects of sexuality and gender due to their ‘innocence’ (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; Bobier & Martin, 2016); their learning is “sanitized and dominated by a heterosexual matrix of relations” (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 307). Critics argue that DAP practices establish heteronormative discourses through “silencing” non-heteronormative or queer behaviours, identities and practices in the setting (Janmohamed, 2010, p. 306).
Alternatively, socialisation theories often recognise and thus focus on sex. Sex-role socialisation views sexual difference as assumed. Socialisation theorists often believe that the ‘roles’ that children are taught by adults are a superficial social dressing that covers ‘real’ biological difference (Davies, 1989). Within the sex-role socialisation approach it is often believed that a child is taught their sex role by one significant adult but is pressured to maintain the role by peers, media, family and society (Davies, 1989). They do not see the individuals as having agency in the construction of their own gender. Within socialisation theory, the person socialising is understood as the active agent and the person being socialised is a passive recipient who is pressed into a fixed form (Davies, 1989; Halim & Lindner, 2013; Taylor & Price, 2016).

The osmosis socialisation theory (Davies, 1988), “sees gender as a fixed, rational, coherent and unitary aspect of identity which is traditionally or non-traditionally gendered” (MacNaughton, 1996, p. 21). This form of socialisation theory assumes that children develop their gender roles and understanding through a process similar to osmosis and soak up this information simply by being around other children, adults and the media. It presumes that children accept and ‘take up’ the gender offered to them by parents and society, as well as toy companies (Davies, 1988; MacNaughton, 1996). Osmosis socialisation theorists may believe that sexism is reproduced through various social institutions, such as family and school (MacNaughton, 1996). According to this theory, “sexist gender differences in our society are created and maintained because children … automatically absorb sexist messages from other children, from adults and from the media” (MacNaughton, 1998, p. 155).

The two theories explored above have vastly different concepts of children’s development, but both may be used in similar ways in early childhood settings in relation to gender. In practice based on DAP, children’s gender identities may be viewed as naturally developing at a predetermined stage. Exploration of gender outside of normative understandings of gender roles may not be seen as appropriate. The view that children will develop their understanding of gender and sexuality naturally and in stages may lead to educators shutting down or silencing this exploration. It may also lead to an environment where educators do not believe that it is their role to help children explore their gender identities.

Similarly, in practice based on socialisation theory, children’s gender identities may be viewed as inevitable and out of the control of the educator. As with DAP, socialisation theory
removes agency from both the educator and the child. Individuals who base their practice on socialisation theory may believe that gender identity is developed through observation of the individuals and media influences that surround them. While the educator may be able to encourage children’s exploration and expansion of their gender identities, this theory ultimately indicates that the wide array of influences on children’s understanding of their gender identities may be too vast for any educator to counter.

2.2.2 Psychological and sociological studies into gender roles

Researchers’ understandings of gender have evolved over time. There has been a focus on trying to understand the subtleties of masculinity and femininity, and gender differences, through scientific and psychological studies (Robinson & Davies, 2007). Research into the psychology of gender can be traced back to the early 1970s (Chrisler & McCreary, 2010). Prior to this, research into gender had focused on biological differences between males and females, but had begun to shift away from a biological determinist approach towards an understanding of the importance of social and environmental factors (Zosuls, Miller, Ruble, Martin, & Fabes, 2011). In the seminal books and papers published at the time, terms such as ‘gender roles’ and ‘gender identity’ emerged, along with an understanding of the role children and parents played in gender formation (Zosuls et al., 2011). In the decades since, important psychological research and studies of gender have been conducted and have contributed significantly to current understandings of, and theory behind, gender studies (Stewart & McDermott, 2004).

Garai and Scheinfeld (1968) embarked on a comprehensive study into the psychological differences of males and females. They found that females were more concerned with social stimuli of any kind, and were more responsive to the “nuances of relationships as implied by social cues and are more sensitive to the reactions of others toward one another and toward themselves” (p. 235). Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) found that females displayed a greater interest in people and thus had a greater capacity for interpersonal relations. In the 1970s, gender roles were often rigid and behaviours outside of the norm were known as ‘cross-gender’ behaviours (Rekers, 1975). Rekers’ research describes children’s play that fits into the social norms as appropriate behaviour. It was a common belief during this time that children who frequently displayed ‘abnormal’ gender behaviour needed early psychological help to avoid gender identity difficulties later (Rekers, Yates, Willis, Rosen & Taubman,
1976; Stoller 1970). However, some research was emerging to counter these views on females and femininity (Meade, 1981; Nicholson, 1977).

Psychological research over the past six or more decades has collected information on ‘tomboys’, ‘sissy girls’ and other people who do not fit into societal norms (e.g., Hemmer & Kleiber, 1981; Lynn & Solomon, 1959; Martin, 1995; Rekers, Bentler, Rosen, & Lovaas, 1977). Studies have examined males and females to assess masculine and feminine behaviour. In many cases, these studies examined the individual’s behaviour but did not directly question why society marginalises people into strict gender groupings with behavioural expectations. Robinson and Davies (2007) highlighted that much of the research into the area of ‘tomboys’ and ‘sissy girls’ had been conducted through the discipline of psychology (Carr, 1998; Reay, 2001). Bailey, Bechtold and Berenbaum (2002) completed a study on a selection of ‘tomboys’, comparing them with their brothers and sisters in areas of playmate preference, gender identity and sex-typed activities and interests. They found that in almost all cases that the actions of ‘tomboys’ were significantly more masculine than those of their sisters, and less so than their brothers.

The evolution of the psychological approach to research in gender is likely to have had a large impact on the ways in which early childhood educators viewed children’s behaviour. Research referring to behaviours that fall outside of ‘stereotypical gendered behaviours’ as ‘abnormal’ is likely to have created negative connotations around certain behaviours undertaken by children. The use of the terms ‘tomboys’ and ‘sissy girls’ may also have developed an underlying discourse of ‘difference’ or ‘incorrectness’, even when validating the identities by naming them. Psychological approaches to understanding gender often proceeded with an understanding that there were normal or abnormal ways of doing gender. Gender, whilst influenced by culture, was seen to be an essential aspect of self that unfolded or was expressed within a cultural context (Altman, 1992).

Sociologists also paid attention to how cultural context might constrain or enable various ways of being gendered in the world (Brickell, 2006; Risman, 2004). The implication of these ways of thinking is that if an individual were to realise their potential, the cultural conditions that support such an outcome needed to be in place. This suggests that identity and culture are relational. Sociologists, like their psychological counterparts, positioned some ways of being gendered as deviant, at risk of falling away from an expected trajectory, and, therefore, in
need of being repaired and normalised (Altman, 1992). While psychology and sociology had some similarities in their approaches to examining gender, sociologists of childhood critiqued developmental psychology for its focus on cognitive development and clear stages of growth (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998).

Initially, sociologists viewed sex as biological and fixed, with social meanings constituting gender imposed (Oakley, 1972). Sociologists Money and Ehrhardt (1972) believe that gender socialisation of children begins from birth. They focus on the biological development of chromosomes, genitalia and hormones, and argue that these, along with other developing sex attributes, contribute to the child’s identification as male or female. They state that the child’s view of gender identity solidifies over time but only becomes active at puberty (Fausto-Sterling, 2012). Gould (1977) argues that research into sociological views of gender was problematic due to its heavy focus on role theory, referring to the acting out of social processes and socially defined categories, and suggests that it would have been helpful to implement other paradigms and theories.

In the 1970s and 1980s, there were many sociological studies on gender that examined the difference in treatment of boys and girls in early childhood settings and at home (Bernard, 1981/1982). Harrington, Block and Block (1978) suggest that had more fathers been included in the research, a wider range of differential treatment of children based on gender by their parents would have been prevalent in studies. Huston (1983), for example, states that fathers are more likely than mothers to treat boys and girls differently. In early sociological research around gender in early childhood settings, some researchers examined dynamics between children with a particular focus on the experience of girls (e.g., Bernard, 1981/1982; Brown & France, 1986; Nicholson, 1977). Bernard (1981/1982) examines the experiences of girls under five who are born into what she refers to as a “pink world” (p. 133), and states that after the first four or five years of life, a “little girl” only gradually begins to learn about other worlds, including “the male world’s contempt for girls” (p. 135). As Bernard’s work suggests, some of the research in sociology during this period was informed by feminism (Balme & Bulbeck, 2008; England, 1999). In particular, Oakley (1972), who identified as a second wave feminist (Bunkle, 2016), was one of the first sociologists to distinguish between sex as a biological component and gender as a cultural and psychological construct.
The sociological and psychological literature referred to has produced some important ideas around gender, and these schools of thought continue to inform thinking and practice today. In particular, the aim to address inequality in the sociological literature remains a necessary and significant objective (Fraser, 1996/1997). In recent years, however, the approach to gender research has begun to change, evolving from a focus on masculinity and femininity, as well as ‘correct’ ways of engaging in gender roles, to a more expansive understanding of gender and a more expansive series of aims (Osgood & Robinson, 2017). Some of these newer theoretical approaches have been influenced by various feminist movements that not only seek to address inequality but also seek a more radical proliferation of difference and interrogation of the normative mainstream (Fraser, 1996/1997). The next section will explore some of these feminist theories and how they have impacted educational and social approaches to gender.

2.2.3 Feminist theories of gender politics

Feminist theories and approaches to gender focus on the politics of construction of gender. Nancy Fraser’s work on justice explores the principle of participatory parity, the social arrangements that permit people to participate as peers (2007). Gender parity – which Fraser explains is a qualitative condition of being on par with others, not a count or quota – is achieved through redistribution, recognition and representation (1996/1997; 2009). This requires questioning the way gender functions to impact distribution of a number of relevant cultural goods, such as employment, safety, income and success (Fraser, 1996/1997), seeking recognition of sexual difference or deconstructing the concept of the masculine and feminine, and exploring issues of representation, identity and difference (Fraser, 2007). The politics of distribution, where equality and erasure of gender difference is sought, and the politics of representation, where acknowledgement of difference and an expansion of representations of and ways of being gendered is sought, have been constructed as a binary. Feminist politics is thus required to deconstruct that binary (Fraser, 1996/1997). This is relevant to early childhood as this is the time that children begin to recognise and make sense of gender. The construction of gender and the concept of the masculine and feminine have been questioned and deconstructed by early childhood researchers (Blaise, 2005; Campbell, Alexander, & Smith, 2017; Campbell, Smith, & Alexander, 2017; MacNaughton, 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2014).
Some feminist writers suggest that the feminist struggle can be seen historically and politically as three tiered (Kristeva, 1981; Moi, 1985). While Kristeva's work has been particularly influential in the field of psychoanalytic theory, her article Women's Time (1981) explores female subjectivity and feminist struggle and is particularly relevant to feminist postructuralism, the theoretical stance of this thesis. Kristeva proposes that there are three generations of feminist struggle, which do not imply a chronology and can co-exist in one historical time. Moi (1985) characterises these three generations as tiers, and this three-tiered approach has been cited in this thesis as it aligns with the way that the social and cultural contexts in the research have been conceptualised.

The first tier is an equal opportunity model, which is based on demanding equal access, pay and equal resources for males and females (Alloway, 1995; Davies, 1989). The first-tier perspective is that educational programs should ensure that females should be given the same opportunities as males and be given equal access to resources, teacher time and attention (Alloway, 1995). In this thesis, this has been aligned with Fraser’s (1996/1997) notion of equality and distribution. In early childhood, a setting that subscribes to notions of equality might strive for the equal distribution of resources and materials to children and for the careful use of language used in the settings to ensure that children are not treated differently based on sex/gender. Additionally, they might strive to bring in more male educators to address the gender imbalance and ensure equal pay and conditions are provided to all educators, which would include addressing any obstacles to women’s participation in work.

The second tier is a gender-inclusive model that questions why females should have to break into male domains (Davies, 1989; Hughes, 2002). The second-tier perspective critiques the first tier and questions why it is important for females to get ahead in a man’s world. Applied to the educational sphere, programs aligned with the second tier would emphasise valuing the female contribution and female qualities, and would question whether incursion into the male world is a worthwhile path to travel (Alloway, 1995). In this thesis, this has been considered in relation to Fraser’s (1996/1997) notion of representation and difference. This can be seen in early childhood settings in relation to the gendered nature of early childhood teaching. According to the notion of representation, early childhood education and early childhood as a profession would be valued and respected more highly in society. It would celebrate early childhood as a feminised profession. It would focus on women’s abilities and strengths and would highlight these to the children.
The third tier looks at expanding how gender is done, for instance, by contesting existing gender binaries. This is aligned with a post-structuralist approach (Alloway, 1995). The third-tier perspective views maleness and femaleness as a culturally constructed binary that is dichotomous, and rejects this metaphysical view (Alloway, 1995). It aims for liberation from the strict binary that gendered identities are understood and lived, and all the oppositions they entail (Davies, 1989). It strives to interrogate the constraining binaries that, in turn, are linked with other binaries that connect certain attributes to socially constructed understandings and enactments of maleness or femaleness, for instance connectedness/separateness and tenderness/strength. The desired result of post-structuralist deconstruction of binaries is that rather than gender being constructed in limiting ways, influenced by predefined notions, a diversity of ways of being gendered would be available to all people (Alloway, 1995; Davies, 1989). In early childhood, a setting that subscribes to this notion would actively critique the gender binary and stereotyped gender roles. This would be evident in the work with children as program plans would involve expansive pedagogies around gender that strive to help children question gendered limitations and build an understanding of the complex nature of gender. An expansive approach would be implemented across all aspects of the children’s education including transitions, language and materials. The staffing would be based on individual knowledge, skills, philosophies and pedagogies rather than the sex or gender.

The difficulty with achieving the goals associated with the third tier stems from the fact that individuals are part of a cultural context that has a lengthy history of strictly separated gendered identities, and are subject to this from birth. Gender is linked to identity within culture to such an extent that it is understood as a natural fact rather than something people have learned to see as natural (Davies, 2003). Referring to aspects of the self as being socially constructed draws attention to the deeply embedded ways that these constructed aspects of self are experienced and become core elements of identity. The male-female binary has become one of the most basic metaphysical constructions. It is the first principle and unquestionable base on which so much rests (Davies, 2003). Davies (1989) believes that work at the third tier needs to be combined with work at the other two tiers to “eventually bring about significant change” (p. 71). This will, however, entail difficulties as the effects of constructions of gender are deep and subtle.

The argument being pursued here, in line with Fraser (1996/1997), is that it is possible for strategies seeking equity to coexist with strategies that seek to support an expansion of ways
of being gendered in the world. Gender is inescapably political and this is also true in early childhood settings. These settings seek to “extend and enrich children’s learning” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) and provide them with the best possible start to life, which should include addressing their experiences of being gendered subjects. The political and theoretical framework and ideas outlined above provide an interesting way of thinking about what working in this space might entail. Working towards bettering the experiences of children in early childhood settings, in relation to gender, will in part involve constructing contexts that address inequality, challenge normativities and support further diversity. The key argument is that a variety of approaches might be used to reflect on what is being done, and a number might be used in relation to imagining what might be done. It is also necessary to consider that, in some cases, equal practice may not lead to equality (e.g., Cresswell, Rowe, & Withers, 2002). The following section will explore feminist post-structuralist theory, which corresponds with the third tier of feminism, and provides ways to interrogate, deconstruct and expand notions of gender.

2.2.4 Feminist post-structuralist theory

The political theories explored above indicate there are many approaches to trying to address inequalities produced on account of gender in any given cultural context. This subsection will aim to deepen an understanding of gender itself via a consideration of feminist post-structuralist theory. This theoretical approach has been examined in detail to build an understanding of gender through this lens, and, in part, it will form the basis for the approach to this research. The term post-structuralism is generally used to describe the mechanisms of power as enacted through language and discourse, and how meaning and power are constructed, enacted, and opposed in our society (Blaise, 2005). Feminist post-structuralism has added to this theoretical landscape, focusing, in part, on the absence of women and femininity from Western thought and consideration (Weedon, 2000). It also focuses on the tensions between gender equity and diversity (Fraser, 1996/1997), and entails a commitment to personal and cultural change (Blaise, 2005).

Foucault (1975) provides a way of thinking about how power relations within society operate. In relation to gender, the feminist post-structuralist approach examines how power relations in society are gendered (Grieshaber, 1998; Lyttleton-Smith, 2017). Foucault’s work on power and power relations can be central to the gender dynamics in children (Lowe, 1998). Lowe
(1998), for example, found that children showed a great awareness of the power relationships between females and males, and could clearly define the characteristics of a person with power and, importantly, understood what this meant. Power dynamics embedded in and formed from dominant discourses in society (Robinson & Diaz, 2006) can be deployed in early childhood settings. According to Foucault (1969/1972), society perpetuates certain social relationships that validate and reaffirm the power and privilege of particular groups over others (Robinson & Diaz, 2006).

Feminist post-structuralism is valuable to the field of early childhood education as it offers a way of producing new knowledge by using post-structural theories of language, agency, subjectivity and discourse to understand how power is exerted and functions in the early childhood setting (Blaise, 2005), and to imagine and narrate new ways of being. Dillabough (2006) also distinguishes post-structuralism from structuralism, and some strands of feminist theory, in that it insists that “gender identity is not a coherent or stable narrative to be known in any ultimate sense” (p. 22), nor is it a single monolithic narrative or way of being. Cultural contexts within post-structural ways of knowing produce gendered subjects in a multiplicity of ways, collectively and individually (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2001; Youdell, 2010).

One aspect of the feminist post-structuralist approach is that it critiques the view that gender, as a social construct, identifies particular acts or behaviours that are understood to be appropriate for one particular sex (Bohan, 1997). The approach also places emphasis on how gender is formed through children’s interactions with others, their actions, conversations with others and the social world (Blaise, 2009; MacNaughton, 1996, 1998). Children develop their sense of masculinity and femininity from society. They view reality based on the world around them and then proceed to understand themselves through this view (MacNaughton, 1996). Another belief associated with feminist post-structuralism is that gender inequalities exist because of living in a society that has dominant ideas about the correct way to be male and female (MacNaughton, 1996, 1998). This belief produces a ‘gender order’ where some ideas are seen to be better and more right than others (MacNaughton, 1998). This gender order creates inequalities and segregation. Without a gender order or correct way to be male and female, these inequalities would not exist. MacNaughton (1998) surmises that in addition to inequalities and segregation, normalising gender discourses can problematise children’s choices in taking up different gendered performances and behaviours, as children may not fit completely into the dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity (Robinson & Davies,
2007). One of the key focuses of feminist post-structuralist theory is the interrogation of various normativities, or pervasive ways of understanding and being, often experienced unconsciously, which constrain expansivities (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1975).

Feminist post-structuralists believe that children construct their gender by positioning themselves and being positioned inside masculine and feminine discourses available to them in society (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Davies, 1989, 2003; MacNaughton, 1996, 1998). Through this positioning, children from a young age learn that there are proper ways of being male and female (MacNaughton, 1998), which are normative. Despite the view that children construct their gender identity through observing and interacting with other people and their environment, this does not mean that children take up everything they are presented with or told about their gender identities. The idea that children are blank slates to be written upon or sponges with no initial agency has been discounted in psychological literature (e.g., Cole, 1996/2003). In the event that an adult tries to convince a child that masculinity and femininity may have different meanings from those they currently identify with and accept, the child may accept these different meanings, consider them or may ignore what does not fit their current understanding of gender discourses (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001; MacNaughton, 1998).

This supports the need for educators to help children develop their understandings of their own gender identities. In order for this to be achieved, carefully crafted gender equity plans are needed for early childhood educators. These plans could provide educators with guidance on how to support children in their gender identity development, and could also suggest various resources and how to use them. In doing so, these plans could address issues of language, agency, subjectivity, discourse and power (Blaise, 2005, 2009; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). These additional resources may also support educators to work with children towards the valuable aim of expanding gendered possibilities.

2.2.5 Queer theory

A common discourse that targets educators who endeavour to do work that supports expansive gender identities is that they have a ‘radical agenda’, which means being positioned as political and pro-queer (Taylor, 2017). Such work, however, does not encourage all children to ‘do’ their genders in unconventional ways, although in this thesis
the proliferation of gendered identities is not viewed as negative or shameful. Similarly, proponents of diversity agendas are often accused of criticising heterosexuality. It is important to note that queer theory does not seek to ‘attack’ or erase heterosexual practices, but rather to determine how such discourses became embedded in society, and how they have managed to maintain power over marginalised identities and discourses (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990).

Queer theory positions heterosexuality as an aspect of subjectivity that is “neither natural nor freely chosen” (Blaise, 2004, p. 4) but rather a culturally produced political institution that can disempower women and other marginalised groups, and can limit expansion or difference. It is the unconscious allegiance to any subjective position, and the limits that this entails, that queer theory questions. Many queer theorists would argue that heterosexuality, which is often bound up in a division of genders, can produce sexist inequalities that may be present and often overlooked in classrooms, including early childhood settings (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Cahill & Theilheimer, 1999; Davies, 2003). Heterosexuality could be said to have supported notions of gender that in turn have been maintained and enforced in educational settings. This can be evident through various rewards for traditionally appropriate and gendered behaviours and punishments for deviating from conventional gendered behaviours (Blaise, 2005).

In order to understand sexuality and the current discourses around it, it is necessary to consider the history, cultural beliefs and practices and discursive frameworks that produced the current context (Dowsett, 2017). This can be seen particularly through the historical development of the notion of sexuality. The view of heterosexuality as the norm in Western society occurred during the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. This was achieved through studies on sexuality through the domains of science, psychiatry and medicine (Foucault, 1969/1972, 1978). The findings of these studies formed the science of sexuality and produced the concept that there were individuals whose sexuality deviated from what had become the ‘norm’ (Foucault, 1978), and that these individuals were an identity type. Surtees and Gunn (2010) claim that this was the birth of the homosexual and that “s/he became ‘other’ to the heterosexual” (p. 42). Foucault’s work (1969/1972, 1978) revolutionised theorists’ perceptions of sexuality (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Foucault suggests, for instance, that the perception of homosexuality as an ‘identity’ category was a somewhat recent invention, as prior to 1869 it was viewed as random acts of sexual perversion that could be punished
(Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Foucault critically investigates the way that sexual identities are constituted and ‘governed’ by discourses operating in society (Robinson & Díaz, 2006). This discursive construction of the homosexual as ‘Other’, and the consequent policing of all sexualities (Foucault, 1978), has had a lasting impact on society.

Queer theory, developed in the mid-1980s, emerged from the growing interest in sexuality, particularly in light of Foucault’s work (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Foucault’s writing on sexuality and the body contributed significantly to queer theory (Pilcher & Whelehan, 2004). Foucault’s concept of the ‘regimes of truth’ drew attention to the way that discourse and power determine, and are embedded in, various truths (Robinson & Díaz, 2006). The normalisation of heterosexuality is evident through everyday language, interactions, and the practices and policies of individual people and social institutions (Robinson & Díaz, 2006). This is the context that supports the idea that heterosexuality is closely linked with gendered identities and plays a large role in guiding and enforcing these in our society (Butler, 1990). The normalisation of heterosexuality, and the way it has been linked to gendered identities, has significant implications for children.

For preschool age children, Pogrebin (1980), for instance, believes there are often assumed links between gender and sexuality made by the culture at large. Pogrebin states that this is evident in three key assumptions surrounding gender and young children’s emerging sexualities: first, the belief that gender roles determine sexuality and that therefore children should enact gender in normative ways; second, the belief that a non-normative influence (e.g., home, environment, parents) could make a child homosexual; and third, the presence of cultural homophobia in the idea of the unacceptability of non-normative sexualities generally (Pogrebin, 1980). These beliefs demonstrate linkages between gender and sexuality and how normative notions surrounding gender and sexuality can play out to limit possibilities. These assumptions are widely accepted despite research suggesting that even though gender and sexuality are connected, non-normative ways of being gendered are not necessarily productive of non-normative sexualities (Pogrebin, 1980). It is important to note that, in this thesis, the proliferation of non-normative sexualities is not viewed as problematic.

In this text, gender is positioned as complex and children are positioned as constantly creating and re-creating meanings about gender and sexuality. Through children’s social practices such as their talk and interaction, they reinforce what it means to be a boy and/or a
girl (Blaise, 2009). To fully understand children as gendered and sexualised beings it is crucial to recognise “how gender and heterosexuality intimately and powerfully intersect in the definition and normalisation of each other” (Robinson, 2005, p. 21). Queer theory builds on the ideas of feminist post-structuralism and focuses on heterosexual discourses that influence the social construction of gender through the lens of the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Blaise, 2009). This has the potential to support expansion and difference. The ‘heterosexual matrix’ has been explored in the next subsection.

2.2.6 The heterosexual matrix

The term ‘heterosexual matrix’ is used to “designate that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” (Butler, 1990, p. 151). To view gender from a queer perspective, one must see it as an activity that is performed through a cultural normativity referred to as the ‘heterosexual matrix’ (Blaise, 2005). The heterosexual matrix requires gender to be performed in line with a masculine/feminine binary that regulates gender and gender relations, and normalises heterosexuality as the correct way to be (Blaise, 2005). The normalisation of heterosexuality also creates the non-heterosexual ‘Other’ who does not fit this matrix, often on account of the way that gender is done by that subject. The heterosexual matrix is maintained through policing and shaming the ‘Other’ (Butler, 1990; Renold, 2006; Singh, 2011), which is also sometimes accomplished by the person who is positioned as ‘Other’. In the process of policing and shaming the ‘Other’, the normative centre is paradoxically also policed and takes shape. To be considered ‘normal’ requires an ‘Other’ that must be viewed as ‘abnormal’ (Renold, 2006). Heterosexuality with its required masculine or feminine performances of gender, experienced as certain and fixed and anchored to an essential self, are in fact unstable and fluid, as they are not anchored to an essential core but rather are dependent upon the contrasted non-normative ‘Other’.

In early childhood settings, heterosexual norms are viewed as limiting and regulatory when they encourage children to maintain their gendered roles (Blaise, 2005). Teachers and children often accept and idealise heterosexual norms without realising that they maintain gender inequity (Atkinson, 2002; Blaise, 2005; Robinson & Davies, 2007). This may be due to educators attributing gender roles to biological differences (Butler, 1990). It is therefore the educators’ assumptions and expectations of heterosexuality that presents bodies as gendered (Robinson, 2005). This highlights the importance of helping educators to become
aware of why children may desire to take up and reproduce oppressive gender roles in their play (Blaise, 2005). It indicates how discourses of heterosexuality can regulate the gendered social order of educational settings (Blaise, 2005), which leads to children doing gendered performances and thus reproducing gendered social orders. The act of ‘doing’ gender within the confines of the heterosexual matrix in turn reinforces and builds on the heterosexual matrix, which in turn supports and enables further acts of doing gender through this matrix. Butler (1990) describes these acts as performativity.

Children’s gendered play and social interaction can reproduce ways of being that also reproduce cultural contexts. Cultural contexts are steeped in binaries related to sexualities, which in turn support gendered versions of children’s play. Without addressing and challenging gender binarism, binary gendered practices and gender inequalities will persist (Callahan & Nicholas, 2018). The deconstruction of the male/female binary and the blurring of this constructed separation, in the interests of constructing cultural contexts that might support and enable more expansive gendered ways of being (Butler 1990; Sedgwick, 1990), is consistent with the aims of this research.

2.2.7 Gender and performativity through Butler’s gender trouble

Gender is not only a noun but also a verb (Blaise, 2009), and a process through which different human cultures make sense of sexual identity (Butler, 1990). Butler’s theory of performativity (1990, 2004) outlines her thinking in relation to ‘doing’ gender. According to this theory, gender is created through repetition and recitation and these are the methods through which ontological effects are established. Queer theorists move away from theories about gender as being determined by and a reflection of biological differences and sex (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990; Osborne, Segal, & Butler, 1994). They suggest that what is regularly seen and experienced as an expression of ‘nature’ is actually a complex effect where performances of gender come to be seen and experienced as natural and reflective of nature (Alsop, Fitzsimons, & Lennon, 2002). If gender is performative, then it follows that “the reality of gender is itself produced as an effect of the performance” (Butler, 2004, p. 218). Butler (1990) emphasises the importance of recognising that gender is not a reflection of a ‘natural’ process caused only by biology, but rather that what is seen as biological and outside of cultural influence is actually the product of various repetitions influenced and enabled by culture/discourse, producing gendered bodies.
Butler (1988) argues that it is the institution of gender through the stylisation of the body that helps to define gender as the way in which “bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p. 519). It is when these acts fit within parameters set by “various forces that police the social appearance of gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 44), and where these are constructed as normative, that gendered possibilities may be impacted, or perhaps limited. Butler (1988) also refers to the performativity of gender as ‘an act’, using the word performative in the ‘dramatic’ and ‘non-referential’ sense, and in doing so, highlights the historical dimensions of gendered performance. It is understood that the gender performance that the subject enacts existed prior to the individual arriving ‘on the scene’ (pp. 521-522). Butler (1988) extends this by suggesting that:

Gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again. (p. 526)

It is also important to note that as people perform gendered behaviours, enabled by cultural contexts, they build and contribute to cultural contexts (i.e., there is a dynamic or circular relationship between culture and people). While Butler’s work is embedded in anti-foundationalist philosophical traditions, cultural psychologists and sociologists who write within different traditions also argue that children reproduce cultural practices and reproduce culture. Bourdieu (1977), for instance, in work about tertiary students and university workers inhabiting university cultures, considered the way that the actions of people reproduced cultures embedded in values that produced disadvantage on the basis of socio-economic status. Willis (1977) also argued that working class young people may engage in the reproduction of behaviours that reproduce dominant culture and that cement their position as disadvantaged within such cultural arrangements. Approaches in early childhood education have tended to look to cultural psychologists like Bruner (1990), Cole (1996/2003) and Vygotsky (1978). It would seem that there are writers from a range of academic disciplines and traditions that speak to the connections between the doing of things in cultural contexts and the reproductive cultural effects of such doings.

Butler (1990) believes there is no gender identity “behind the expressions of gender” but rather gender identity is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to
be its results” (p. 25). It is important to understand that gender performativity does not involve selecting one’s gender each day (Butler, 1993). Rather, it is about a series of choices made within discursive contexts, some subtle and some not so subtle, to do with repeating, performing, and embodying gender norms through a person’s language and actions (Blaise, 2005), which come to be seen by others and experienced by self as ‘core’, as normal and essential. In fact, Butler (1988) believes that in most societies the individual has little choice over how they enact their gender roles. Much of this is done unconsciously. She compares performing one’s gender to acting from an existing cultural “script” (p. 526). Salih (2004) builds on this idea and explains that gender performativity is enacted in a “regulatory frame” and that “the subject has a limited number of ‘costumes’ from which to make a constrained choice of gender style” (p. 56) within any given cultural context.

There is some critique surrounding Butler’s gender performativity. Hood-Williams and Cealy Harrison (1998), for example, critique the concept of gender’s ontological status. They question “whether a new ontology is founded on the equally foundationalist conception of gender performativity” (as cited in Salih, 2004, p. 60). Moi (1999) extends on this idea, stating that Butler “instated power as her god” (p. 47) and questions the idea of replacing an essential gendered subject with one that is performative. However, Butler’s performativity is useful in understanding the constructed nature of gender and how cultural contexts can impact the ways children take up being boys and girls (Robinson, 2005). It is social context that mediates the gendered roles children produce as they reproduce cultural practices and perhaps work hard at doing these practices in ways where they are seen to ‘do it right’ (Butler, 1990). The social context and culture impacts on performativity by enabling the possibility to do gender in certain ways; this is the reason it is important to think about the relationship between the early childhood space and gendered possibilities (Lyttleton-Smith, 2017).

Definitions of masculinity and femininity that are present in different early childhood settings can differ according to the sociocultural context within which the early childhood setting is located (Robinson, 2005). In some settings there might, for instance, be conservative notions regarding gender and in other settings there might be more radical notions. Transgressive acts to counter gender stereotypes may therefore take different forms in different contexts. It is important to note that while some transgressive acts may not result in the subversion of more generally understood or experienced gender norms, they remain transgressive nonetheless.
Conversely, it is also important to note that what may appear to be transgressive may instead serve to reinforce limiting ways of being gendered depending on the social context (Renold, 2005).

The boundaries of normative masculinity and femininity are also defined and mediated by race, history, ethnicity, sexuality, politics and time (Blaise, 2005; Gansen, 2017; Robinson, 2005; Robinson & Davies 2007). The impact of these social categories can be seen to police gendered performances in early childhood settings, where children often struggle to engage with their own abilities and understand their identities, and educators often unknowingly enable or constrain their behaviours. For example, when educators justify that rough boys are “just being boys” and a rough girl is acting inappropriately (Blaise, 2005; Reay, 2001), such decisions would be influenced by a combination of some of the social contexts mentioned above.

This section has examined some of the impacts of various normativities on gender and sexuality and explored how these might function to constrain and regulate differences via labelling them as ‘Other’. Butler’s theory of performativity (1990) aims to support the expansion of gender difference by providing a framework with which readers can unpack the connections between gendered constructions of subjectivity and cultural context. Butler’s work is predominantly focused on expansion. Prior to the introduction of such work, there was a focus on addressing inequalities in gender and sexuality with the aim of erasing difference. The erasure of inequality continues to be an important and relevant goal that can coexist with feminist post-structuralist and queer theory that seeks the proliferation of difference and an expansion of the ways that gender is enacted. The next section will continue with a focus on performativity theory as it is relevant to early childhood policy, practices, educators and settings.

2.2.8 Performativity in early childhood education

In education, performativity is also present “where performance related practices, such as teaching and learning, are expected and regulated through measurable criteria” (Kilderry, 2015, p. 632). Performativity in the education environment is, however, more than educators accounting for their work and meeting performance requirements (Kilderry, 2015). This theory is more pervasive than consciously meeting criteria, as it can more subtly regulate
teaching by employing “judgments, [and] comparisons … as [a] means of control, attrition and change” (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Policy frameworks, such as the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), are an example of a context that aims to support particular types of performances that are productive of identities (Gildersleeve & Kleinhesselink, 2017). While these policy contexts might be critiqued on the basis that they are normative, the framework can be seen as a context that encourages and produces the performance of certain kinds of professional identities.

Early childhood educators are being discursively produced within these contexts, and in turn reproduce these contexts through their actions. The performativity encouraged by educational policy contexts can steer teaching practices in positive, albeit normative, directions in implicit and explicit ways. It is also important to note, however, that the stress of critical assessment from an outside source can have a negative impact on practice and an educator’s sense of professionalism and autonomy. Kilderry (2015) conducted a study into the evolution of policy level performativity in the early childhood education environment. She suggests that in the current political climate, early childhood education in Australia relies heavily on outside validation and rules, and that this dimension of performativity has become an increasingly prevalent part of the system.

Along with the introduction of the framework, early childhood educators are likely to have experienced “surveillance via spot checks, licensing visits and validation processes” (Fenech, Sumson, & Goodfellow, 2008, p. 41), which also functions as a way of governing performance. It is important to remember, however, that while the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) offers useful guidelines and boundaries for educators, it is not meant to be delivered in a prescriptive fashion in practice. On occasion it would seem that it can function in more regulatory and restrictive ways as it is sometimes interpreted as being a framework that outlines the one proper way of acting (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). When educators interpret the framework as directive and prescriptive, and comply with these perceived guidelines, it may function to support the construction of narrow professional identities, practices and early childhood contexts. This overly compliant professional identity may cause conflict, as educators perform professional identities that are constructed from multiple contexts in addition to the EYLF.
Kilderry (2015) reveals that some unintended implications of professional accountabilities "can result in teachers disregarding performative demands and showing resistance to the performative expectations” (p. 649). A study conducted by Fenech, Sumsion, Robertson and Goodfellow (2008) discovered there are mixed feelings from educators about the normalisation of a policy-consistent performativity in early childhood education. Kilderry (2015) suggests that “teachers have shown dissatisfaction to new accountability demands and [have] resisted some measures” (p. 1), and that increased accountability and the expectation of compliance has affected early childhood practice, leading to “considerable dissatisfaction” among some educators (Kilderry, 2015, p. 647). Fenech et al. (2008) found that the more experience an early childhood professional has, “the more dissatisfied they are with the regulatory environment” (p. 11), as educators felt that their professional autonomy was undermined by these expectations and regulations. Early childhood educators who have been in the field for many years are likely to have had the experience of constructing their professional identities in contexts that offered greater autonomy in practice. This aspect of professional identity lingers in the present and sits in conflict with the professional identity expectations in highly regulated environments that are perceived to be more compliant and less autonomous.

Research into discourses surrounding curriculum documents mirrored this, indicating that newer educators to the field engaged with and had their identities shaped by curriculum documents more than mid or late career educators (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). These elements of professional identity forged in past contexts may drive alternative non-compliant behaviours. The government policy changes and requirements were developed without early childhood educators having control or input (Kilderry, 2015), which in some cases may lead to a sense of fatalism. Such a relationship with policies and expectations may constrain educators from designing environments that enable children to explore views of themselves that can increase individual and social horizons.

Early childhood educators occupy multiple contexts, each of which impact professional identity (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Contexts include being a teacher, teacher education, time in the profession, departmental policy frameworks (EYLF), the early childhood setting, ethnicity, gender, nationality, local communities, ability, sexuality, religion, family, history and so forth, and each of these contexts is relational. Educators inhabit multiple past and present contexts, which impact their professional identity (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). It is
important to note that not only is professional identity performatively constructed; this work
takes place in multiple contexts producing a professional identity that is not unitary but rather
is complex and multifaceted. Early childhood educators’ professional identities are therefore
comprised of multiple relational elements constructed in multiple relational environments
over time. On occasion, some of these elements may exist in tension, may coexist or may be
combined (see also subsection 2.2.7 on the connections between gender, ethnicity and so
forth). This multiplicity affords differing awareness and generative opportunities (Crowhurst
& Emslie, 2018).

The EYLF discussed above is one of the many contexts that is productive of educators’
professional identities. The framework may support them to do expansive work in the space
of gender. If the goal, however, is to support an expansion of ways of being gendered, it may
remain important to draw upon additional contexts that might support early childhood
educators to do this work.

2.3 Educators’ understanding of gender identities, attitudes towards gender and
impacts

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is one of the multiple contexts that inform professional identity.
The early childhood educator will also have inhabited various contexts relating to gender that
are significant here. Every educator, for instance, has individual experiences and beliefs
surrounding the concept of gender (Snowman et al., 2009) that have developed in various
contexts. Educators’ variance in attitudes surrounding gender may be due to gender bias,
which is often based on deep-seated values and stereotypes (Snowman et al., 2009). Gender
bias is an individual’s method of perceiving others based on their gender (MacNaughton,
2000; Snowman et al., 2009). These might be positive or negative responses to one gender in
particular or preconceived ideas about what the characteristics of each gender entail
(MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Sometimes bias is so subtle or ingrained in
a person’s thoughts and actions that they are not aware it exists (MacNaughton, 2000).

Children who do not conform to traditional gender roles may challenge educators and
inadvertently introduce the relationship between sex, gender roles and sexuality (Lloyd &
Duveen, 1992). Research has found that many people assume that children who do not follow
tradition gender roles may be homosexual (Cahill & Adams, 1997). Educators sometimes
label boys as homosexual and say that non-conforming girls are tomboys (Robinson & Davies, 2007). Educators appear to have little concern about non-conforming girls whereas boys are often seen as “psychologically ill-adjusted” (Cahill & Adams, 1997, p. 519). There is a clear gap in the research surrounding society’s cultural standards of homophobia and the impact this would have on educators’ understanding of gender roles (Cahill & Adams, 1997; Robinson & Davies, 2007). Heterosexuality and the notion of ‘appropriate’ gendered behaviours are influenced by the heterosexual matrix (see subsection 2.2.6), which in turn may regulate educators’ behaviours by informing their beliefs and feelings around the appropriateness or inappropriateness of children’s behaviours in relation to sexuality and gender. Negative views of homosexuality, which may be related to the heterosexual matrix (Blaise, 2005), may influence the ways in which educators view gender roles among children (Robinson & Davies, 2007). As outlined in subsection 2.2.5, educators may treat children differently due to beliefs about what is appropriate and unconsciously reward them for particular gendered behaviours (Blaise, 2005; Halim, Ruble, Tamis-LeMonda, Shrout, & Amodio, 2016).

Cahill and Adams (1997) conducted a study of early childhood educators to examine their beliefs around gender roles, how these were related to their understanding of children’s gender roles, and whether they viewed the socialisation process differently for boys and girls and explored the link between these attitudes and their views on homosexuality. The study found that educators expressed openness to children’s gender roles but that they felt more comfortable with girls exploring gender outside ‘set’ roles. The study also discovered a link between discomfort with open gender roles and homophobia, which fits with the research that suggests that educators’ attitudes influence the ways they teach and thus the children. This view is also shared by Renold (2005, 2006) who stated that girls who fall outside of the expected gender role range are often viewed with less concern about their sexual orientation.

Studies have found that many educators treat children differently based on their sex and have highly gender-typed expectations of their behaviour in educational settings (Ewing & Taylor, 2009; Halim et al., 2016). This is often evident through the imparting of rewards and punishments based on the educators’ desired behaviours from the boys and girls (Ewing & Taylor, 2009). It is interesting to note that while gender stereotypes in educational settings seem to have lessened over the years, studies find that girls and boys receive differential treatment and messages about appropriate behaviours (Koch, 2003; Owens, 2016). An early
research study (Fagot, 1977) found that educators often praised boys for engaging in traditionally masculine activities and criticised them for engaging in stereotypically feminine activities. The same was found for educators’ responses to girls’ play.

Research suggests that early childhood settings can be highly gendered environments (Alloway, 1995). The beliefs and behaviours outlined above are both productive of such environments and produced within such highly gendered environments. Considering these settings, it is necessary for early childhood educators to be aware of the ways in which their practices might be encouraging or discouraging children’s participation (Tonyan & Howes, 2003). It also becomes important to consider the ways that their practices may be complicit in the construction of broader gendered cultures of learning that are supportive of an expansion of gendered ways of being. As research has shown that gender, however subtle, does impact many educators’ actions with children (e.g., Blaise, 2005), it is necessary to develop methods of helping educators to become aware of this, and to provide practical solutions for educators to enable them to actively address gender inequalities in their settings (e.g., Lyttleton-Smith, 2017). It is also important to recognise the connections between awareness and context and to set about the task of constructing environments that may support these things to happen (see section 2.2.3 on Kristeva).

Interest in the impact of early childhood educators on children’s gendered ways of being emerged in the early 1990s. A focus developed on the influence of significant adults, in this case educators, on children’s gender development (MacNaughton, 1996). While this awareness reached many educators, little was done to provide practical solutions for how educators could ensure that children had the freedom to develop their own understanding of their gender, abilities and desires (MacNaughton, 1996). Lee-Thomas, Sumson and Roberts (2005) completed a study into educators’ understanding of and commitment to gender equity in the early childhood setting. They explored educators’ feelings about their ability to intervene in gender equity and their reliance on socialisation theory in gender-related practice. They found a tendency towards a sense of fatalism, in which educators felt helpless towards creating change in relation to the children’s concept of gender. This fatalism discouraged many educators from working towards gender equity (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001).
Despite this tendency towards fatalism, educators do influence children’s views on femininity and masculinity (MacNaughton, 1996). However, children’s understanding of femininity and masculinity is an individual process based on far more cultural influences than just educator attitudes (Alloway, 1995; MacNaughton, 1996). Even though children are capable of developing their own understanding of gender, educators should be aware that their attitudes and biases can impact their own awareness of opportunities to encourage children to challenge their current understanding of gender identity.

It is also important that educators become aware of the implications of how children or other adults police and fix their own and other children’s gendered performances, and that these can inhibit or encourage children’s agency, in play and in other areas of life (Davies, 1989; Robinson & Davies, 2007). Educators need to aid and empower children to take ownership of their gender roles and identities, and provide children with a sense of agency to define and choose their own gender roles (Davies, 1994). While it is difficult to remove or change the pressure that society can place on children to behave in a certain way, it is possible to reposition young children and provide balance through promoting equitable interactional patterns in educational settings and between the children (Fleer, 1998).

Educators should become more aware that if children adhere to set gender roles it could limit their opportunities (Alloway, 1995; Walkerdine, 1990). Educators should also become more aware that they may have great difficulty in making a change to children’s understanding of gender roles through the introduction of educative materials alone (Fleer, 1998). It is not uncommon for educators, for instance, to bring in gender neutral activities and books (MacNaughton, 1998), however, these in isolation may not be effective (Fleer, 1998). Unless children are already open to fluid gender roles, they are unlikely to take from the resources the guidance to explore the parameters of their gender (Fleer, 1998; MacNaughton, 1998). Educators may be required to unpack and counter limitations that can arise in their projects and to support children to be open to expansive ways of being gendered (Warin & Adriany, 2017). It is also important to recognise, in line with performativity theory, that early childhood educators need to inhabit cultural contexts (e.g., early childhood, policy, management, community and teacher education settings) that support the performance of pro-diversity professional identities.
2.4 The impact of teacher education and studies on educators’ perceptions

Appropriate tertiary education for early childhood educators can make a difference. They become more aware of issues relating to gender diversity, and recognise and respond to problems and opportunities in their settings (Robinson & Díaz, 2006). A research study (Hogan, 2012) was undertaken involving pre-service early childhood educators to examine their reactions to gender studies in higher education. The findings are complex. In some cases, pre-service educators appeared to be unaware of gender during their first encounters with the topic (Hogan, 2012). In fact, in many cases, pre-service educators seemed resistant to exploring gender critically, and unwilling to discuss gender roles as a socially constructed phenomenon (Hogan, 2012). It is critical that educators are open to learning about gender identities and sex roles (Robinson & Díaz, 2006; Hogan, 2012) as educators are a key influence in many children’s lives. An awareness of the need to supply positive gender dynamics will make a difference in realising gender diversity in early childhood settings. It would appear there may be some resistance to engaging in work in this area (Faulkner & Crowhurst, 2014) and such resistance needs to be included in any study of gender diversity in the early childhood context to support best practice.

Research studies have found that for many pre-service educators, the topic of gender was at best seen to be of little interest and more often than not seen as superfluous and unnecessary for teaching (Hogan, 2012; Hogan & Daniell, 2012). This could be due to students having difficulty accepting new information about the meaning and existence of female inequality in their discipline of study (Mahoney, 1996). It may also be due to the fact that pre-service educators will bring with their own understandings of gender discourses, many of which are based on commonly held beliefs from society and stereotypes frequently reinforced through culture and the media (Robinson & Diaz, 2006). It is difficult to challenge long held understandings of and beliefs about gender roles and the confusion that may surround the students’ understanding of sex, sexuality and gender, and how these social and identity categories intersect. Unless pre-service educators examine and problematise their own past experiences of privilege and oppression, they are likely to make pedagogical decisions that maintain the status quo (Souto-Manning, 2017). It is interesting, in this regard, to note that the first tenet of the early childhood ‘anti-bias curriculum’ is for educators to identify and confront their own biases (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009). This is an example of a
value/behaviour/professional identity position that, if performed, would be consistent with the production of a pro-diversity pedagogue.

There is a belief among pre-service educators that early childhood settings are gender-neutral sites (Hogan, 2012). While pre-service educators may acknowledge that society can influence children’s gendered ways of being, they often feel that educators can mitigate these influences by creating an environment that is somehow neutral in that it celebrates diversity, offers children equal opportunities and treats each child as an individual (Hogan, 2012). Hogan suggests that pre-service educators favour intervention at the individual level and, as a consequence, often ignore wider cultural interventions. Higher education can then seek to illustrate the ways in which power dynamics and gender discourses impact the early childhood setting and how that setting is always embedded in gendered positions. This is not to say that individuals cannot engage in beneficial interventions, but rather that those interventions need to be clearly understood as part of engaging with a larger, gendered cultural project over time. It is important that pre-service educators understand that children’s gender dynamics can be influenced by forces outside of their control (Halim & Lindner, 2013). It is hoped that educators become not only aware of the power balance in their settings but seek to engage over time, as discussed above. Implementing strategies while ignoring the contextual dimensions of gender imbalances and inequalities may address these problems in the short term but will not remove them. Addressing gender inequalities and imbalances will involve not only identifying, deploying and implementing existing contextual strategies in the present, but also understanding that as these are repeated over time, larger gender affirming environments may be constructed.

Alloway (1995) suggests that “the first task is to recognise the asymmetries in gender relations; the ultimate task is to dismantle them” (p. 34). Educators interested in gender diversity may work with children to interrogate traditional and dominant gender (and other) binaries (Alloway, 1995; Blaise, 2005) that may limit ways of being. Children should be provided with an environment in which they feel secure to explore, move beyond and between existing gender borders, and take the opportunity to test these limits and discover their own identities. Alloway (1995) explains that “the trickles of movement across gender borders provide the promise of spaces in which to begin to work with children in deconstructing the limitations of having to fit into one or other of the binary categories” (p.
101). Early childhood educators need to engage in educational contexts and experiences that support them to recognise such opportune moments.

It is also important for higher education academics and pre-service educators to recognise and acknowledge the gender imbalances that are present in early childhood settings, and the cultural dimensions of such imbalance, however subtle (Alloway, 1995; Robinson & Díaz, 2006). Recognising such imbalance may be difficult as these may not be explicit or immediately evident, but rather they may function in covert and more subtle ways. A formal strategy consistent with and supportive of this broad goal of enhancing gender inclusion is Australia’s first national early childhood policy framework, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), was designed to give the field a unified voice and can be deployed to support work in this arena.

2.5 Early childhood education framework and policy documents: approach to gender

In 2008, the Australian Government decided that a national quality framework (NQF) (DEEWR, 2008a) was needed to unify the country in its approach to early childhood education (DEEWR, 2010). An important initial step for the NQF was the development of the curriculum document. This was undertaken by a consortium of academics tendered by the DEEWR to work alongside policy makers to develop the ‘Early Years Learning Framework’ (EYLF) (Arthur, Barnes, & Ortlipp, 2011). In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments endorsed the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). The framework was designed to provide children aged birth to five years of age with a consistent start regardless of their socio-economic background or the type of prior-to-school setting they attended (Docket, 2009). The framework attempts to create a national standard of early childhood education by affirming the significance of learning in the early years and promoting such a view across educational sectors (Docket, 2009). The EYLF is an important context in which educator professional identities, practices, and early childhood settings take shape. As discussed in section 2.2.8, the framework is meant to be a non-prescriptive document that can be used with multiple theoretical approaches (DEEWR, 2009).

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) includes a focus on the ways in which children’s lives are characterised by notions of ‘belonging, being and becoming’. Belonging in the EYLF refers to ways in which children know “where and with whom [they] belong”, being refers to “the significance of the here and now in children’s lives”, and becoming refers to the “rapid and
significant change that occurs in the early years as young children learn and grow” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 7). These three notions are woven throughout the framework, which is comprised of three interrelated elements: principles, practice and learning outcomes. There are five principles in the EYLF, which focus on relationships with children, partnerships with families, equity, diversity and reflective practice. The framework also outlines multiple aspects of pedagogical practice that are intended to “underpin” educators’ teaching practice (DEEWR, 2009, p. 16). Finally, the framework consists of five learning outcomes “designed to capture the integrated and complex learning and development of children” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 22). These outcomes include a focus on children’s identity, connection with and contribution to the world, wellbeing, confidence around and involvement in learning, and communication.

In the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), the principles of ‘high expectations for equity’ and ‘respect for diversity’ are both topics that could and should include gender identities. However, ‘high expectations for equity’ ensure that children with different learning capabilities and opportunities are catered for while ‘respect for diversity’ covers cultural differences and, simply, ‘identities’ (DEEWR, 2009). The EYLF focuses heavily on the concept of identity, explaining that educators should provide for children’s diverse interests, respect their backgrounds and cultures and help “children [in] developing an awareness of their social and cultural heritage, of gender and their significance in their world” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 9). The quote above comes from the introduction to the EYLF’s first learning outcome, ‘children have a strong sense of identity’, and is one of only three times that the EYLF directly mentions gender. The other two times are used in definitions of inclusion. When it comes to breaking down how educators should provide children with a strong sense of identity, the framework offers numerous insightful and helpful suggestions; but in relation to supporting their gender there is nothing apart from it being mentioned in passing in the introductory paragraph, as quoted above, for that outcome.

Considering that one of the five outcomes in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is ‘children have a strong sense of identity’, and this outcome refers repeatedly to inclusion, it can be seen that the EYLF can be interpreted as an educational approach that is focused on inclusion. Despite this, it is unclear on how educators could approach gender. It is worth examining why the policy is not more detailed or extensive in this area. By focusing on equity and inclusion, and even reminding educators to “celebrate the benefits of diversity” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 18), the
framework minimises what might be seen as the controversial aspects of gender in early childhood. MacNaughton (2000) refers to the fact that, historically, gender has been silenced within curriculum documents.

In the EYLF, it is stated that educators can draw on developmental theories, socio-cultural theories, socio-behaviourist theories, critical theories and post-structuralist theories, with the latter referring to “issues of power, equity and social justice in early childhood settings” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 12). This reference to social justice, listed under post-structuralist theories, could be seen as inherently political. In early childhood education, many forms of pedagogy promote social justice and equity, including anti-bias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009; Scarlett, 2016), and educators’ work around gender equity can be considered activism (Smith, Campbell, & Alexander, 2017). The educators’ guide to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2010) also refers to the five theoretical approaches listed in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Gender, however, is mentioned in relation to culture in the guide. Culture is defined as a social construction that “incorporates the scope of human diversity and ways of being, such as gender, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, age, and sexuality” (DEEWR, 2010, p. 22). It is worth noting that ‘sexuality’ does not appear in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), only in the guide meant to support educators’ decision making, and that, like within the framework document itself, gender is only mentioned superficially (DEEWR, 2009, 2010).

It is evident that the framework has a strong focus on identity but is silent in the area of gender equity and diversity. It is clear that for a document that is supposed to guide the nation in its approach to early childhood education, the lack of explanation of and methods for providing gender equity for children is a concern. Why is it that the framework hopes to cater for children’s identities through multiple methods, however their solutions for supplying children with gender equality do not include a discussion of gender differences and identity? The document needs to be analysed and dissected further to understand the decisions made that led to this silence (Bacchi, 2009) and the context that generated such silence, which reflects broader cultural conditions (Butler, 1990).

While gender is included in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), it is listed as an aspect of inclusion, which can be interpreted as a focus on gender inclusivity and equality. One of the common approaches to gender is seeking equality, which Kristeva (1981) associates with the first tier of feminism, while second tier approaches look at difference and expansion of gender
(Fraser, 1996/1997), which can be understood as a proliferation of gender identities. In this thesis, a combination of these approaches (which can be aligned with the third tier, as discussed in section 2.2.3) is viewed as a valuable way to address gender. The EYLF seems to be silent on the proliferation of gender differences as part of identity and, rather, includes a slight focus on inclusion. While it can be seen as positive that the EYLF addresses gender through the lens of inclusion and equality, lack of detail makes this tokenistic.

In this thesis, the focus on the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is in relation to early childhood educators’ experiences and practices around gender. Their context needs to be considered, including the context of policy, early childhood settings, and wider societal and cultural understandings of gender. Policy documents are a context in which professional identities and practices take shape (Gildersleeve & Kleinhesselsink, 2017). While the framework can be seen as emphasising inclusion in the basic sense, it can also be critiqued for its absence. The framework does not currently advocate for awareness of gender in early childhood settings, and could make it far more explicit, that is, for positive outcomes in the area of gender to be achieved, the approach needs to be implemented at all levels of the setting (e.g., policies, teacher practice and resources).

It is evident that particularly, as the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is so silent on gender, other avenues are required to inform educators about how to work with gender in their settings. One significant area discussed in this literature review is teacher education on gender inclusion and diversity (see section 2.4). It would also be useful, through teacher education, to reinforce ways that educators can use the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) without treating it as prescriptive. It is discussed in this literature review that some educators use framework documents prescriptively (see section 2.2.8). This can also be seen with the EYLF, which was designed as a non-prescriptive document (DEEWR, 2009). The non-prescriptive nature of the framework is intended to enable educators to meet certain outcomes and standards of practice through their own methods and theoretical approaches. While silences in the framework can be problematic, they can also create opportunities for individual theoretical interpretations for practice, and for educators to perform their professional identities. However, this cannot be achieved without other sources of guidance, such as teacher education and other resources in this area.
2.6 Conclusion

This literature review has presented an assemblage of theories that are useful in considering gender and sexuality. The suggestion is not that these are the only useful theories but rather they serve in relation to thinking about questions of gender and sexuality in educational contexts, because of the connections between culture and identities that they suggest. The literature reviewed forms the basis for the design and analysis of the research that has been carried out. This research reveals that gender is a diverse and sensitive area, with a wide range of opinions on how gender is formed in individuals and the role it plays in society. This research project used the theoretical approaches of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory. It is evident from the literature that there has been a rush of research into the development of gender identity over the last forty years.

Research has turned towards different topics and there appears to be less attention paid to gender as a ‘concern’ or focused area in early childhood settings, teacher education and the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). This was a constraint when examining more recent literature. However, the theoretical perspectives of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory suggest that gender and sexuality will always be a part of young children that they must discover and interpret within the social groups they belong to. Children will develop an understanding of their gender identities through those around them and their wider environment. Despite this, there is no discussion or suggestions in the EYLF on how to guide children’s understanding of gender identity. The EYLF does not list practical ways that educators can make a difference in this area.

From this review of existing literature, the decision to use the theoretical perspectives of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory has been made for several reasons. The questions posited to support these theoretical frameworks and the research have been designed to incorporate previous views, which have proved largely ineffective in terms of outcomes, and move beyond a static position where it was thought the issues had been addressed. Feminist post-structuralism and queer theory may have the capacity to answer the thesis questions, and explain educators’ understandings, thoughts and beliefs about gender identity in the context of their own lives, the social environment and through the lens of gender as a performative activity. Another key theoretical framework drawn on in this research is Fraser’s (1996/1997) concept of expansion and difference, which has been applied
to the area of gender (see section 2.2.3). It is necessary to consider the educators’ inhabited contexts and constructed identities that support their work with, and interpretation of, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). In order to achieve difference and expansion in relation to gender, educators need to feel encouraged and empowered to make decisions, seize opportunities and engage in practice that resists normative assumptions within their cultural and social contexts.
Chapter Three – Methodology and Methods

3.1 Introduction

Within this research, early childhood educator participants’ views on gender were explored in relation to children’s sense of identity by examining their personal experiences and understanding of gender development. In addition, this research involved EYLF developer participants in order to gain an understanding of the process behind developing the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), with a particular focus on gender inclusivity. As stated in Chapter One, this research was guided by one research question and five sub-questions. The research question was:

How do early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identity influence their practice?

The research question was explored and expanded on in relation to five sub-questions:

• Where do educators believe that their understanding of gender identity has come from?
• How do educators believe that children develop their gender identities and what do they believe their role should be in this development?
• What interactions and issues have educators encountered in relation to gender equity in early childhood settings?
• How can educators be supported, and what is required to provide practical solutions for change?
• Why is there silence surrounding gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009)?

These questions were considered in relation to literature discussed in this thesis and through analysis of the data collected. This chapter outlines the research design, chosen participants and how they were recruited, methods of data collection and analysis, and also highlights some of the potential research risks and how these were addressed.
3.2 Theoretical perspective

This research utilised a feminist post-structuralist and queer theory approach to gender development. The study was conducted with the theoretical view that gender and gender awareness develops in young children from an early age and is largely socially and culturally constructed. The research followed the theory that children learn to understand and construct their gender identity through the people and environment around them, but may choose to reject information they receive if it does not fit their current understanding of their gender identities (MacNaughton, 1998). Early childhood educators develop their own understandings of gender and sexuality in the same way and therefore bring these preconceived ideas into their work with children. The stances that informed this research are closely aligned with a critical research paradigm. Rather than attempting to discover one objective truth, a critical research paradigm acknowledges that reality is perceived by the individual, and therefore may vary based on context, experiences and interpretations (Hughes, 2003; Scotland, 2012). It also acknowledges the impact of power on individuals' perceptions of reality and knowledge (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Scotland, 2012). The ontology associated with this paradigm is historical realism, which examines the historical construction of reality through social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values, while the epistemology is transactional and subjective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), constructed within a specific context. The methodology is dialogic and transformative (Mertens, 2015), aiming to bring about change through the research process. These ontological, epistemological and methodological approaches were appropriate for this study, which aimed to understand educators’ perceptions of gender, while analysing their responses through a feminist post-structuralist lens.

A feminist post-structuralist view is that children will try to act in a certain way to fit the social expectations of their gender (Butler, 1988). Furthermore, Butler’s concept of performativity (1990) states that children are a particular gender because of their actions and further draws attention to the cultural conditions that produce those actions. The educators’ perspectives on their own gender are likely to impact their view of children’s gender development. These views could play a part in the cultural conditions that frame children and their gendered sense of self in society.
The theoretical perspective for this research was tested through the development and publication of a journal article. The article, ‘A case study of gendered play in preschools: How early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influence children’s play’ (Chapman, 2016; see Appendix J), was published in the *Early Child Development and Care* journal (2018). Feminist post-structuralist ideas were applied to test the efficacy of the theoretical perspective. Following on from this, the theory of performativity was added as another analytical tool to the current research to add in-depth exploration of relationships within a cultural environment.

### 3.3 Participants in the study

This research involved a selection of 12 early childhood educators working in pre-school kindergartens and long day care settings across Melbourne, Australia from varying socio-economic backgrounds. They were split into groups based on their years in the field, 18+ years, 10-18 years, 5-10 years and 0-5 years. In addition, there were two participants who were involved in the development of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). These participants were selected to ensure that they had comparable roles in a range of settings. The groups were split to select participants who were working as teachers in the field before, during and after the implementation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). In addition, there were two participants who were involved in the development of the EYLF. The selection process for finding participants and requirements for inclusion are outlined below in Section 3.4.1.

### 3.4 Study design and method

Feminist post-structuralism and performativity were used to support a qualitative phenomenological approach (Barnacle, 2001; Vagle, 2014) that involves studying people’s individual experiences by capturing group responses and personal narratives. To truly capture and understand narrative responses, research methods need to be flexible and detailed. The research was qualitative in order to examine the educators’ perceptions and approaches through the use of semi-structured focus groups and semi-structured interviews. Focus groups were used first to explore participants’ views on and understanding of children’s sense of identity and how it is represented in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009). After these were completed, semi-structured interviews were held, that focused on participants’ views of children’s gender identities as well as where they believe
these views may have developed. As described above, participants were purposefully selected to reflect their different experiences in the industry, with specific reference to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

A qualitative approach provides a ‘naturalistic enquiry’ of the participants, which provides in-depth research regarding the participants and their communities (Punch, 2005; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Qualitative research allows for a holistic approach within a naturalistic setting (Creswell, 2009). Collecting qualitative data allows the researcher to capture the personal understandings of the participants without limiting potential responses (Allen, 2004). This research aimed to collect personal narratives from the participants and qualitative research allows for this to happen. Despite the variety of responses that participants may provide, a qualitative approach can be used to find patterns in these responses (Freebody, 2003). In this case, these are presented as common trends of discourses that are present in the data. And in some cases, insights from detailed qualitative findings can be invaluable to the development of theory (Dowling & Brown, 2010). In this study, the researcher sought to focus on depth and a diversity of points of view.

This research has been designed as a case study of early childhood educators from multiple kindergartens and long day care settings across Melbourne, Australia which provided an in-depth look at a small sample of subjects and their views on gender. Some researchers use case studies as a means to give the subject a ‘voice’ (Scott & Morrison, 2005). Considering the inclusion of participants’ personal narratives, this seems to be an ideal form of presentation for this research. When conducting a case study, researchers may focus on one case or phenomenon, but within that case can examine a single unit or multiple units/sets of participants (Gerring, 2004). Stake (1995) defines a case study that examines a number of units chosen to suit the research needs as a ‘multiple or collective case study’ (p. 446). The research also gathered data from two EYLF developers, in order to examine the topic holistically. These two sets of participants allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of early childhood educators’ approaches to gender, as well as the political approach to gender identity in early childhood policy.
3.4.1 Participant selection

There were fourteen participants involved in this research in total. This consisted of 12 early childhood educators and two EYLF developers. The educator participants were recruited through two approaches: contact with multiple early childhood settings in metropolitan Melbourne, Australia and contact with educators via a Facebook group for early childhood educators in Australia. The only requirement was that the participants had taught in an early childhood setting as a kindergarten teacher, and that they were able to attend a focus group in Melbourne. At a late stage in the recruitment process, the researcher posted a message to the Facebook group to say that the study still required a participant who had taught in an early childhood setting for a particular length of time. These recruitment approaches were effective and no potential participants had to be turned away from the research. One participant dropped out of the research, and another participant took her place. The participants lived in metropolitan Melbourne and others up to two hours away and taught in early childhood settings that covered a range of demographics. The EYLF developer participants were selected as they were part of a group of EYLF developers who published numerous articles about the process. The researcher contacted multiple developers via email and two volunteered to be part of this research. The EYLF developer participants were recruited by email.

Upon expressing interest in taking part in the research, educator participants were provided with Plain Information and Consent Forms (see Appendix A). The EYLF developers were contacted directly via email and a phone conversation. Upon expressing interest in participating in the research, they also received a Plain Information and Consent Form (see Appendix B). These statements and consent forms explained what participation in the research entailed and outlined privacy, security and other important information.

The data was collected from April 2016 to May 2017. During this time the ECE participants were involved in focus groups, interviews and a follow-up questionnaire. The EYLF developers were involved in an interview.
3.4.2 Focus groups

Semi-structured focus groups were used as a tool for gathering the participants’ views on their perceptions of the ‘sense of identity’ outcome in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), and what this means in early childhood education. The groups consisted of participants that were selected based on their years in the field and divided into separate groups according to the number of years spent working as early childhood educators. Each group discussed their understanding of what a child’s sense of identity entails and examined various elements of children’s sense of identity through the use of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) document, how they would respond to certain scenarios, and through the use of artefacts.

The groups were broken down, as follows:

- Focus Group 1 – 10-18 years in the field
- Focus Group 2 – 0-5 years in the field
- Focus Group 3 – 18+ years in the field
- Focus Group 4 – 5-10 years in the field
Focus groups were appropriate for this research as they shifted the focus from the interviewer to those being interviewed (Lichtman, 2006), meaning that the participants guided the direction of the dialogue. This helped the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ views and perceptions. This less structured method consisted of the interviewer acting as a facilitator and allowing for emerging questions and responses (Lichtman, 2006). A semi-structured approach to focus groups was beneficial as it allowed for further personal perspectives. While the responses are likely to be more natural and fluent, the risk of giving control to the group entirely is that the topic may stray from the desired research area (Morgan, 1997). This suggests that some structure is needed in the focus group. Focus groups can provide a useful starting point before individual interviews (Berg, 2007; Morgan, 1997). Combining focus groups and individual interviews is one method used for countering power dynamics in a group and ensuring that silent or ‘silenced’ participants have a voice (Baxter, 2003).

Focus groups can be beneficial as interviewing research participants in a group can prompt further responses from others. For example, in the focus group of educators who have been in the field for 5-10 years, the participants frequently built on and extended the responses from other participants (See Appendix K). Fellow participants can stimulate others to comment or react in ways that may not occur in individual interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011; Lichtman, 2006; Punch, 2005). It is important to be aware that this could also be counterproductive in some cases if participants are hesitant to speak in front of others, or are influenced by the responses of others. This is why it is important to also collect responses through other methods, which in this case were private interviews. It is also important to approach focus groups and predesigned questions in a particular way in order to navigate this limitation. It is interesting to note that while some participants may be hesitant to share their opinions, most would be willing to share an experience they have had (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups can also be beneficial as they allow for the researcher to observe group dynamics and interactions on a topic (Berg, 2007; Morgan, 1997). Group discussions often display evidence of group members’ similarities and differences in opinion but this may not always be the case (Morgan, 1997). Therefore, the combination of interviews, where the researcher has more control over the direction of the conversation, and focus groups that may touch on wider topics and dynamics, are a well-suited combination (Morgan, 1997).
This research utilised focus groups as a tool for gathering the early childhood educator participants’ views on and attitudes about children’s sense of identity and what this means in the early childhood education environment. Each group discussed their understanding of what a child’s sense of identity entails. They also looked at various elements of children’s sense of identity through the use of artefacts and scenarios that may be encountered in early childhood settings to prompt further responses from the participants on sense of identity.

The focus groups were semi-structured; however, the base questions and themes were consistent. The base questions and general structure of the focus groups included:

- how a child’s sense of identity is developed;
- bringing in an artefact that symbolised their personal sense of identity;
- programs that could be effective in helping to foster children’s sense of identity;
- examining the ‘sense of identity’ outcome in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009);
- thoughts on the EYLF, how it helps practice and how it can be used;
- examining the EYLF for anything that might need to be expanded or added; and
- responding to scenarios regarding practice in relation to children’s sense of identity and how each educator would respond.

(For a complete list of questions, see Appendix C.)

A research assistant was present at each of the focus groups and was instructed to take note of particular verbal and nonverbal forms of communication amongst the participants. This was in order to capture their experience of the focus group and any significant reactions to the questions asked or general discussion. Prior to the focus groups, the research assistant was briefed on the types of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication to observe. These consisted of tone and variation of voice, facial expressions and body language. The same research assistant was used for each group in order to ensure consistency with their observations and to minimise variations in observation. Due to the subjective nature of these observations, the researcher and research assistant discussed their observations after each focus group and made additions to the list of verbal and nonverbal communication for the remaining focus groups. The research assistant was also advised to add any additional forms
of communication observed to the list. The data on verbal and nonverbal forms of
communication has been summarised in Appendix O.

3.4.3 Interviews

Once focus group discussions were completed, interviews were conducted. Interviews allow
for the personal views of the participants to surface. While the focus groups consisted of
group discussions about the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the ‘sense of identity’ outcome, the
interviews explored personal narratives about the participants’ practice and experiences.
Interviews were important for this research as they allowed for detailed responses that
reflected the participants’ views and potentially the wider community of early childhood
educators, though it is always difficult to generalise findings in qualitative research with
small numbers. Interviews can be beneficial as they provide genuine snapshots of the
participants’ thoughts and delve deeply into their subjective experiences (Perakyla &
Ruusuvuori, 2011). The closeness between interviews and everyday conversation can
sometimes give the impression of simplicity. It has been argued that this is not the case
(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews require preparation and consideration into the
timing, placement, and type of questions. Preparation is important as spontaneous interviews
rarely lead to worthwhile information; rather, they often reproduce common opinions and
prejudices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

It is important to give thought to the questions asked in interviews, particularly whether they
are open-ended or closed, if they are leading or allow for participant-guided responses and
the type of phrasing used. It is a good option to conduct semi-structured interviews
(Freebody, 2003). The semi-structured interview offers more direction than an unstructured
interview and more flexibility than a structured interview, beginning with predetermined
questions but allowing for varying the questions due to relevance and circumstance. This was
the best option for this research as it consisted of a wide variety of participants and entirely
predesigned questions could limit the potential responses. The direction of the interviews was
led by the participants. It is important to consider the direction a researcher takes in their
quest for personal narratives (Sandelowski, 1991).

The interviewer does not find narratives; instead they participate in their creation (Mishler,
1986). In other forms of interview, the researcher may be viewed as a “‘facilitator’
interviewer and the participant, a ‘vessel-like’ respondent who gives answers” (Riessman, 2008, p. 23). Conversely, narrative interviewing involves two active participants in the construction of the narrative (Riessman, 2008). The interviewer needs to actively create an environment in which research participants feel comfortable to share their responses. Rather than the usual rules of conversation turn-taking, a narrative interview may have the participant speaking for long periods of time. It is the interviewer’s responsibility to make the participants feel comfortable to speak and to help them make connections between stories they have shared, past and present (Riessman, 2008). This was taken into consideration throughout the interview process. While the interviews were focused on particular topics, the researcher encouraged the participants to tell their stories in ways they wanted to tell them. Rather than aiming to obtain answers to the interview questions, the researcher used dialogue to tap into the participants’ stories, and to notice patterns and perhaps unexpected content. Their responses were then analysed through thematic analysis and feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA).

i. Early childhood educator interviews

The educators were each involved in one interview. The interviews consisted of the use of artefacts and questions to prompt responses and narratives from participants. The interviews were semi-structured; however, the base questions and themes were consistent. These included:

- educators’ understandings and perceptions of children’s sense of gender identity and how the educators believe these have developed;
- gender equity programs that educators have put in place and what these involve;
- setting policies or philosophies in relation to gender roles in children;
- any challenges that they may have faced from other educators or families in relation to providing gender equity in the classroom;
- what they would find helpful as guidance in delivery gender equity programs; and
- examining their own gender identity development through artefacts and memories.

(For a complete list of questions, see Appendix D.)
ii. *EYLF developer interviews*

The two participants who were involved in the development of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) were each involved in one interview. These participants consisted of one academic and one policy maker who were part of the government’s team that designed the EYLF. The questions were semi-structured and selected based on the direction that the participants took in the discussion. This differed for each participant as they both had a unique role in the development of the EYLF. The information provided in these interviews was very detailed.

The questions were consistent, and included:

- how they became involved in developing content for the EYLF;
- their particular role in the development of the EYLF;
- what strategies were used when developing the content;
- how the five learning outcomes were planned, with a focus on the ‘sense of identity’ outcome;
- how the strategies to meet the five outcomes were developed and how areas were chosen to be supported by these strategies;
- areas in which it was required to speak ‘in code’ or ‘tone down’ content;
- why and how gender was included in sense of identity;
- possible future stages in developing the EYLF; and
- if they were developing the framework again how might they phrase gender and equity elements to ensure they were included?

(For a complete list of questions, see Appendix E.)

*3.4.4 Artefacts*

This research utilised artefacts in both the focus groups and interviews with the early childhood educator participants. Artefacts are often overlooked as a source of data, despite their ability to provide information not available from interviews or other sources of data
The artefacts were included in the research design for participants to physically represent their sense of identity in the focus groups and their ‘gender identity’ in the interviews. In each instance, the participants were asked to bring in an object/artefact that symbolised these concepts and they were then prompted to explain their choices. The artefacts provided additional insights into the participants’ perspectives on these concepts. This research analysed the artefacts, and then considered them in relation to the descriptions and interpretations provided by the participants. One potential limitation of the collection of artefacts is that the interpretations can be subjective, as the researcher is often unable to ask and clarify the context behind the item (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This was countered through the inclusion of the participants’ own interpretations about their chosen artefacts.

Artefacts provided the researcher with the ability to analyse the participants’ contexts and identities in new ways. It is important to be mindful of the “symbolic or figured elements of identity, and the ways in which people use cultural artefacts to contest or maintain positional identities” (Bartlett, 2005, p. 7). In addition, to fully build an understanding of the cultural context in which an individual is produced, it is necessary to recognise the role that cultural artefacts play in social constructs. Hodder (2000) emphasises that the inclusion of artefacts is required to conduct an adequate study into social interactions and behaviours. This research utilised artefacts to enable the researcher to capture a more comprehensive view of the participants’ perceptions of ‘sense of identity’ and ‘gender identity’. The artefacts were analysed to identify key thematic groupings.

3.4.5 Follow-up questionnaire for educators

Due to the lengthy time frame over which the research was conducted, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to all early childhood educator participants six months after the semi-structured interviews were conducted, during the data analysis phase. This allowed for capturing the continuity of the participants’ thoughts on gender identity as these are likely to have changed over time (Coolican, 2013; Scott & Morrison, 2007, Wilkinson, 1998), particularly as the focus groups and interviews are likely to have brought their attention to this topic. This time period also meant that the researcher’s understanding shifted as it made it possible to notice patterns and aspects of the participants’ thinking that required deeper thought and reflection (see Appendix F). The use of the questionnaires that followed on from the previous research may have provided the participants with an opportunity to reflect on the
ways that their views may or may not have changed and evolved over time (Dennis, 2014). Multiple participants reported, through the follow-up questionnaire, an increased focus on gender since the focus groups and interviews. These responses will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

The questionnaire asked participants to clarify some details about their experience and for further thoughts. The questions focused on:

- their background;
- educational studies;
- years in the field;
- experience with gender studies; and
- further thoughts regarding gender identity in early childhood settings.

(For a complete list of questions, see Appendix F.)

3.5 Data collection and analysis

The focus groups were conducted by the researcher with a research assistant present to observe the participants. Preparation consisted of discussion on what could be usefully observed, for example, body language, tone of voice, etc. It is important to not only record the words of the participants but also their facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language to “capture the culture of a group of people” (Yin, 2016, p. 166) and note the dynamics between the individuals speaking. The data from this research was recorded with an audio digital recording device. Digital recording is a preferable method for recording interviews (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The researcher led the focus group and the research assistant documented notes on voice intonations, gestures and facial expressions. All data were transcribed verbatim and processed verbally. The research findings consist of coded common themes and discourses that are present in the participants’ responses as well as personal insights of individual responses.
Analysis and coding of the data involved thematic and discourse analysis, particularly since
the data was rich with personal stories and lived experiences. Multiple themes and discourses
emerged in the participants’ responses. Themes refer to patterned responses (Braun & Clarke,
2006) and abstract constructs (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) that can be found with narratives and
texts. Thematic analysis focuses on the content, rather than the language or form of a
narrative (Riessman, 2008). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis should be
considered a method in its own right, flexible and adaptable across a range of theoretical
approaches, rather than a tool used across a variety of methods. It keeps stories intact, using
prior theoretical concepts to capture and understand the narrative and its thematic meanings
(Riessman, 2008). Freire (1970/2000) describes how to identify themes in dialogue and
narratives, and the overall key theme, or ‘generative theme’, becomes the focus of further
analysis (Crowhurst, 2015). Thematic analysis was used for this research as it allowed for an
initial method of dividing and analysing the participants’ responses. Splitting the responses
into themes based on the patterns present in the content provided a clear view of the
directions that the responses were taking. Once the data had been split into themes, it then
‘set the stage’ for comprehensive discourse analysis to take place.

Discourses are socially constructed meanings, rules or conventions (Jørgensen & Phillips,
2002). Rather than simply referring to language or signifiers, discourses are practices that
“systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1969/1972, p. 49). Gee
(1991) describes a discourse as an identity kit, a set of socially accepted practices and ways
of using language that identify individuals as members of a group. They can be categorised as
discourse refers to the ways people enact socioculturally and historically significant identities
engaged in socially recognisable activities, while lowercase ‘d’ discourses refer to language
in use (Gee, 2008). According to Gee’s research on discourse analysis, language is used to
indicate several things. It can communicate what an individual believes is significant, and
allow individuals to enact identities and relationships. It can “convey a perspective” (Gee,
2014, p. 34) on what is ‘good’, ‘normal’ and ‘appropriate’. Gee also describes the way that
“social goods” (2014, p. 7) are at stake when using language, referring to how people use
language to gain or lose these social goods. He defines the pursuit of social goods as
individuals wanting to be seen as acceptable or good at a particular practice, such as being a
‘good student’. This can be extended to educators who have dedicated many years to being a
‘good’ teacher. This was important to consider during the discourse analysis stage of the
research, as participants’ responses may have been influenced or shaped by the desire to sound ‘good’. Consequently, the analysis stage took into account each participant’s individual context and how this may have shaped their views, values and responses.

Due to the nature of the themes and discourses embedded in this research, feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) was used to analyse the data from the interviews and focus groups, and to identify and examine the dominant and competing or oppositional discourses (Baxter, 2003) that were most prevalent in the participants’ responses. FPDA was built on the post-structuralist method of discourse analysis. Baxter (2002a) examined post-structuralist discourse analysis and how a range of aspects of post-structuralist theory, including feminism, could be used to explore the complexities around power in relation to gender. Applying a feminist lens to post-structuralist discourse analysis had been explored in previous literature (Davies & Banks, 1992; Jones, 1993); however, Baxter developed and named FPDA as a new method of discourse analysis in 2002 (Baxter, 2002b). FPDA questions the ways in which biological sex can be classified into binaries, viewing this as a powerful gender discourse in society (Baxter, 2016). This approach suggests that while subjectivities are discursively produced, this does not remove or limit a person’s agency (Baxter, 2008, 2016). FPDA views individuals as positioned in terms of agency, to accept, adjust, fight against or overturn subject positions (Baxter, 2016). Such analysis can be used to “describe and critique competing versions of subjectivity available to a person” (Baxter, 2016, p. 43) and that is why it is of particular use here. Specifically, this lens enables a focus on the emergences of discourses that might support expansivity.

FPDA can also be useful as a tool to explore the discourses present in an early childhood environment, as it can “make sense of the complexities and ambiguities of classroom power relations” (Baxter, 2002b, p. 6). It can also be used to examine the discourses that produce power relations for children, both individually and as a group, and underline the actions and thoughts of educators and policy makers. According to Baxter (2016), FPDA views the ways that people “make sense of their lives [as] a necessary starting point for understanding the ways in which gendered discourses continue to structure social relations” (p. 43). FPDA was used to gain this understanding, by enabling the researcher to analyse the discourses deployed in the participants’ responses with a particular emphasis on listening for discourses relevant to expansion and constraint related to gender diversity.
The participants’ responses were examined and themes were identified through several steps. First, the transcriptions were read thoroughly, and colours and shapes were used when highlighting and annotating the transcripts to assist with the categorisation process. Key quotes were highlighted, and the themes were identified and categorised using thematic analysis. The themes were entered into a table and, grouped together when appropriate, until a firm understanding emerged of the themes present in the data. The table was divided into themes, related quotes, and indicated the stance held by educator participants on that theme. For educators, the quotes were also coded within the table, based on the participants’ years in the field.

The focus on years in the field was chosen to allow for possible links to emerge between the participants’ responses and their years of experience in early childhood education. The concept of generational logic (van der Tuin, 2009) was used to examine the ways in which the early childhood education workforce can vary based on time and context. Van der Tuin redirects the concept of generational logic in feminism and defines it as non-linear and non-hierarchical, explaining that third-wave feminism in structured through generationality, and can affirm, extend and shift ideas from the previous waves. Shifting away from generational conflicts and stereotypes about age cohorts are necessary as centring age and generation exclusively within feminist debate is simplistic (Garrison, 2004). The themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups were then considered together, and similar ideas were grouped where appropriate. During this process, the most prevalent themes were selected and categorised into ‘key thematic groupings’, which comprised several of the original themes identified. The same process was conducted, through thematic analysis, for the educator participants’ artefacts, and for the EYLF developer participants’ responses.

The key thematic groups in this research will be explored in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six, the most prevalent discourses are analysed using FPDA. FPDA is not a prescriptive data analysis method. The key principle of FPDA has been described as “the discursive construction of subjectivity” (Baxter, 2008, p. 24), and this principle was considered during data analysis. Other principles of FPDA include discourse as social practice, performative nature of speakers’ identities, diversity and multiplicity of speakers’ identities, the contextualised nature of the construction of meaning, the deconstruction or challenging of binaries, inter-discursivity, and the need for self-reflexivity (Baxter, 2008).
The researcher used FPDA to examine assumptions and constructs underlying participants’ responses, with an emphasis on discourses pertaining to gender differentiation (Baxter, 2003). This involved exploring discourses assumed or deployed around gender, particularly in relation to identity, beliefs and values, and questioning where in the culture such discourses are enabled. FPDA also provided insights into the dominant and competing discourses deployed by participants in focus groups and interviews. It was used to identify the discourses that participants may have drawn upon to perform or construct their responses, which tended to differ from or expand upon the themes that emerged. The discourses were also considered in relation to the contexts within which they were enacted. The process also involved determining which discourses were absent, or those which participants may not have engaged with. It required a deep engagement with the language used by the participants on both a denotative and connotative level (Baxter, 2003). The themes and discourses were identified, categorised into key thematic groups and key discourses, and analysed in relation to the literature, and the findings will be discussed in Chapters Five and Six.

3.6 Research: ethics, issues and limitations

This section will cover the ethical considerations, limitations and potential issues that were taken into account during the creation of the research design. It also includes literature that informed these decisions. In addition, it explains the choice of location, layout and semi-structured content for the focus groups and interviews. Further, this section includes a discussion of the group dynamics and power imbalances that had to be considered throughout the study. Finally, this section will discuss the process of data analysis that was used during the course of the research, the methods of securely storing all data and considerations behind ensuring confidentiality of the participants involved.

There were many steps taken by the researcher to consider and counter possible risks to the participants. However, it has been argued that it is not possible to conduct research that contains no potential risks (Morse, Niehaus, Varnhagen, Austin, & McIntosh, 2008). In fact, some researchers have suggested that contributing to qualitative research studies, in particular through interviews and focus groups, has the potential to challenge the participants’ thinking as they have to make decisions about the responses they give and what they will share (Koelsch, 2013; Wilkinson, 1998). Through involvement in research, the participant “not only imparts information but [they are] also affected by the active process” (Procter &
Padfield, 1998, p. 127). The discussion about the participants’ views changing because of the research process has been mentioned in section 3.4.5 and these changes may have had unexpected consequences. While this was not something that could be countered by the researcher, it was necessary to consider these potential impacts while conducting the focus groups and interviews.

3.6.1 Focus groups

There were a number of limitations and ethical considerations that needed to be considered for focus groups when planning this research. Time and location can be difficult as focus groups contain multiple participants and it can be difficult to find a location that is appropriate for everyone involved (Morgan, 1997). To counter this limitation, the research focus groups were held at a central location in the city so that public transport was available for the majority of participants. As the participants were likely be working in early childhood settings during the day, the focus groups were planned for weekday evenings, allowing participants to finish work and make their way into the city. It was important when planning for focus groups, that the environment is taken into consideration and is comfortable for the participants. The researcher took into account furniture placement and spacing when setting up the environment for the focus groups and interviews, as various elements of the environment can influence responses from focus groups (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007).

Various elements of the environment can influence the responses from focus groups (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Research suggests that it is wise to use a nondescript environment to avoid participants becoming distracted. It is also important to position chairs in a circle or large square so that all participants can see each other, preventing social dominance from becoming an issue and subgroups from forming (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). It is also important to ensure that there is enough space between each seat to provide participants with personal space. Research has found that participants are more responsive when given personal space rather than seated close to another participant (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). This research utilised these suggestions to maximise natural responses from the participants.
Another limitation surrounds group dynamics. It is seen as a positive element of focus groups that group discussion and dynamics are likely to give the research deeper responses; however, the group dynamic may limit the responses of certain individuals in the group (Berg, 2007). The group dynamics of focus groups may be a concern for participants with a tendency towards conformity, those unwilling to share their thoughts publically, or those who tend to have more controversial views when in a group (Morgan, 1997). This is why it is important to offer some structure to the focus groups rather than allowing them to be entirely participant led. It is also important to ensure that social dynamics are inviting and inclusive. Participants should be directed to allow others to share their thoughts and opinions without judgement. This should be facilitated by the researcher early in the session, which does not mean that all participants have to agree but they should respect differing opinions in the group (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). This was considered throughout the focus groups to ensure that all participants’ voices were heard and respected.

It is important when creating groups that cohesiveness and compatibility are considered (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Highly compatible and cohesive groups are often happier and perform their tasks more effectively as less group maintenance is required (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). It is important for these groups to become homogenous in their discussion and compatibility is likely to make this occur (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Each group needs to work together to identify a research mission and provide consistent responses. This should be facilitated by the researcher early in the session, which does not mean that all participants have to agree but they should respect the differing opinions in the group (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). While participants could not be split based on personality, they were split based on years of experience in the field. This would have created a likelihood that many participants would be close in age and all participants would have had experience in early childhood, and thus would have some common interests. It is also recommended that research be conducted with mixed sex groups and single sex groups (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Statistics show that there are significantly less male educators in early childhood education in Australia, which lowered the likelihood of finding male participants and eventuated in only female participants.
3.6.2 Interviews

There are a number of ethical issues to consider when conducting qualitative interviews, including interpretations of knowledge and power asymmetry between the interviewer and researcher. One consideration is that individuals may interpret each question differently. A qualitative interviewer should try to cover a factual and meaning level in their questions. For this reason, it is necessary for researchers to listen to the ideas expressed, as well as recognising and interpreting what is being said ‘between the lines’ (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). When interpreting the participants’ responses, the researcher should feed their interpretation of the response back to the participant and allow them to clarify if needed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The researcher ensured that participants were able to expand on or clarify topics discussed.

Whilst the opportunity to speak freely has been provided to the interview participants, interviews have the potential to cause a power imbalance between the interviewer and the interviewee. The participant might become intimidated by the questions, or worry that their responses could be incorrect or that they might be judged for them (Punch, 2005; Somekh & Lewin, 2005). This could lead to ‘social desirability’ becoming a factor in the participants’ responses, which could compromise the reliability of the information gathered. Participants might say what they think is the acceptable answer rather than the ‘true answers’ (de Vaus, 2002). For this reason, questions needed to be posed in a non-threatening manner. As the interviewer is in a position of power, the interviews were approached carefully. Techniques that were used to keep the interview relaxed included maintaining eye contact and sitting on the same level as the participant.

3.6.3 Data analysis

There is a risk when analysing data, as the meaning heard by one individual may not be what the speaker intended to communicate (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Somekh & Lewin, 2005). Interpreting the data could lead to confusion about the true intentions of the participant. However, face-to-face focus groups and interviews allow for clarification of responses, thus validating the information gathered. This ensures that the participant is respected throughout the research and that their responses are correctly represented.
When using audio digital recording devices, it is necessary to take into account the nonverbal communication displayed by the participants (Stewart, Shamdasani & Rook, 2007). Nonverbal communication is neglected by many, if not most, researchers (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). An audio recorder only captures participants’ verbal responses, which can cause difficulties as the researcher is unable to capture the nonverbal communication (Sutton & Austin, 2015). This is particularly problematic in a group environment where multiple participants are sharing at the same time and nonverbal responses may be more indicative of views than verbal responses (Caputo, Hazel, McMahon & Darnels, 2005). To counter this problem, the researcher led the focus groups and had a research assistant take notes on important occurrences, and observe verbal and nonverbal communication. A list of definitions of verbal and nonverbal communication was developed as a tool for the research assistant to use when capturing data in the focus groups (see Appendix O). These definitions were gathered from three sources (Knapp, Hall & Horgan, 2013; Macquarie Dictionary, 2019; Oxford Dictionary, 2019). This accounted for the group dynamic and ensured that these occurrences were captured for later analysis. The research assistant was not present at the interviews; however, the researcher was responsive to the nonverbal cues of the individual participants and asked additional questions to ensure that any perspectives not covered could be shared.

In ensuring that an ethical approach is maintained throughout the research, an important issue is the confidentiality of all participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008; Dowling & Brown, 2010; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). In recording data, it is important not to include identifying information so as to ensure the privacy of all participants. This was done by coding each participant in the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews. All written documentation was coded so that it would be unidentifiable to others. Each participant was given a pseudonym. Due to audio recording, voices may be recognisable. However, the tapes are stored securely in a locked drawer. All tapes, papers and files are stored securely during the research project and for the five-year storage period following the end of the research.

Due to the possibly sensitive nature of the topic and the involvement of human participants, it is necessary that particular consideration is given to ensuring the research contains no risks to all involved. A high level of rapport is extremely important for many aspects of qualitative research (Konza, 2005). This rapport also has the potential to hinder the research, as any form of personal relationship between researcher and participant might affect the results. When
working with participants, it is important to take into account their vulnerability. As qualitative research can be invasive, it is vital that all participants give their informed consent, not just assent (Konza, 2005). All participants have been supplied with Participant Information and Consent Forms (PICF) (see Appendices A & B) to ensure they were aware of what the research entails and educate them on their rights regarding stopping the research or refusing to answer questions. All participants’ involvement in the research was voluntary. Informed consent was granted by each participant before undertaking the focus groups or interviews.

3.6.4 Participants

As discussed above, an important issue is confidentiality (Dowling & Brown, 2010; Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). In recording data, it is important not to include identifying information so as to ensure the confidentiality of all participants. Real names were not used in the transcripts of interviews and focus groups. Any data collected was de-identified to ensure confidentiality for participants. The two participants who may be identifiable were offered the option of being coded, and were informed that they were likely to be identifiable due to being part of the small group who helped develop the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), however the participants agreed to be a part of the research despite this risk. This information was explained clearly in their PICF (see Appendix B) and permission was sought from all participants before proceeding.

Data from this research is being stored on the RMIT H: drive, which is a secure data system, for five years. After this time, all data will be destroyed. All research forms, study design, interviews questions and support documents were submitted to the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) (RMIT University, 2018) and the Department of Education and Training Ethics Committee (Department of Education and Training, 2018) for their approval of the study to ensure that it met ethical standards. Both applications have been approved (see Appendices G & H). In April 2017, an amendment was made to the HREC application that removed additional interviews for the educators and added the follow-up questionnaire. This was approved (see Appendix I).
3.7 Conclusion

This chapter outlined the study design and methodology for the research, using qualitative methods of data collection as it enables the researcher to gain personal responses that are necessary for developing an understanding of each participant’s views, perceptions and motivations. Semi-structured focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used to gain in-depth responses from the participants. Limitations, issues and ethical considerations have been discussed and solutions for ensuring that these were countered have been outlined. Confidentiality, consistency, clarification and power dynamics were listed as strong foci for ensuring the research was ethically sound.
Chapter Four – Data and Emerging Themes

The following chapter provides an overview of the initial themes identified from the data collected. It is divided into two sections: the early childhood educator participants and the EYLF developer participants. The former section includes information about the educator participants, data from the focus groups and interviews, data indicating verbal and nonverbal forms of communication from the focus groups, a summary of the artefacts, and an initial exploration of the themes that emerged from the data. The latter section includes information about the EYLF developer participants, data from the interviews, and an initial exploration of the themes that emerged. These themes will be further analysed in Chapter Five, while the most prevalent discourses have been analysed using feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) in Chapter Six. The themes and discourses in this research were identified and analysed through specific theoretical approaches, and the researcher’s context, and do not preclude other discourses and themes that have not been discussed.

4.1 Early childhood educator participants

Early childhood education in Australia is a highly feminised workforce. Statistically, 97.3% of educators are women and only 2.7% are men (The Social Research Centre, 2014). There are many variables that contribute to these statistics. Historically, professions that were seen as feminised have been structured around the act of caring (Dillabough, 2005). The early childhood workforce is no exception. It has been seen as a highly feminised workforce and a caring profession. It is likely that the statistics listed above play a large role in this prevailing trend. Policy has been influenced by maternalist discourses, including connotations of ‘softness’, nurturing and caring (Bown, Sumson, & Press, 2011). Early childhood, like other feminised workforces, involves the skill of emotional management of the self and others, which is often undervalued within discourses of professionalisation (Andrew & Newman, 2012). Owen (1998) suggests that a predominantly feminine workplace can reproduce the notion that women are particularly suited to ‘caring’ for children, thus perpetuating early childhood education as a ‘suitable’ job for women, and in turn potentially alienating men, which could maintain the statistical divide.
Early childhood education is a relatively low paid occupation (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2018), with a high pay disparity between early childhood education and primary education (Community Early Learning Australia, 2018). In addition, many educators feel they receive minimal public recognition or professional status (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2011). These conditions often lead to a high turnover of workers, which can lessen professional practice and professional culture in the workplace (Cumming, Sumson & Wong, 2015). Additionally, gendered and classed discourses around caring labour, and particularly maternalist discourses, can construct the notion of a ‘caring self’, making it difficult for women to argue for better pay and conditions because this undermines their sense of being caring selves (Andrew & Newman, 2012). The context outlined above was considered in relation to the participants and their experiences in the field.

Table 4.1 indicates that all of the early childhood educator participants involved in the research were female. Their ages ranged from 28-57 years, and their years of experience spanned from four to 31 years in the field. Eleven of the 12 educator participants participated in all stages of the research. One educator opted not to take part in the interview as she had left the field. This group of educators represent a subsection of Australian early childhood educators. The participants were selected to allow for a cross-section of educators of different years of experience working in the field as a qualified teacher. This was to note if this had any correlation to the educators’ differing attitudes towards gender and how these relate to the EYLF. The table also gives an overview of the educators’ ages and years in the field.

**Table 4.1: ECE participant background information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Years as an ECE Teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18+ years of experience in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10-18 years of experience in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5-10 years of experience in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0-5 years of experience in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Names are pseudonyms selected by the participants

**Bertha participated in the focus group but declined to be interviewed due to job turnover

Table 4.2: ECE participant experiences and qualifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Studies in Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>18+ years of experience in the field</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Rose</td>
<td>Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood) Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Honours) First Class</td>
<td>Personal research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Bow</td>
<td>Bachelor of Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Jean</td>
<td>Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Education, PhD in Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>10-18 years of experience in the field</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Marie</td>
<td>Bachelor of Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>Through Bachelor degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Bertha**</td>
<td>Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (in Colombia)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Margaret</td>
<td>Diploma in Community Services (Children’s Services) Bachelor of Early Childhood Education Postgraduate Diploma in Education Studies Undertaking Masters in Education Studies</td>
<td>Personal reading, encountered none during any of her courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5-10 years of experience in the field</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 EF</td>
<td>Bachelor of Arts (Education Studies) Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education)</td>
<td>Through both Bachelor degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Hazel</td>
<td>Bachelor of Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>Personal reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Tegan</td>
<td>Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Honours) Masters of Education (Educational Management)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>0-5 years of experience in the field</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Layla</td>
<td>Bachelor of Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>Completed professional development during the research timeframe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 JP</td>
<td>Bachelor of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) Diploma of Youth Work</td>
<td>Through both qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 RC</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (Early Years)</td>
<td>Through qualification and networking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Names are pseudonyms selected by the participants

**Bertha participated in the focus group but declined to be interviewed due to job turnover
The table above summarises participants’ backgrounds, including if they have children, their professional qualifications, and whether they have engaged in studies related to gender in the past. Seven of the 12 participants have children, with most of those in the field for the longest length of time having children and the majority of those in the field for a shorter length of time not having children. The participants have varied amounts of knowledge in the area of gender development. Five participants had some form of official teacher education on gender and three had been involved in personal research or reflection. All of the participants have early childhood teacher qualifications; however, these were achieved in various ways. Eight of the participants completed the ‘Bachelor of Early Childhood Education’ in Australia, one participant completed the ‘Bachelor of Early Childhood Education’ in Colombia, two participants completed the ‘Bachelor of Teaching – Early Childhood’ in New Zealand, and one participant completed a Graduate Diploma in Early Childhood Education. Five participants completed other degrees prior to or after their Early Childhood qualifications. Two participants completed their Honours along with their degrees and one completed a PhD in Early Childhood Education.

While all of the participants were qualified as early childhood teachers, there were differences in their tertiary backgrounds. Firstly, those who studied in different countries (New Zealand and Columbia) were likely to have received different guidance, content and resources during their studies. Those who pursued further study, or had previous qualifications, would have gained different knowledge. Considering that each participant completed their qualifications at different times, often in different decades, it is likely that the course content will have varied. The providers of early childhood qualifications in Australia are subject to an accreditation process to make sure they are providing required content (Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2018a). This would then ensure that students who complete the qualification at a different time receive what is perceived as up-to-date knowledge that is likely to vary from the knowledge received by those who studied the course in prior years. Finally, the participants who completed their qualifications in Australia prior to the launch of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) would have received different instructions on planning for and working with children. The qualifications received in Australia since the EYLF was released are likely to have included a strong focus on using the EYLF in planning for children.
One potential issue with curriculum documents like the EYLF is that they are often supported by policy documents that contain grand narratives about “the ideal child” (Cheeseman, Sumson, & Press, 2014, p. 418) and political discourse focused on productivity. The challenge for educators is to look beyond the confines of national curricula by reflecting on or resisting these grand narratives, and to consider the way EYLF outcomes can be considered as part of an increasing political trend towards accountability and a productivity agenda (Cheeseman, Sumson, & Press, 2014, p. 420). Sumson and Wong (2011) indicate that despite the “politically conservative and cautious nature of the EYLF” (p. 29), it is possible to work with the EYLF in “critical and transformative ways” (p. 28). One way to promote critical and transformative thinking about practice is through a deeper examination of curriculum documents and “widely accepted assumptions constituted in government policy” (Cheeseman, Sumson, & Press, 2014, p. 420) that impact educators’ practice and have the potential to shape children’s learning and development, and political discourse.

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was examined as a context for this research, as it is a national framework that guides early childhood practice in Australia. The ‘sense of identity’ outcome, in particular, was the main focus in this research as gender is included under this heading in the framework. The educator participants discussed their views on, and use of, the EYLF extensively in their focus group responses. The following quotes were illustrative of the participants’ attitudes towards working with a document like the EYLF:

“I do use it extensively [however] … we do it, I don’t talk about it enough because I guess I’m a little bit reticent talking about it. We do all these things and they’re based on our values and our beliefs, my own and my colleagues. We also do lots of training but we always take away the best parts of those things… although I use it pretty much all the time I don’t think I express the ideas particularly well using the framework as a support for it.” – Rose (Focus Group 3)

“I do all of these things and have done them for a long time, obviously, being that I’ve worked in the field for a long time.” – Rose (Focus Group 3)

Rose’s comments indicated the complexities around the way the EYLF was used in practice. In her first quote, she said that she used the framework extensively and “all the time”, while in the second quote she said that she had been doing “these things” for a long time,
presumably prior to the introduction of the EYLF. These were interesting and contrasting sentiments, and suggested that many aspects of the EYLF were already present in her practice, and that they perhaps reinforced the work she had been doing throughout her career.

“I use it a lot, and [it] is always in the back of my mind, especially when you are doing observations. That it [the EYLF] is really helpful when you are having conversations with the parents... I use it to communicate the learning with the parents.” – Bertha (Focus Group 1)

Bertha’s comment about the EYLF was very positive, particularly in relation to interactions with parents. She found that it provided structure when she observed children, which allowed her to communicate what she observed to parents.

“I’m very happy with the EYLF. I use it a lot. I refer to it quite a bit. I feel like it has a good understanding of the identity for children… Yes, with my planning and programming and just reflecting on my practice.” – Layla (Focus Group 2)

Like Bertha, Layla had positive views about the EYLF and stated that she used it frequently in her planning, programming and reflections. She drew attention to the “understanding of the identity for children”, which she particularly liked.

“It’s compartmentalising it too much for me. It would be better if instead of having these statements children feel safe and secure and supported, they should be educators provide an environment in which children achieve this...It’s really hard there because the more detail they provide the more prescriptive it becomes and the more a lot of people out there will just seize on that and use it as a tick box exercise...” – Bow (Focus Group 3)

“I felt for me it was superficial. It really didn’t impact all that much on what I was doing.” – Bow (Focus Group 3)

Bow felt that the EYLF was too compartmentalised and that the statements should focus more on what the educators were doing than on how the children felt in their care. She was concerned that it could become too prescriptive if people utilised it as a checklist, when in her opinion the outcomes should be used more broadly. In terms of her own use of the framework, she stated that it was “superficial” and therefore did not impact heavily on her practice.
“I think I’d like to see more specific goals.” – Marie (Focus Group 1)

“Why is [identity] in the curriculum?... To have that as a goal in there presupposes what identity we want for children rather than allowing us to then work with the family and the culture to support then to develop the identity that’s going to work best with the mix of what family wants plus how the child is going to fit into Australian society.” – Marie (Focus Group 1)

Marie expressed two concerns about the EYLF. Firstly, she felt it was too broad and needed to include some specific goals. Secondly, she questioned the content in relation to identity, and stated that identity should not be something that educators decide for children but rather should be something they work with the family on to best support the child. This indicates the struggle educators may face between collective values and individual family cultures, and the difficulty of determining the role of the early childhood educator and setting in this space.

“I have been working with the EYLF ever since it started. I don't tend to look at it as in depth, as I would have many years ago. I tend to just look at the broad outcome and then figure a way we can tie it to individual circumstances of a child, or whatever is happening.” – RC (Focus Group 2)

RC’s statement indicated her awareness of the difference in the way she would have used the EYLF earlier in her teaching career. She explained that earlier in her teaching she would have referred to the framework “in depth”, but she looked at it broadly and found ways to connect it to a child’s circumstances or context.

“I don’t like [the EYLF] much… looked over [the document] and thought, ‘Oh, yeah. I'm pretty much doing that. That’s all right. I could [continue to] do what I am [already] doing.’ And then I started using the EYLF a bit more, mainly because I like the poetry of being, belonging and becoming dependable and I can relate to that, but this stuff doesn't really attract me hugely and I have a very light hand when it comes to really referencing these things.” – Jean (Focus Group 3)

Jean expressed the view that while she did not like the EYLF at first, she eventually realised that the framework does not differ significantly from her existing work. She then began to use
aspects of the framework, but still did not feel very connected to it and tended not to reference it as much as she could.

“Yes, some like it. [I’m] not sure if it is that helpful. When this [the EYLF] came out I read it over and over and over again and I was having problems... And I just thought, like, there's nothing in it that I think, I don't like it or I disagree with it. But I don't think it helps me. This piece of paper doesn't help me, getting in there and being with the kids is what you do.” – Margaret (Focus Group 1)

Margaret’s quote revealed that while there were no specific aspects of the EYLF that she disagreed with, overall she believed “I don’t think it helps me”. She elaborated by saying that it does not help her work with the children, when presumably she sees this as the aim of the framework. This raises an important point: it is necessary to consider how the policy might support the ‘doing’ of particular actions, and exploring the relationship between policy and action.

The participants described using the EYLF in different ways, with a tension emerging between the framework being too broad or too specific. The extent to which the participants viewed it as a guiding or directive framework varied, as did the extent to which they used the framework to support their practice. Their relationship to the framework alternated between being ‘subject’ to it, or following it, those who were not ‘conscious’ of it, or believed they did their practice a certain way regardless of the framework, and those who purposefully used it to achieve certain outcomes. There are several possible reasons for this, including differences in their education and their years of teaching experience. Many of the participants completed their studies before the EYLF was implemented, and did not receive any guidance on how to use the framework.

The quotes listed above were selected as they were evocative and expressed the strongest sentiments about the EYLF from the focus groups. All three participants from the 18+ years in the field group communicated complex perspectives on the EYLF. Bow had concerns about the framework being used as a “checklist”, and stated that it did not impact what she was doing, while Jean and Rose both felt they were already doing what the framework outlined and struggled to reference it or use it to support their work. It was worth considering that the framework was brought in after they had been working in early childhood education
for over nine years. In the 10-18 years of experience focus group, Bertha was the only educator who said that she used the framework a lot and found it very helpful for communicating information to parents. Margaret, however, believed “it doesn’t help me”, while Marie found it to be too broad and also felt that identity should not be specified in the curriculum but rather negotiated with the family. From those with fewer years of experience as early childhood educators, RC appreciated the broadness of the framework and found that she was able to make connections to the work she was doing. Layla was the only participant who stated unequivocally that she was “very happy with the EYLF”, used it in her practice, and appreciated the identity outcome.

These contrasting opinions on the framework’s depth, helpfulness, and representation of the ‘sense of identity’ outcome reveal that the EYLF is a source of contention amongst educators, and that length of time in the field may impact the way the framework is used and understood in practice. This suggests that education and guidance are needed in how to make a policy framework operational. This would not simply involve extending educators’ knowledge of the EYLF and exploring what it offers for early childhood education, but also examining what it means to enact policy. Whilst this was not the scope of this research project, this has been highlighted as an area of future research. In considering the participants’ responses to the EYLF, their years of experience in the field are relevant, as is their broader experience. Additional analysis of the focus group data is outlined in the section below.

4.1.1 Focus groups

(See methodology for breakdown of focus groups [section 3.4.2])

Focus groups were used as a tool for gathering the participants’ views on and perceptions of the ‘sense of identity’ outcome in the EYLF, and what this means in early childhood education. Selected quotes were chosen as examples of some of the themes identified in participants’ responses. These can be found in Appendix P.

The quotes that were listed in Appendix P indicated that differences emerged between the focus groups. For example, in relation to proactiveness in their role, none of the participants in focus groups 1 and 4 mentioned this; however, it was mentioned in focus groups 2 and 3,
which consisted of those in the field for the longest time and those in the field for the shortest time. (Other differences and commonalities from the themes are unpacked in Chapter Five.)

Six themes were identified from the focus group data. Each quote was colour coded based on the participants’ years in the field to allow for possible links to emerge between the participants’ responses and their years in the field. The following table outlines the six themes and lists the participants who discussed the various stances within each theme. These have been colour coded based on their years on the field.

Table 4.3: Six themes that emerged in the focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of identity</td>
<td>Stances varied from educators should take a proactive role (Rose, Jean, Layla, RC) to educators should have a role or at least not the lead role (Bow, Jean, Marie, Tegan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EYLF</td>
<td>Stances focused on the EYLF being positive (Rose, Bertha, Margaret, Marie, EF, Hazel, Layla, JP), the helpfulness of it (Rose, Bow, Jean, Margaret), the broadness (Bow, Jean, Bertha, Marie, Margaret, EF, Tegan, Layla, RC, JP), and the content within it (Rose, Jean, Bow, Margaret, Bertha, Marie, Tegan, Hazel, RC, Layla).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender formation</td>
<td>Educators discussed personal or societal beliefs that children are too young to express gender identity (Margaret, Tegan), children engaging in stereotypically gendered behaviours (Bow, Rose, EF, Margaret, RC), danger or risk around gender non-conforming behaviours (RC, JP) and conflict with parents over children’s gender non-conforming behaviour (Rose, Bow, Jean, Margaret, Marie, Tegan, Hazel, JP, RC, Layla).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference between parents’ role and educator’s role in gender formation</td>
<td>Stances ranged from the need to be empathetic and respectful to parents (Bertha, Margaret, Bow, RC, Layla) to the need to do right by the child regardless of the parents’ wishes (RC, Layla, Bow, EF, Hazel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact of educator’s role on children’s gender formation</td>
<td>Stances ranged from it being hard for the educator to have an impact on children’s gender formation (Bertha, Marie, Layla, Bow) to educators play a large role in influencing children’s gender formation (Tegan, EF, Hazel, JP, Rose, Jean),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understandings of homosexual and transgender identities</td>
<td>Responses included transgender and homosexual identities being taboo/contentious topics (Bertha, Layla, Tegan), linking non-gender conforming behaviours with transgender identities (Margaret, Bertha, Marie, Layla), and conflating gender non-conforming behaviours with homosexuality (Jean, Margaret, Bertha, Marie, JP)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For complete details, see Appendix N. The themes are examined in more detail below.

1. Emerging themes

The focus groups were structured around set questions and topics, but particular discourses were deployed, and themes emerged, based on the participants’ perspectives and experiences. When responding to a question about children’s sense of identity, the participants’ views were split on whether educators should take a proactive role or not, or at least not have the lead role. When they discussed the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), the views were quite complex. Many of the participants had positive views about the EYLF and indicated they found it helpful, while the majority felt that it did not cover everything, covered the wrong things or did not help them. There was overlap between these two groups. A similar number expressed the view that the framework should be broad and not prescriptive.

In terms of gender formation, a range of themes emerged, including references to a personal or societal belief that children are too young to express their gender identity, that children
engage in stereotypically gendered behaviours, or that there is risk associated with gender non-conforming behaviours. The majority of the participants had experienced conflict with parents, usually fathers, about a child dressing or behaving in gender non-conforming ways. The participants were largely split on views about whether they had to respect and empathise with parents’ wishes in relation to gender, or whether they had to prioritise the child regardless.

When discussing the role of the educator in children’s gender formation, several of the participants felt that it was difficult for the educator to have an impact or mentioned other influences on gender formation, while a slightly larger group felt that educators play a large role and that part of this role requires them to subvert the stereotypical play and gender stereotypes in the environment. It is worth noting that one participant, RC, stated that educators have to be mindful of “having an agenda”. In Chapter Five, this notion has been analysed further, including exploration of the way that particular positions are perceived as ‘agendas’ when the status quo or normative positions are considered neutral, despite also having values embedded. Finally, several participants – mainly those from the 10-18 years in the field group – referred to transgender identities and homosexuality in relation to questions about gender formation in children. The stances included ‘transgender and homosexual identities are taboo and contentious topics in early childhood’, ‘links non-gender conforming behaviours with transgender identities’, ‘the belief that being transgender is a recent development in society’ and ‘confounding gender non-conforming behaviours with homosexuality’.

Overall, looking at the most commonly occurring discourses throughout all of the focus groups provided a variety of insights into the educator participants’ stances. It became evident that many stances were shared by diverse groups of participants across all years of experience, with the exception of the theme and stances relating to transgender and homosexual identities, which were predominantly expressed by one group. The themes that were identified in the participants’ responses in the focus groups will be analysed in Chapter Five, with reference to the participants’ years of experience. These will be examined in relation to the themes that emerged from the interviews, and key thematic groupings will be identified based on the overarching themes present in the data. Change three will be to are, have been, etc.
ii. Key responses to focus group scenarios about gender

In the final stage of focus groups, the participants were presented with four scenarios about practice (see Appendix CC). Each scenario touched on children’s sense of identity and the educator’s role in developing and shaping practice. These were used to gather the thoughts and ideas of the participants on how they would respond in each case. Two of the scenarios focused on gender identity. Each one was based on a real experience that the researcher had encountered. The experiences were chosen because they were commonplace, as evidenced by the participants having similar experiences to share, and reflect a challenge that has created discussion in early childhood over time (e.g., Bernard, 1981/1982; Meade, 1981).

Key responses to Scenario A

Scenario A

The following scenario was shared with each focus group. Key responses from the participants have been outlined below.

A child in your setting has a strong interest in Ben-10. She attends each day in clothing with Ben-10 pictures all over it, and whenever possible, will choose to create and wear Ben-10 costumes. Some of the other children in the setting comment on this during their play. When the child would try to initiate play with some of the girls in the group they tell the child daily that green is not a girl colour and that Ben-10 is for boys, not girls. One child tells her that she can’t come to her birthday party because she likes Ben-10 not fairies. In addition, you overhear some of the boys turning her away as Ben-10 is a boy, not a girl, and so she can’t be Ben-10, just the mother or sister.

Focus Group 1

“For me, it’s about belonging. This child would be feeling a sense of not belonging to her own gender, to her own classroom, perhaps even not belonging to her teacher either. So she has to develop a sense of belonging to someone and that might actually change things for her.” – Marie
“With that scenario, we have the opposite. So we have this little boy. He loves princesses and he dresses up every single day with the princess… he’s about to turn five, other children, they're all the same, they pointed at him when they were at school… So we are at this point that we still don’t know what to do. Mum is very supportive and the child will come fully dressed in girls’ clothes and then his grandma gave him a princess dress so one day he came with the princess dress…” – Bertha

“You’d have to go and talk to the parents and find out what the parents were feeling about the whole thing too, rather than me deciding that it was a problem that I was going to fix because it’s no use trying to solve the situation in kindergarten.” – Bertha

**Focus Group 2**

“I think this is the age where they are starting to become… there's something external, there's something happening, to make them think that this is a boy, this is a girl. This is how a girl should act; this is how a boy should act. It also comes down to what those other children's influence [is] as well.” – RC

“We had the opposite last year. A child started at our centre who, a boy who was very into Disney princesses and he would come dressed as Snow White nearly every day. At first, the boys, especially the boys, the girls didn't seem to mind but the boys would make a lot of comments. One little boy even referred to him as a she, in his mind he was a she. We didn't delve into gender identity as much as we could have. It was more just, ‘We can wear what we want.’ I did probably tell the children off too much, when I heard them make cruel remarks. It’s like, ‘No, don’t say that. He can wear whatever he wants’. I didn’t at the beginning, I probably didn’t deal with it as well as I could have, not that I dealt with it bad[ly] but I probably could have done more. I could have started a conversation about it.” – Layla

**Layla:** Yes, I feel like I don't have the knowledge.

**JP:** Can fully recognise myself, I’ve got no knowledge in it.

**RC:** It's probably why we're here.
Focus Group 3 and Skype add on

“But there are times when I would, not in a real confrontational way, but there would be times when I would try to basically assert that I'm in charge here. This is my space. When children come to kinder [sic], this is how we do things. These are important for you. I might be even recourse to wave a bit of the curriculum at them… And it helps that we would be confident that the document would support us in having an environment where children are allowed to fantasy play and be whoever they like when they're playing fantasy and also one that I feel supportive of challenging gender roles. I would feel as if I could say, ‘Look, this is the national curriculum framework and I am a teacher trying to do this.’” – Bow

“If it was a girl doing it and children were being discriminatory against her, I would obviously have a conversation with everybody involved. I guess I'd use a lot of modelling and discussion with the other staff around the fact that green is just a colour. It doesn't belong to any specific gender.” – Rose (Skype add on)

“You talked about colour and the boys not letting her play. I guess, okay it is an obsession…You would explore why the child is so into it and also try to find some other interests that they're in so that their interest will now balance.” – Rose (Skype add on)

Focus Group 4

“I think that’s a way that we play a very big role, and what our feelings are as teachers, and what we impart on that sort of gender-specific stuff. And often our thoughts and feelings around it, it's probably going to impact that girl. Are we supporting her play? … Ben-10 isn't necessarily a boy or a girl. It’s a tricky one because there are gender stereotypes everywhere.”

– EF

“I really think it’s something you would need to address and talk about, that boys and girls can do anything, and that no one is restricted by their gender, what they can get involved in, particularly at kinder [sic].” – Tegan

“And I guess sometimes it is just a matter of planting the seed, whether it be through a book or through just a comment in a discussion and seeing where that then takes it. I know that we’ve tried to plant the seed, and it’s just gone, ‘Yeah, no. Don’t like that idea. We’re going to keep going with this.’ And other times they go, ‘But wait, what if we try that?’ and I guess
sometimes, without overstepping it, but the teacher stepping in and helping to facilitate that play.” – Hazel

**Key responses to Scenario B**

**Scenario B**

The following scenario was shared with each focus group. Key responses from the participants have been outlined below.

*A father approaches you angrily at pick up time, as he arrived to find his son dressed in a princess dress and heels. He tells you sternly that he does not want his child dressed in ‘girl’ clothes and that you are not to allow him to wear them. The child, however, spends most of his time trying on these dress ups and loves pretending to be a princess. You provide a variety of dress up clothing options but he always chooses these dresses.*

**Focus Group 1**

“You've got the conflicting roles there. Okay, the child has a role, but the family has a role and we have a role. So, where's the line on allowing the child to have their own role in their identity formation? And that's the difficulty with families as well. Because, this father, in this particular instance [referring to scenario], is not allowing his child to have a role in that particular part of the identity formation. So, he wants his child to develop an identity in a certain way and I think that the difficulty here is, you have what the child wants, but you also have the child's relationship with the father and what are the consequences for this child when they get home.” – Marie

“You can definitely do board picture stuff about diversity and not all boys are like… and not all girls wear pink and all. You could do that, but I don’t know how much impact you are going to have.” – Margaret
“I had a boy last year and he still loves dressing up and so we supported that at the kinder and then I found out that he loves the makeup as well. We never do makeup at kinder [sic] but he must have done it at home and maybe his mum would just draw the line on that when it comes to going to kinder [sic]. So he always arrived to kinder [sic] in boy clothes and then he was always dressing up and then I also saw his father's reaction to when he would see his son at the end of the day, he hasn't actually taken the clothes off and he wasn't supportive completely of his son being that way.” – Marie

“It's a really hard one because you have to almost make a choice: do you do what the family wants or do you do what the child wants?” – Margaret

Focus Group 2

“I just stand my ground. I’m like, ‘I’m sorry, it’s part of our program. It’s always going to be out here and we would never say that he couldn’t do it. At the end of the day if you’re not happy with it, see you.’ It’s not the best for the child, but, I would never put dress-ups away because the dad told me not to.” – RC

“This is part of our frameworks. We allow children to explore roles through dramatic play and that helps them create a sense of identity. We’d just have to back up everything… some people would never take that seriously, but you still have to stand your ground.” – Layla

“I had a little boy last year who came from three-year-old kinder [sic] that had never said a word. At home he spoke, but in the classroom context had never said a word. It was probably about March and he held my hand and I'd been trying to build a relationship with others. Lots of nonverbals, playing around and things. He took my hand, he took me into the bathroom, took me to a quiet corner where no one can see and whispered, ‘I want to be a girl.’ That's the first thing that he ever said. Then, suddenly he started talking. Always wanting to wear the dresses, some things like that, but had very rigid parents who did not want him dressing up and things like this…It was just a huge thing that I wish I knew how to do. Kids, actually surprisingly, you know what, everyone, was just sort of okay, that's B, that’s just who B is. He never really got that sort of reaction, like in the scenario. They just accepted it, which was kind of humbling.” – RC
Focus Group 3 and Skype add on

“They do treat me very much as a source of expertise on children and family life. They don’t challenge me very much. I think working a long time is probably the difference. I don't think you get treated with [the] same respect as you would an old timer.” – Bow

“I would probably explain from our perspective that we try to support children’s interests and the value of role play and the skills that the child is learning so probably try to explain it from an educational perspective to him. I would also, it's really tricky, because it's obviously his views but we also want to respect the child's interests. Yes, all of our little boys that love doing this would be very fortunate with fathers that actually supported this 100%.” – Rose (Skype add on)

Focus Group 4

Discussion regarding feeling comfortable suggesting families go to a different setting if they disagree with the philosophy:

EF: They’re not at the right place. I always feel perfectly comfortable saying things like that too.
Tegan: Yes.
Hazel: It’s very interesting to hear the parent’s responses when you say that. I mean, ‘You can't say that.’ I had that last year. I said, ‘Maybe this isn’t the best environment for them… we have a kinder literally next door. We share a footpath. Maybe next door might suit you a bit better. They’re like, ‘You can’t say that.’ I said, ‘Yes we can. This is our philosophy’.
EF: You’ve got to know the philosophy.
Hazel: This is my personal belief. This is why we say, ‘Look at both preschools. We’re very different. A child can learn anywhere, but they’ll thrive in a specific environment. This may not be the environment for your child.’
Tegan: Yes, and that’s the other concern…if we do have to draw the line in the sand and say, ‘Well, this is our philosophy. And I’m sorry if that doesn’t fit with your personal philosophy, but maybe this isn’t the right place.’ My concern then for that child is, ‘Where do they get to do that?’

The participants’ responses to the scenarios further indicated their views on children’s sense of identity and the educator’s role in fostering and shaping it. The scenarios were used to
determine how the participants thought they would respond in each situation. The responses to the scenarios have been used to examine the educator participants’ views on practice in relation to gender. These will be incorporated into the analysis of the key thematic groupings that emerged from the focus groups and interviews to be explored in Chapter Five. In addition, some of the responses to the two scenarios on gender identity are also present in the table of focus group responses (see Appendix N) as particular themes emerged in the discussion of these scenarios that fit within the overarching themes that emerged from the focus groups. Themes and discourses were identified in the participants’ responses to the scenarios and have been outlined in Chapters Five and Six. Additionally, many of the quotes outlined above will be examined and analysed further in Chapters Five and Six.

iii. Definitions of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication

As outlined in the methodology chapter (see section 3.6.3), a list of definitions for verbal and nonverbal communication were developed as a tool for the research assistant to use when capturing data in the focus groups (see Appendix O). These definitions were gathered from three sources (Knapp, Hall & Horgan, 2013; Macquarie Dictionary, 2019; Oxford Dictionary, 2019).

Verbal and nonverbal forms of communication data were collated and compared to the audio recordings to ensure consistency, and some additional verbal responses were added to the table (see Appendix Q). This table was then considered in relation to the specific questions that had been asked or topics of discussion at the time of verbal and nonverbal responses. An additional table was developed that outlined the questions and topics that correlated with verbal and nonverbal forms of communication noted during the focus groups (see Appendix R).

This table indicated that particular questions and discussion topics elicited noticeable verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. For focus groups 1, 2, 3 (not Skype) and 4, the areas associated with the most responses were scenarios A and B on gender, followed by possible changes/additions to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the educator’s role in fostering the child’s sense of identity. For focus group 3 (Skype add on), the area associated with the most responses was fostering the child’s sense of identity. The participants in focus group 3 were also particularly interested in the second scenario that was about religious sensitivity (see
Appendix CC). This data suggests that particular questions and topics were more challenging or led to more engaged conversation than others. Verbal and nonverbal forms of communication will be discussed in Chapter Five, with regards to the themes that emerged from the educator participants’ responses. The significance of the data, and whether it indicates that particular questions or topics were more challenging, or caused more discomfort for the participants than others, has been considered in Chapters Five and Six.

iv. Conclusion

The focus groups were used to gather the participants’ views on the ‘sense of identity’ outcome in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), the role they play in fostering children’s sense of identity, and their own practice in this area. And these groups provided an extensive amount of data, from the participants’ responses to the questions and scenarios they were presented with to verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, and the artefacts they selected. Six main themes were identified from the participants’ responses, which include ‘sense of identity’, ‘EYLF’, ‘gender formation’, ‘difference between parents’ role and educator’s role in gender formation’, ‘impact of educator’s role on children’s gender formation’, and ‘understandings of homosexual and transgender identities’. The two scenarios outlined in the data focused on gender identity. They have been used to examine the educator participants’ views on practice in relation to gender and incorporated into the key thematic groupings to be identified in Chapter Five. Verbal and nonverbal responses were recorded in the section above, as well as the frequency with which each response occurred in relation to each question. (The findings will be explored together with key thematic groupings that emerged in the responses from focus groups in Chapter Five. Key discourses will be examined in Chapter Six.) The participants were also asked to select an artefact that represented a sense of identity to them. As artefacts were also used in the interviews, they will be examined in subsection 4.1.3.

4.1.2 Interviews

In addition to the focus groups, interviews were conducted with early childhood educator participants as a tool for gathering their views on gender identity, both personally and in relation to children. The interviewer also asked them about their practices in the area of gender as individual educators and as part of their workplace.
i. Analysing interview transcripts

Like focus groups, all interviews were initially transcribed and coded. An example of an interview with one of the educator participants can be found in Appendix L. This interview is interesting because it contains lengthy responses that touch on anecdotes from the early childhood setting and from participant’s own experiences.

In the interview, the participant, EF, provided multiple examples of her perceptions of gender, showing a strong belief in providing children with gender neutral materials, environments and the tools to counter stereotypes. As with the majority of interviews, there was some overlap in the definitions and uses of gender and sex. This overlap was primarily through linking gendered identities and behaviours with children’s anatomies. Despite this, EF displayed a strong understanding of gender identities being societally produced, and often heavily impacting children. She discussed society’s push toward polarised gender identities, in particular through the media and retail industry. EF explained her belief that young children start to develop gendered behaviours from a young age but begin to look at them critically between the ages of three and five. She takes a head on approach to addressing gender identities with the children in her early childhood setting, explaining the types of push-back she received about children acting in an non-stereotypical manner, that it was always from families of boys, and how she would handle these situations by referring them to the setting philosophy on gender.

EF stated strongly that she believes feminism and gender empowerment can be problematic if it leaves the boys saying “what about me?” or does not address the needs of both sexes. She described the multiple materials and techniques that they use to ensure equality among the children. Interestingly, she pointed out that while it is assumed that all educators at the setting follow these approaches, it is not something they discuss. She explains that their philosophy on gender is strong, and while it recognises the varied backgrounds of educators and families, it strives to provide a consistent approach across the board. Some other key areas discussed in this interview centred on EF’s belief that her childhood experiences had a positive impact on both who she is today and her beliefs surrounding gender. In addition, EF outlined her appreciation for her qualification and teacher education in New Zealand and the content provided, including gender. She outlined her surprise and initial struggle in adapting the Australian approach to early childhood, but explained she has found teachers with common
pedagogical approaches and is happy now. The interview below contains these ideas and many more descriptions of EF’s childhood experiences, experiences at university level, encounters with gender stereotypes in her setting, and working with children and co-educators to provide a gender equitable environment. (The complete transcript of EF’s interview can be found in Appendix L.)

ii. Emerging themes

After the interview transcripts were coded, key quotes were listed in a document, sorted by theme, topic or idea. Over time the researcher developed tables (See Appendices M & S-W) in which the discourses were sorted by the themes, topics and ideas that were emerging. Each section of the tables listed the stance or idea discussed by the participants and then each relevant quote was placed under the appropriate heading. Each quote was also coded based on the participants’ years in the field to allow for possible links to emerge between their responses and years in the field. The key themes that emerged were society (see Appendix S), family (see Appendix T), gender identity (see Appendix U), early childhood settings (see Appendix V & M), and teacher education and working with colleagues (see Appendix W). Initially, a large number of themes emerged across the five areas outlined. These were then combined and coded, alongside the themes that were present in the focus groups, into four key thematic groupings. See the section 4.3 and Chapter Five for the breakdown of these groups.

The interviews were structured around set questions and topics but particular discourses were evident based on participants’ perspectives and experiences. Looking at the most commonly occurring themes throughout the interviews provided insights into the educator participants’ views. Multiple themes were identified in the interview responses, and these themes were grouped together in five key thematic groupings. The key thematic groupings were ‘society’, ‘family’, ‘gender identity’, ‘early childhood settings’, and ‘teacher education and working with colleagues’, which grouped together the themes that were most prevalent throughout the participants’ responses.

Under the first thematic grouping, ‘society’, the themes included ‘gender identity development, and societal shifts in relation to gender’, and ‘womanhood and feminism’. The ‘gender identity development, and societal shifts in relation to gender’ was discussed most
frequently in this thematic grouping, and included responses by participants across all years of experience. The second thematic grouping, ‘family’, consisted of the themes ‘gender inequities in domestic roles’, ‘conflict between motherhood and having a career’, and ‘parents dictating/influencing children’s appearances in relation to gender’. The theme ‘gender inequities in domestic roles’ emerged prominently in responses across all four groups. The theme ‘conflict between motherhood and having a career’, however, was referred to only by the 18+ and 10-18 years in the field groups.

In the third thematic grouping, ‘gender identity’, the themes included ‘exploration of gender stereotyped toys, colours, clothing and language’, ‘understanding of diverse gender identities and gender non-conforming behaviours’ and ‘sexualisation of children’. The theme ‘understanding of diverse gender identities and gender non-conforming behaviours’ was the most prevalent, and was identified in responses from participants across all years of experience in the field. The fourth thematic grouping, ‘early childhood settings’, consisted of the themes ‘countering gender stereotypes’, ‘kinder teaching as a traditional female role’, ‘children policing gender’, ‘families’ responses to educators based on age and experience’, and ‘encounters mixed responses from families in relation to gender’. The theme ‘countering gender stereotypes’ was frequently occurring and was present across all four groups. The theme ‘families’ responses to educators based on age and experience’, however, was referred to only by the 18+ and 10-18 years in the field groups.

The fifth and final thematic grouping, ‘teacher education and working with colleagues’, consisted of the themes ‘collaborating and communicating different ideas surrounding gender’, ‘expressing empathy for people who feels challenged by social changes’, ‘conflict between staff over gender practices – generation based and philosophy based’ and ‘importance and impact of teacher education in gender for educators’. The themes ‘expressing empathy for people who feels challenged by social changes’ and ‘conflict between staff over gender practices – generation based and philosophy based’ were discussed by participants across all four groups. The latter theme was identified in the largest number of responses and was also noticeable for having the most detailed responses in this area.

During the interview process, the educator participants were asked if they had any suggestions for supports that would assist them in developing gender equity practice. The responses included a large focus on professional development, guidance and resources, as
well as some mention of the curriculum, information, self-reflection and policy. The depth of
their responses indicated there is a demand for further guidance in this area. These seven
suggestions will be examined further in Chapter Five. A full list of suggestions can be found
in Appendix BB.

iii. Conclusion

The interviews with early childhood educator participants were used to gather their views on
gender identity and to learn more about their practices in the area of gender as individual
educators and as part of their workplace. Five thematic groupings were identified based on
the participants’ detailed responses. These groupings, ‘society’, ‘family’, ‘gender identity’,
‘early childhood settings’, and ‘teacher education and working with colleagues’, were chosen
as they were most prevalent throughout the participants’ responses. The themes that emerged
from the interviews, and educators’ suggestions on what would assist them with gender
equity practice, will be analysed in Chapter Five. These were examined in relation to the
themes that emerged from the focus groups, and key thematic groupings were developed
based on the overarching themes present in the data. In addition, they will be analysed to
examine the discourses deployed in the responses in Chapter Six.

4.1.3 Artefacts

Artefacts were used to gather information on the participants’ views about their own sense of
identity (Artefact #1) and their own gender identities (Artefact #2). The artefacts chosen by
each participant and the reason given for each choice have been combined in a table. The
artefacts that educator participants brought to the interviews and focus groups were examined
and defined (see Appendix Y). They were then examined collectively and coded into
frequently occurring themes (see Appendix X & Z). The participants were asked to provide
their perspectives on how the first artefact represented their sense of identity and how the
second artefact represented their gender identity, in order to counter the subjective nature of
artefact analysis. These responses were also coded and compared against the themes
identified through the researcher’s analysis of the artefacts to ensure all possible themes were
covered. By nature, many of the artefacts had social emotional value, which is difficult to
measure. For example, for her sense of identity’ artefact, Rose brought a cow ear tag on a
keychain, which she explained was significant due to it being given to her by her father and
that it represented her upbringing, background and the influence of her dad on her life. Some examples of the ‘gender identity’ artefacts chosen included jewellery, photographs, a doll, clothing and more. Some examples of the ‘sense of identity’ artefacts jewellery include identification cards, jewellery, a mirror, photographs and more. For a full list of artefacts, see Appendix Y.

i. Emerging themes

Thematic analysis of the artefacts and the participants’ explanations of the artefacts, were used to identify and code themes. The researcher developed two tables that contain the themes that emerged from the artefacts that participants had chosen to represent their sense of identity and gender identity. The artefacts and quotes relating to each theme have been separated by the participants’ years in the field, which have been coded by the key shown in Appendices X and Z. This was done in order to determine whether there was a connection between the themes emerging from the participants’ artefacts and their years in the field.

The ‘sense of identity’ artefacts and related explanations, which were presented in the focus groups, are described in Appendix Z. Themes were identified through thematic analysis of the artefacts and the participants’ explanations of why they chose the artefacts. The most prominent theme, based on frequency, was ‘influence of family, background and upbringing’, which emerged from the artefacts and explanations of participants from all four groups of years of experience in the field. The other themes that emerged included ‘being a parent, caretaker, having pets’, ‘travel and learning languages’, ‘place of origin, culture, the natural world, home’ and ‘internal and external influences’. These three themes emerged from the artefacts and responses from participants spread across the four groups. There were no apparent trends based on years in the field.

Details of the ‘gender identity’ artefacts and their corresponding explanations, which were presented to the research in the interviews, are contained in Appendix X. Themes were identified through thematic analysis of the artefacts and the participants’ explanations of why they chose the artefacts. Of the five themes identified, three themes were evident in the artefacts and explanations of participants from all four groups, which were divided based on years of experience in the field. These included ‘femininity, including physical symbols of gender’, ‘personal identification with gender’ and ‘awareness of gender expectations’,
‘influence of family, background and upbringing’ and ‘childhood play with toys and other children’. The theme ‘femininity, including physical symbols of gender’ was relevant to the artefacts and responses of nine out of eleven participants, which is significantly higher than the other themes.

ii. Conclusion

The artefacts were used in the research to gather information on the participants’ views about their own sense of identity and their own gender identities. In examining these two artefacts together, it is worth noting that in the artefacts and responses relating to sense of identity, the most prominent theme was ‘influence of family, background and upbringing’. This theme was linked to participants from all groups. In contrast, for the artefacts and responses relating to gender identity, the theme ‘influence of family, background and upbringing’ was only linked to the artefacts and responses from participants who have been in the field for 5-10 years or 10-18 years. It is also interesting to note that in all but two cases, the participants who referred to the influence of family in relation to sense of identity were different from those who referred to family in relation to gender identity. This has been explored further in Chapter Five, and the themes and discourses identified from the participants’ choice of artefacts and related explanations will be examined in Chapters Five and Six.

4.2 EYLF developer participants

As discussed previously, the EYLF was developed by a consortium of academics tendered by DEEWR to work alongside policy makers. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments endorsed the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), developed to support educators in providing quality care nationwide. While the EYLF provides outcomes for best practice, it does not list any practical ways that educators can make a difference in the area of children developing a sense of their gender identities. Indeed, this could be regarded as one of the silences in the framework. For the purpose of this research, one academic and one policy maker agreed to be interviewed about the process of developing the EYLF.
4.2.1 Introduction

Table 4.4: EYLF developer participants’ background and involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jamie</td>
<td>Involved as a policy maker on the consortium of people who developed the EYLF. Previously worked for the government and was responsible for early childhood curriculum in her state. Had assisted with the development of her state’s curriculum framework.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Involved as an academic on the consortium of people who developed the EYLF.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Names are pseudonyms

4.2.2 Interviews

Interviews were conducted with the two EYLF developer participants in order to determine their role in the development of the EYLF, the strategies used when developing the content, how the five learning outcomes were planned, how the strategies to meet the five outcomes were developed, how areas were chosen to be supported by these strategies, which areas required them to make compromises around content, why and how gender was included in sense of identity, and what changes they would make if they were developing the framework again, especially in relation to gender and equity.

i. Analysing the interview transcripts

The interviews with the two EYLF developer participants were transcribed and coded. The coding process involved generating a list of potential codes relating to the development of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), which were then refined and defined. The researcher used thematic analysis to identify initial themes from the transcripts, and developed a table that contained quotes pertaining to each of the themes.

ii. Emerging themes

Many themes emerged from the interviews with the two EYLF developer participants. These have been outlined in a table in Appendix BB. The most prominent themes were ‘sensitive
nature of the work’, ‘considerations over when to ‘push’ for content to be included’ and ‘focus on outcomes in the framework’. The other themes that emerged included ‘brevity of the framework’, ‘terminology used in the framework’, ‘strategies used in the development of the framework’, implementing the framework’, ‘discussions around children’s identity’, ‘the inclusion of gender under the ‘sense of identity’ outcome’, ‘changes they would make now’ and ‘references to Indigenous content’. This is further discussed in Chapter Five, section 5.2.

iii. Conclusion

The themes outlined above that emerged from the EYLF developer participants’ interviews will be explored in Chapter Five. Key thematic groupings have been identified and developed based on the overarching themes present in the data. The responses will also be analysed to examine the discourses deployed, which have been outlined in Chapter Six.

4.3 Conclusion

The research was designed to capture the early childhood educator participants’ views on gender, their use of the EYLF, and their beliefs on the role of the educator in fostering a child’s sense of identity. In addition, the EYLF developer participants were included in the research to gain an understanding of the process of developing the EYLF, and what was included around gender and sense of identity. This chapter provided an overview of the initial themes identified in the data collected for this research. This included information about early childhood educator and EYLF developer participants, analysis of quotes from focus groups and interviews, a summary of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication from the educator participants, and an examination of artefacts selected by the educator participants as well as their explanations of how these were chosen. Themes were identified through thematic analysis, and initial comparisons were made between the participants’ responses to their number of years in the field. These included themes that were present due to the questions asked by the researcher during the focus groups and interviews, and those that emerged outside predetermined questions. The former predetermined questions were informed by the literature, and aimed to answer the main research question and five sub-questions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008) was used to determine patterns from which key themes, or generative themes (Freire, 1970/2000), were identified. These themes will be examined further in Chapter Five.
Chapter Five – Discussion

This chapter focuses on key aspects of the data presented in the previous chapter and examines them alongside the literature cited in this research. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was used to identify key themes that emerged in the data. The findings of this analysis can be found below. Each section contains a figure (Figures 5.1, 5.2 and 5.3) that depicts the key thematic groupings and contains analysis on each area. These themes were made up of multiple discourses that were deployed in the participants’ responses. In Chapter Six, the most prevalent discourses will be analysed in more detail, and in relation to the literature, using feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA).

5.1 Key thematic groupings identified from educator participants’ responses

This section provides an overview of themes present in the data from educator participants’ responses and organises these into four key thematic groupings. The themes that emerged as most prevalent in response to questions asked included: educators’ understanding of gender and how it develops; dynamics with colleagues; educators’ role in children’s gender formation; suggestions on resources and guidance that would be helpful to educators in providing gender equity; the impact of teacher education; years of experience in the field; background context; and the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) on educators’ approaches to gender. In addition, themes were identified from the participants’ responses that were evident but did not directly emerge in response to the predesigned questions. These included: navigating relationships with families; early childhood as a feminised workforce; sexualisation of children; generational differences in views on gender; beliefs about feminism; and linking gender non-conforming behaviours with homosexual and transgender identities. The themes outlined above were then consolidated into four overarching key thematic groupings (as described above) explored in this chapter. These key thematic groupings are ‘educators’ understanding of gender’, ‘the educator’s role’, ‘views on the EYLF’, and ‘impact of personal context on educators’ approaches to gender’. Figure 5.1 provides an outline of key thematic groupings and themes that make up each grouping (i.e. each theme representing an assemblage of discourses present in responses). The discussion of each theme within each key thematic group area will take the form of a general discussion made up of an assemblage of different elements.
5.1.1 Educators’ understanding of gender

This section consists of discussion around educator participants’ understanding of how gender identity develops, the links between sexualisation of children, and compromising childhood innocence, linking gender non-conforming behaviours with homosexual and transgender identities and generational shifts in gender. These have been examined through the lenses of queer theory, feminist post-structuralism and performativity.

i. Views and understanding of how gender identity develops

In order to examine the educators’ understanding of gender, the researcher took into account multiple factors. One of these factors was their views on how gender identity develops. These views varied widely, and they referred to gender identity development as both innate and influenced by multiple factors. Two of the educators expressed the belief that gender identity development is partially innate. Layla suggested “there is an innate thing that we’re born with or a certain way we want to be, but we are definitely influenced by the outside”. This may align with some socialisation theories around gender development, which posit that while gender roles are comprised of ‘real’ biological differences, these are influenced by socialisation processes (Davies, 1989). Layla’s response implies that gender is tied to biological elements of development and also that cultural contexts, like early childhood
settings, have some bearing on the gender identities that children shape. Layla’s view was shared by Bow, who stated “there’s a certain component that has to be innate” but added that children are also “significantly impacted by the teaching that comes directly from the adults, …society in general, [and] the stereotypes that they constantly see put in front of them”.

Some of the participants emphasised the role other people play in reinforcing gender stereotypes, which can impact children’s gender identity development. Several educators specifically referred to the way families influence children’s gender identity development. EF stated, for instance, that “gender identity is something that probably begins before you have even been born…depending on what that looks like for your family.” Tegan’s response built on this idea, as she stated that “parents tend to really reinforce those gender stereotypes from birth.” While Tegan acknowledged that this process can also take place within early childhood education, she believed that “more than anything it comes from home.” Multiple theories around the development of gender identity in children, including feminist post-structuralism (Blaise, 2009), which differ from socialisation theories, place emphasis on the impact of those people around the child, including the family, and the social context in which they live (Davies, 1988, 1989; MacNaughton, 1996, 1998; Zosuls et al., 2011). Post-structural theories would suggest that these contexts not only influence emerging gender identities, but that these contexts are productive of emerging gender identities (Butler, 1990). These ideas have been further explored in Chapter Six. In addition to family, Renold (2006) suggests that children can impact other children’s understanding of their gender identities through policing their expressions of gender. This was demonstrated by Marie’s response, which acknowledged the role of family but also emphasised the impact of reinforcement from friends and other children as large influences on children’s gender identity development. She stated that their friends often say to them “‘boys don’t do that’ or ‘girls don’t do that’.”

The way gender is negotiated between self and others is further illustrated by Jean, who responded that “gender identities develop through a combination of [the child’s] experiences in inhabiting their own body and then how people respond to them.” Jean further referred to the concept of “gender constructs”, suggesting that gender is a construct developed and maintained by society through actions and beliefs. Jean’s thoughts around society playing a significant role in children’s understanding of gender also aligns with MacNaughton’s views (1996) on the ways children develop their sense of masculinity and femininity from society and the world around them, and then begin to understand themselves through this view. Other
educators involved in the research outlined behaviours and objects as being “traditionally masculine” (Tegan) or “stereotypical woman things” (EF). This phrasing indicated their understanding of certain behaviours falling into socially acceptable gender binaries, suggesting that behaviour may fall within this realm but does not necessarily need to be enacted in this way. This understanding links with the belief that we live in a society that has dominant ideas about the correct way to be male and female (MacNaughton, 1996, 1998) and that these can influence the ways we are produced as gendered.

The word ‘stereotype’ was mentioned by all participants in response to multiple questions and discussion topics. This suggests a level of awareness of societal pressures and the way these pressures might influence constructions of gender; however, this awareness did not automatically inform how educators approached their work with children. The struggle to view gender in a way that was outside of the stereotypical was highlighted in a response from Rose. Rose was a participant who was supportive of gender diversity; however, when sharing an anecdote about a child in her setting, she stated “I had a little boy who loved dressing up in girl’s clothes”, then paused and added “traditionally what kids perceive as girl’s clothing.” Rose’s initial description of “girl’s clothes” illustrates an example of an unconscious response she followed with a response that demonstrates an understanding of gender as a socially mediated aspect of identity/subjectivity. This struggle between an awareness of societal pressures around gender and the acceptance of normativity (stereotypes) has been discussed by Butler (1990) who suggests it is important to interrogate normative and pervasive ways of understanding and being that are evident in the culture, and to understand that these are often experienced unconsciously and in turn support normative ways of understanding and being. Other participants also reported struggling with stereotypes, some in their practice (i.e. Bow) and others in their personal lives (i.e. Layla). Further exploration of this can be found in section 5.1.4 (iii).

Many participants also discussed the influence of the media and popular culture on children’s understanding of gender and their identities. Layla explained that she believed children have “got all those external pressures, the media and all that” and this plays a role in the ways in which they view their gender identities. Prioletta (2015) explains that media messages and popular culture have become “powerful agents in the social construction of gender” (p. 16). While Layla referred to media in relation to the ways children learn about gender, she also linked it to her personal experiences, adding that her own understanding of gender came from
“definitely the media [and] family members”. A large majority of the participants made direct reference to the role that media plays in shaping children’s understanding of gender identity. From this, it can be seen that the media functions as a discursive context within which gender identities and understandings about gender identities are constructed and produced. Marie mentioned “YouTube [and] TV” as specific sources for these influences. YouTube was also mentioned by Layla and JP as an important example of media. It was evident from their responses that many of the participants viewed media as a key influence in children’s lives, particularly in the area of gender. Some participants referred to this without discussion of whether these influences were positive or negative, while others mentioned negative messages being passed to children through the media. RC expressed the view that the “media is terrible but it has a flip side” because it allows for “access to more ideas and information.”

One area that participants’ responses centred on was the media’s representation of toys as appropriate for a specific sex. RC described her views on advertisements, stating:

“You can even hear in the music in the background of advertisements, that the boys are rough and destructive. Then there’s explosions going on in the background and telling them that this is what you like and this is how you need to behave to be a boy. It’s the complete opposite when they’re trying to promote anything for girls. Soft music and ballet and light, airy singing and sparkles. I think that feeds into it a lot… saying, ‘act like this and get this toy and it will make you a girl’”.

RC’s response about advertisements is a good example of the way advertisements function as a discursive terrain (i.e. soft music, ballet, sparkles, explosions, toys, the consumer subject) containing a variety of discourses that become available to children and potentially productive of gender identities. Kahlenberg and Hein’s research (2010) reinforces the ideas discussed by RC, stating that marketing and advertisements are “designed, packaged, and marketed to correspond with [children’s] masculine or feminine identities” (p. 830). Multiple participants discussed the ways in which children take on masculine or feminine identities and how these can also be present and reproduced in early childhood settings. There was a particular focus on clothing, colours, toys and representation of popular culture, for example. Bow described the frequency with which girls had come to her setting and “whooshed in in their pretty flirty, inappropriate dresses for kindergarten” adding that she “would put it down to the marketing”. Jean mentioned she found that the many of the girls she teaches “are
obsessive about pink and having pink things and being attached to pink things…some girls will be almost panic stricken if they don’t get the pink one.” Margaret suggested that children’s assumptions around blue and pink as gendered colours are “a cultural thing” stating also that the link between colour and gender is not only evident in toys and clothing, but in other areas of culture and that manifestations of gender may vary from one culture to another. Margaret illustrated this point with her response about children in her early childhood setting that come from an Indian background, stating “they don’t have that, pink is for girls thing”. Additionally, Davies (2003) discusses the ways individuals are part of multiple cultural contexts, and that these contexts can in turn influence aspects of their identities and the ways in which they understand core components of their identity. Social norms associated with gender can vary depending on the multiple contexts that an individual inhabits – and individuals can draw upon the available discourses that these contexts provide as they go about the work of constructing gendered identities.

Lindstrand, Insulander, and Selander (2016) explain that the representation of gender in popular culture is crucially linked to the reproduction of hegemonic social norms and ideals. As outlined above, multiple participants referred to stereotypical representations of gender that are present in society, the media and popular culture. Olivia discussed the presence of popular culture in her setting, stating “there’s a very strong gender bias in the popular culture items that [children are] bringing to the program”. Bow explained that she has a strong “anti-marketing push” to counter gender stereotypes and other potentially harmful influences in popular culture. She stated she was “trying to avoid the kids coming in with the princess backpacks or the Bratz dolls or the superhero, things like that.” Bow’s attempt to limit the presence of popular culture in her setting is not uncommon and reflects an understanding of the links between constructions of gender and popular culture. Her comments demonstrate that she is aware of the cultural dimensions that frame gender construction and also on account of this awareness, she consciously seeks to limit the impact of popular culture within her early childhood setting, by constructing that space, drawing on discourses other to those that are represented in popular culture.

Bow’s push to remove certain aspects of popular culture in the setting was also interesting, because theorists have noted that the influence of popular culture can be quite forceful or persuasive. Research, for instance, has found that popular culture not only communicates messages to children about their gender identities (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2010), and societal
norms (Lindstrand, Insulander, & Selander, 2016), but it can also create a sense of expectation about how a child is supposed to behave in order to belong to a specific sex or gender. This adherence to expected gendered behaviours, reinforced by popular culture, may be illustrated through a statement made by Layla. In this response, she discussed a situation with a child in her setting in which she had asked the children to bring in something from home that made them happy to share with the group:

“One little girl who seemed to have come from a very stereotypical home … brought in all these girly, princessy kind of, they were like unicorns or something, and then she couldn’t exactly explain why they made her happy. That was one that I thought was interesting.”

The child’s inability to explain how the princesses or unicorns made her happy may have been due to a lack of ability to analyse her choices. It may also have been due to the child developing interests in this area, simply because they were shared in the context by other people, and also on account of the objects of her interest being present in books, television shows, movies, or in other multiple cultural contexts that she inhabits and is aware of in her life. Servos, Dewar, Bosacki, and Coplan (2016) completed a study in the area of gendered expectations from popular culture. They found that girls, in particular, experienced stress in having to compete with these gendered expectations, that is, to fit within normative expectations of gender. Perhaps, Layla’s example demonstrates the way cultural contexts, like popular culture, influence the desires that young children have to be gendered and do their gender in particular ways. It also demonstrates the feelings associated with this doing and being as influenced by cultural contexts.

While Layla’s response referred to toys, the influence of popular culture can be evident in multiple aspects of the early childhood classroom. These might also include clothing, posters, music, books, and many other aspects of culture. Wohlwend (2009) suggested that educators are often unwilling or uncertain about how to mediate the gendered messages that can be found within popular culture. In the anecdote shared by Layla above there is evidence of engagement with and reflection on gender identity and how this is understood by children. Perhaps what is required is more guidance on how these gendered messages in culture can be engaged with in a meaningful and age appropriate way, which supports a diversity of early childhood learners. Perhaps accounts of good practice, and accounts of the theoretical
narratives that inform this practice, are also required. This has been further discussed in section 5.1.2.

ii. *Gender, the sexualisation of children, and compromising childhood innocence*

Another discourse that was deployed by many educator participants was the view that children are too innocent to discuss their gender identities, and further, several participants linked innocence with sexualisation. Tegan, for instance, expressed the belief that society views discussing gender with young children as “taboo” and too complex, stating that the “concept of children having an awareness of gender…maybe questioning gender, is such a taboo subject… We couldn’t possibly do it for four-year-olds…seems to be [what] a lot of society believes.” This was also illustrated by Margaret’s comment that “a three- or four-year-old child might not be able to explain [gender] in ways you can understand”. Childhood innocence, it would seem, can be a key discourse that is deployed in order to stall work in this area.

Some areas within early childhood literature explore the notion of children’s innocence. Developmental theories, in particular Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), for instance, often view childhood through the lens of an underlying discourse of childhood innocence (Robinson, 2008). This innocence is often equated with sexual immaturity, in which children are seen as vulnerable and in need of protection (Robinson, 2008), and where adults believe that innocent children need to be guarded from aspects of sexuality and gender in order to protect this innocence. Work on sexuality and gender with young children can be shut down on this account. A number of studies support this view, and suggest that many educators believe that children are too young to learn or talk about sexuality (Blaise, 2005; Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Robinson & Diaz, 2006; Surtees & Gunn, 2010). Sexuality is therefore linked to innocence, innocence to childhood, and gender to sexuality. It can be argued that work that aims to support gender diversity is sometimes positioned as threatening innocence on account of the links that are perceived to exist between gender and sexuality.

Positioning children as innocent means they are not perceived to have a sexuality, and therefore thinking and talking about them in this way becomes unintelligible or difficult. It is via notions of sexualisation that sexuality is often spoken about in relation to children, meaning that the innocent child has been corrupted by sexuality (James, Jenks & Prout,
1998). The concept of sexualisation in early childhood was a discourse deployed by participants in this research, across a range of years in the field in this study, and echoed in the literature referred to above. This distaste and focus on the sexualisation of young children was shared by multiple participants in this study. Bow and Hazel, for example, both emphatically referred to sexualisation in their responses. Bow said “Let’s not even get on to the inappropriate sexuality that we are pushing down on to our children”, while Hazel said “Let’s not go down the sexualisation road”. These participants illustrated the way discourses of sexualisation and innocence intersect and may govern what is seen as appropriate practice in early childhood spaces. In this instance, however, discourses of sexualisation and innocence may have been functioning to provoke the educators to consider and do work on gender. What was evident was that the discourses around sexualisation and innocence can function in multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways. These discourses might stop work around gender, be a catalyst for further work and change, or some combination of both.

iii. Terminology used in relation to gender

When discourses of non-normative sexualities and gender identities are combined with the discourse of childhood innocence, the effects are more likely to shut down work around gender with children. While educators in this study were uncomfortable with discussing sexualisation, their responses included multiple references to aspects of sexuality in relation to gender. It was evident in these responses that a number of participants linked sexuality and gender and this was particularly prevalent where the conversation was concerned with non-conforming gender identities. Lloyd and Duveen (1992) discuss the ways in which children who do not conform to traditional gender roles can challenge educators and inadvertently introduce the connection between sex, gender and sexuality. Through queer theory and notions of the heterosexual matrix, developed in queer theory, we can begin to understand the possible reasons behind the linking of sexuality and gender (Butler, 1990; Robinson & Díaz, 2006). The normalisation of heterosexuality in society is evident through language, interactions, and the practices and policies of individual people and social institutions (Robinson & Díaz, 2006). The normalisation of heterosexuality and the subsequent linking with normalisations of sex and gender has implications in early childhood settings. This linking of sex, sexuality and gender was evident in participants’ responses; however, at times it seemed that the educators used these terms interchangeably. This suggests potential confusion around the terminology. Such confusion was significant on account of the ways
sexuality can function to shut down work around gender. When gender is seen to be non-conforming, the idea that it might be a pathway towards a non-normative gender identity or sexuality might shut down work in this area on account of it being seen to encourage this development.

The conflation of terms related to sexuality and gender was evident in multiple responses from participants. When they were asked questions about gender, multiple participants discussed transgender identities, intersex variations and homosexuality. Margaret expressed concern about her lack of understanding around transgender identities and intersex variations, stating that:

“I really feel I have a lot of ignorance about all the new issues that we’re having about -- not issues but awareness I guess of transgender and intersex. I don’t have a full understanding of any of that. That’s something I need to find out more about.”

While Margaret openly acknowledged her limited knowledge in these areas and expressed her desire to learn more, her response suggests that she related transgender identities and intersex variations to gender when intersex variations relate to the sex and biology of an individual. Margaret was not alone in expressing concern about her lack of knowledge about transgender identities and how this may relate to children. It is important, therefore, that educators know about relevant labels and the ways in which they are different and intersect. For the purpose of this study, it has been noted that sexuality and innocence were conflated, and gender was often conflated with sexuality. On account of this, gender may come to be seen as a threat to childhood innocence. Just as gender may be conflated with sexuality, and work may be stopped on account of this, so too work on transgender and intersex may come to be seen as threats to childhood innocence and shut down work on these issues. An implication is that ongoing work with educators that clarifies such terms is required.

Bertha spoke about the need for further training around working with children who might be transgender. She stated:

“I just think that we need a little more bit of training about how to think about difficult situations like transgender and how we can allow the children to think as well, be critical, but at the same time, they make their own minds [up] without us influencing them. But what type
of training? The other thing is, that’s what we think but we don’t know how the parents are going to react…but if we start supporting transgender…some people are going to jump, ‘I don’t want my kids to know anything about that,’ and some people will be more supportive. So it is very complex because we are not only dealing with children, we are dealing with their families, we are dealing with their community, we are dealing with our own beliefs.”

Bertha described multiple factors for educators to consider when navigating gender in their settings. She discussed the lack of knowledge about transgender identities and the need for training in this area, the presence of educators’ personal beliefs around gender, and the pressures that educators can face from families with regards to gender. As Bertha emphasised, educators’ personal beliefs around gender can have a significant influence on their practice with children. Snowman et al. (2009) suggests that this could be due to gender bias that is formed based on the various beliefs held by the educators. Educators may be aware of these views or biases and the ways they impact their practice. However, they can also be so subtle and ingrained that the educators are unaware of their presence (MacNaughton, 2000). These views and biases may not only impact educators’ practice with children but in their own understandings and ways of doing gender. Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity can be evident in the ways educators enact and navigate gendered and professional identities in the cultural contexts they inhabit. An example of how educators have to negotiate multiple contexts is Bertha’s quote above which exemplifies how educators have to negotiate multiple contexts through a multiplicity of identities (Rogers & Scott, 2008) in addition to considering their role in shaping the identities of the children they teach in partnership with the children’s families. Many responses from the participants suggest that the dynamic between educators and children’s families, when working with gender, can be complex and requires navigating. This has been explored further in section 5.1.2 (iii).

The frequency of the discussion about children potentially being transgender suggested that many of the educators made direct links between gender non-conforming behaviours and transgender identities. While a child who explores expansive gender roles may be transgender, this does not imply a direct correlation between gender non-conforming behaviours and identifying as transgender (Ehrensaft, 2017). It is also important, however, that educators do not assume that children in their settings are definitely not transgender (Fast & Olson, 2018; Olson, 2016). Early childhood educators can play a large role as advocates for children who are questioning their gender identities or are performing gender non-
conforming behaviours, as well as their families who may seek support (Kroeger & Regula, 2017). A few participants discussed scenarios where children approached them and confided they were not the gender that others assumed them to be. One example of this came from RC who, during her focus group, stated:

“I had a little boy last year who came from three-year-old kinder that had never said a word. At home spoke, but in the classroom context had never said a word…He took my hand, he took me into the bathroom, took me to a quiet corner where no one can see and whispered, ‘I want to be a girl.’ That’s the first thing that he ever said. Then, suddenly he started talking. Always wanting to wear the dresses, some things like that, but had very rigid parents who did not want him dressing up and things like this.”

In her interview, RC provided further detail on this encounter. She explained that not only did the child say “I want to be a girl”, but also said “I don’t want to be a boy…don’t tell my mum and dad.” She responded by saying “Okay, mate. That’s okay. That’s fine. Thanks for letting me know.” She also mentioned that “the more he started talking, the more confident he got…he was really just loving life. He really enjoyed it.” This response indicates that in some situations, children may be doing more than exploring gender identities, and it may also be about cross-gender or transgender behaviours (Ehrensaft, 2015, 2017). Beemyn and Rankin (2011) completed a survey of nearly 3,474 participants who identified as transgender or a related identity. They found that a large proportion of the participants stated that as young children they were aware they identified with a gender that opposed their biological sex, and that many of these individuals chose to keep this secret due to potential negative reactions from others. This scenario has been examined in more detail in section 5.1.2 (iii).

Another example of the interchangeable use of sex, gender and sexuality was the way some participants conflated gender with homosexuality. This was evident in a response from Marie, when she suggested that “the gender stuff ... is so difficult to teach. You talk to people and [they ask] have you got a book on gay families and do you read it to your children? What do you do with it?” Her discussion around providing inclusive environments for families with same-sex parents suggested some confusion around what gender entails. This was also evident in a response from Layla to a question about childhood experiences with gender. She described the experience of learning about what it means to be a boy from her three cousins, explaining that:
“...they were tougher, ‘tougher’ in quotation marks. Like stronger and grubbier, smelly... which is very interesting though because one of them turned out to be gay. Not stereotypically gay, but they were all really, they were boy boys, like stereotypical boys.”

Layla slipped between discussing her cousin’s gender to discussing his sexuality. She expressed surprise that her cousin ended up identifying as homosexual because he was not stereotypically gay. These views are not uncommon. In fact, Pogrebin (1980) explains that there is an assumed link in society that gender roles will determine a child’s emerging sexuality. She adds that due to this assumption and the existence of cultural homophobia, there was, and sometimes still is, an emphasis placed on children performing their gendered identities normatively.

Many of the educator participants discussed the pressures that children face when acting outside of their normative gender roles. JP described her concerns for a boy who wore a dress each day and stated that she found herself wondering “What’s school going to be like for you, buddy?” Rose explained that she would sometimes find that “other children are discriminatory against those children”. RC also spoke of the ways in which other children policed gendered behaviours, saying that “it’s just getting worse and worse and worse..., now, down [with the] under threes, if you have a little boy walking around in a fairy dress, he might still have that interest, but other children are going to notice”. Robinson and Davies (2007) emphasise the importance of educators becoming aware of children policing other children’s genders. It is evident that some of the participants were aware of this. Margaret referred to peer influences when discussing her own son’s experiences exploring outside normative gender roles. She explained that “he changed when he went to school, became a more obviously mainstream boy, I guess. I feel like that was in response to – not pressure but peer influence.” These responses reinforce the view that gendered identities that are not performed normatively can be met with negative responses. It also links back to the educators’ discussion around the way children gain an understanding of their gendered identities. As discussed above, there are complex discourses being deployed through society’s views on non-normative sexualities and gender identities. This complexity is caught up with the notion of gender, which in turn can create a sense of panic around doing work on gender identities with children. There is a need for educators to have a clear understanding of the value behind doing this work, an awareness of their role and knowledge and understanding of the terminology around gender.
iv. **Generational shift in views on gender**

The educator participants expressed a diverse range of views around gender. While there were many similarities, each educator also had unique perspectives about how children’s gender identities develop and ways it can be seen in the early childhood setting. Snowman et al. (2009) suggest that each educator’s understanding of the concept of gender is produced through their individual experiences and the multiple contexts from which they have come. Considering that these participants had been in the early childhood field for varied lengths of time, there were multiple factors within their teaching identities to inform their understanding of gender and subsequent practices. Van der Tuin (2009) outlines the idea of “generational logic”, which she defines as “sedimentation of a perspective connected to, but not confined to age” (p. 17). Varied generational logic can be seen within the early childhood workforce and in educators’ perspectives on gender. While this can be due to the age of the individual, other variables can impact their views and beliefs (Nielson, 2017). These can include their personal context, the teacher education that they received in the area of gender, political contexts (i.e. the government’s approach to gender during the time of their tertiary education and years in the field, the introduction of the EYLF [DEEWR, 2009]), and cultural and societal influences (i.e. second and third wave feminism [Coady, 2017; van der Tuin, 2009]) that have been present during their lives.

The participants’ views on gender appeared to vary based on their years in the field. These centred mostly on ‘life experiences influencing gender’, most frequently discussed by participants from the 5-10 and 18+ years in the field groups, and ‘references to transgender identities’ which were predominantly mentioned by participants from the 10-18 years in the field group. In addition, a number of the participants discussed encountering generational differences in their personal lives (i.e. their parents, grandparents, and children) and with their colleagues. These generational differences have been outlined in later sections of this chapter. In section 5.1.2 (ii) the educator participants’ experiences with colleagues have been discussed, and in section 5.1.4 (iii) their personal contexts have been explored.
5.1.2 The educator’s role

This section examines the role of early childhood educators in relation to gender. This consists of educators’ beliefs around their role in children’s gender formation, educators’ dynamics with colleagues and navigating relationships with families.

i. Beliefs about their role in gender formation

One discourse frequently deployed in participants’ responses was around the child having autonomy in the formation of their gender identities. This corresponded with the feminist post-structuralist notion that while children learn their gender by positioning themselves and being positioned inside the masculine and feminine binary discourses that are available to them within their cultural contexts (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 1998), they also have agency in the accepting and taking up of these gender identities. In addition, the participants’ responses corresponded with psychological literature that discounts the notion of children being blank slates to be written upon (Cole, 1996/2003). The following quotes from the data indicate that the participants had strong views on this issue:

“Children can make their own decision about what’s going to be perfect for them rather than us putting our ideas onto them.” – Marie

“I like to think that, yes, maybe if children are getting maybe the more traditional values and beliefs at home; kinder is a place where it’s okay to be, a bit more experimental and not be defined by gender.” – Tegan

“I think it’s really important that children are just children and they’re individuals and they’re valued for who they are, not based on what gender they are.” – Rose

Some participants discussed the importance of having an active role in ensuring that children are able to explore their gender identities freely. Hazel emphasised the importance of actively countering gender stereotypes, stating:

“There are so many things that a girl can do that may have been always a male idea, and opening up their eyes. Because I think it starts now, in early childhood, to then hopefully see that change later on in years.” – Hazel
The view of the educator as having an important role in the formation of children’s gender identities was also discussed by other participants:

“In fact, because we have done in our training and we have got this in the curriculum and we have thought about it, we probably are better able to shape a child’s identity than their own parents because we have thought through this sort of stuff. But, at the same time, who really should have the role in the identity shaping?” – Marie

“I think that we have a responsibility to be thoughtful about how we manage gender in the classroom and don’t want to abide to clichéd or excessive emphasis on gender.” – Jean

“I think we have to be very careful, very mindful of not projecting or having an agenda… of your own personal values and beliefs, and pushing them on children… like a child walking in every morning and the first thing you say to them is, ‘Aren’t you wearing a beautiful dress today?’, and then you say that every single day, and it’s basically telling every child that, ‘You’re not beautiful unless you have lovely dresses’, and that’s what beauty is. It’s the small things that you say and you do. It’s what’s been put on you and then you’re putting it back out there.” – RC

Other participants expressed the view that the educator has a role in children’s gender formation but that this role is not significant. One particular example can be seen in this response from Layla:

“I think we have maybe a percent, I don’t know what kind of percent but it is not a big percent. If we can do our bit but at the end of the day…they go home to their mum and dad. Their mum and dad are the biggest influence into their identity, and then family and the community, we are only a small part of that as educators. We just got to work our hardest in trying to influence their positive development of sense of identity. But at the end of the day, I don’t believe we have a very big impact.” – Layla

Layla reflected that educators have a role in children’s gender formation, and acknowledged they need to strive to aid positive development. However, she concluded by stating that she did not think educators have a large impact. This view indicated the potential underlying discourse of fatalism around the role of the educator. Lee-Thomas, Sumsion and Roberts (2005) completed a study into educators’ understandings of and commitment to gender equity
in early childhood settings, including their feelings about their ability to intervene in inequitable situations pertaining to gender, and also exploring their reliance on socialisation theory in gender-related practice. They found that many educators felt helpless about creating change in children’s concept of gender. This may prevent educators from working towards gender equity (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). In multiple responses from the educator participants, there were discourses deployed around their current lack of knowledge and that they required further guidance in the area of working with children around the development of their gender formation. One example was illustrated by a discussion between three of the participants during their focus group:

**Layla:** Yes, I feel like I don’t have the knowledge.

**JP:** Can fully recognise myself, I’ve got no knowledge in it.

**RC:** It’s probably why we’re here.

These statements were made in response to Scenario A (see section 4.1.1 [ii]) in the focus group, in which the participants were asked to consider how they would respond to a child who was facing backlash and being ostracised from peers due to performing non-normative gendered behaviours. The interaction quoted above also implies that the participants believed that there was one correct way of responding to this situation. Layla and JP referred to their lack of knowledge in how to address the inequities described in Scenario A. While RC did not directly state that she did not know the correct way to proceed, her plural use of “we” in her statement implied a collective lack of knowledge with Layla and JP, and that their ‘group’ may have attended the research because they were less knowledgeable on this topic.

Jean expressed an ongoing struggle she had been experiencing around gender. She discussed the ways in which she struggled with considering the importance of gender symbolism for some children. She stated:

“I’m struggling to get my head around the idea of the role that gender symbolism plays for people who need to identify as a particular gender and need to be able to put on the cloak of gender in order to feel like they’re really themselves. I’m conscious that in trying to actually reduce the presence of gender in the classroom you might actually be depriving some children of opportunities that they need in order to explore their feeling that they’re in one gender and they belong in it.”
The discourses that were deployed by Jean were around the assumption that the provision of gender equity in early childhood entails the removal of gendered identities and binaries. Her reference to people who “need to be able to put on the cloak of gender in order to feel like they’re really themselves” suggested that children may need to be able to identify with a specific gender and that simply providing gender-neutral spaces can be problematic. Jean’s ‘struggle’ can be linked to Fraser’s (1996/1997) concept of equality versus difference. Her exploration of the value of gender for certain children correlated with Fraser’s concept of difference, which can be linked to expansion. Expansive gender identities would provide opportunities for children to identify within a gender space that is not restrictive. Additionally, Jean’s reference to a “cloak of gender” can be linked with Butler’s theory of performativity. Butler suggests that gender is not a garment that is taken from a closet, donned for the day and returned to its place at night (1993), but rather produced through a series of continual acts, or performances informed by discourses.

Educators’ beliefs about their role in children’s gender identity development are important. The participants revealed that they do not have guidance on what their role is or should be. This may be negative, as it can leave educators unsure and potentially feeling helpless about their role and ability to have an impact and without support if they are challenged by parents, colleagues or management. It can also be positive as it leaves their role open and flexible. The potential challenges have been discussed in the following two sub-sections, while the opportunities have been examined further in Chapter Six.

ii. Dynamics with colleagues

The modern workforce consists of multi-generational workers that have entered their careers during times of great technological and innovative change (Hannam & Yordi, 2011). Lancaster and Stillman (2002) discuss the ways in which multi-generational workers can collide and may experience conflict in situations where they need to work together. The early childhood workforce is made up of educators who have joined the field over a lengthy timespan and therefore issues associated with a multi-generational workforce were identified as significant. As discussed in section 5.1.1, educators bring with them multiple “generational logic” (van der Tuin, 2009, p. 17) that have been influenced by a variety of factors, including teacher education, and personal, political, historical and cultural contexts. The variance in generational logic can be seen in educators’ views around gender. Multiple participants
discussed colleagues that held views on gender that differed from their own. Jean explained she had encountered assumptions about it being okay to reinforce stereotypical views, to which she had responded “No. You’re not going to do that.” She added that as the leader in the room she “just overruled them again. It’s not something [she] really make[s] a matter of discussion”. RC reflected on the best way to work with colleagues “who aren’t quite on board with the idea that [gender] is social justice”, suggesting that one should “sit down and go, ‘You might not understand this but as a team of professionals, this is what we’re promoting.’ That’s probably what should happen.”

Other participants discussed the changes in views around gender over time and the ways in which this can impact views. One example of this was from Layla, who explained:

“…we do have a lot of older educators or a lot of educators that aren’t from Australia so [they] may have different cultural ideas about gender as well...We’re all trying to get on the same page and it is changing and we’re all learning.”

Layla’s response demonstrated her empathy and consideration for colleagues who may be older or from other cultural contexts. The discourses associated with the participants’ empathy for those who have different views on gender due to their contexts were underlying within multiple areas in the participants’ responses (see section 5.1.1 [iv]). The link between cultural context and views on gender was discussed in section 5.1.1 (i).

Tegan explained that countering others’ views around gender can be complex as “it’s really hard that you challenge people as a professional, or as an educator, or whatever, and their practice, but, really, what you’re challenging is their life experience, and their beliefs.” Her response outlined that challenging colleagues’ views on gender is complicated as it is not just about teaching practice. Tegan was describing the multiplicity of identities that an educator inhabits within their professional identity (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). In addition, her explanation of the ways in which educators develop their views on gender corresponded with the idea that individuals are created within, and are a part of, multiple contexts, which then impact ways in which they view society and their roles within it (see section 5.1.1 [ii])

Bow described one of her colleagues who opposed the steps introduced by her workplace to address gender stereotypes in their program. She suggested that the reason behind this may be
due to the change in views around gender that have occurred over the past few decades. She hypothesised the possible reasons as follows:

“What threatens people is they feel like they’re being asked to give up everything that was precious, to them. The girls who loved playing with dolls are being told that was wrong. The boys who loved the trucks are being told that was wrong. It can be incredibly threatening to someone who has just happily gone their whole life acting in a certain way, believing that they have control over their destiny, to be told now your whole life is a sham because you’ve actually had this forced upon you.”

Bow’s response indicated an underlying compassion for those who responded negatively to the work being done on gender expansion and diversity. Discourses associated with empathy and acknowledgement of different contexts were present in responses from other educator participants. A common response was how difficult it could be:

“From my perception, my issues around gender in my workplace are entirely to do with the adults and not with the children. That’s not with the educational program.” – Jean

Some participants described problems associated with a whole-team approach and how hard it could be to respond to differences of opinion around gender from colleagues. Jenkins, Ritblatt and McDonald (2008) explain that many educators feel unprepared to handle conflict with colleagues. This appeared to be evident in a response from Bow, who discussed a situation where she overheard an educator make a statement that she considered to contain gender biases. She explained that:

“I was absolutely horrified...I personally, am not very good at being confrontational. I am not someone to say, ‘Look, I was really disappointed with what you said. We need to sit down and talk about it.’ It was more a case of ‘What on earth do you mean saying that?’ in a jocular fashion and hoping you get the message and then perhaps later on coincidentally having various staff meetings about how you can avoid bias.”

Like Bow, other participants discussed ways in which they try to engage colleagues about gender and practice:
“I tried to open up a dialogue, everyone fell silent. I bang on for a bit and then nothing changes. Nobody engages and eventually, I become more and more isolated until I’m just having conversations with myself. It becomes pointless because they’re not actually prepared to state or defend their ideas.” – Jean

“Once I developed some confidence in my own ability as an educator and in my own philosophy, …pedagogy, I thought that I just worked on what I could do in my space and hoped that that would have an impact on the others around me……as I became more confident, then I was absolutely more than happy to have those difficult conversations with my team, and say, ‘Well, this is what we value and this is what we believe,’ and it’s about referring back to the framework documents that talk about a strong sense of identity and sense of belonging and that exploration is not only okay but valued.” – Tegan

“You’re raising the level of awareness and then you can go deeper when you’re ready.” – Marie

Some participants outlined experiences they had had with colleagues whom they perceived as opposing work around gender equality:

“It’s not a situation as you would find in child care roles where people are out acting this way out of lack of knowledge. There’s a bit of a conviction on her part that well of course girls like things like that and it doesn’t matter what you say. I know because I have been a mum and I am now a grandmother, with two granddaughters, that little girls like this sort of stuff. To an extent, I can offer an alternative point of view but it is a debate rather than acting out of ignorance. I can say, ‘Well, look, we don’t do that sort of thing.’ But I don’t think that I am ever going to change her tightly held beliefs.” – Bow

“I don’t know if it was more to do with the gender issue or more to do with the power play.” – Layla

“They think it’s a bit of a joke. It’s just like we’re making the problem by identifying that there’s a concern here. Boys are boys. Girls are girls. Stop worrying about pretending that they’re not. They have that issue of it’s not an issue. You’re making it an issue.” – RC

The responses above contained an underlying discourse of helplessness around making changes to their colleagues’ views. Bow expressed the view that it is not just opposing work
around gender equity in early childhood settings that can be problematic. She expressed frustration with educators in her setting who viewed non-normative gender expressions as something remarkable and “gorgeous”. She explained that some educators would see “a boy put on a dress [and] it would be a photo opportunity… cause isn’t it cute that the boys are dressing up like that,” which she suggested was “just as negative really…it should be unremarkable.”

Additionally, participants described their early childhood settings’ whole-team approach to gender. Some participants discussed direct actions that were being taken within their settings to ensure a consistent approach to gender:

“We do a bit of just general chit chat and we do a bit of general education but it’s not necessarily targeted because I find with my staff that does not necessarily work terribly well.”
– Bow

“As it comes up with ideas we will discuss them, so especially if we’ve noticed something in the program that we need to talk about…We’d just have a conversation about that so we’re all on the same page.”
– Hazel

“We’re a part of [a researcher’s] study that she’s doing. We’re getting some education about the issue around gender identity…As a whole, we’re trying our best to…be more accepting of fluidity, that things aren’t set in stone, and that things are changing. The evolution of life from the times.”
– Layla

The majority of educator participants indicated there was not a centre-wide approach to gender:

“To support gender identity and equality, we just do it… it’s embedded, I suppose… I guess with the people I’ve been working with for quite a while, we just know what each other think and we all support that approach. There are some new team members that have only joined us this year and that is something we probably do need to discuss at a staff meeting.”
– Rose
“Gender is something that I don’t think is discussed enough. However, because of our process of hiring, our philosophy, it underpins it but it doesn’t state it...We’re reviewing our philosophy at the moment so adding in something around what support can look like for gender and for at least having those conversations… It does sometimes go unsaid.” – EF

“No, we don’t [address gender as a team]. I think it’s just something I need to keep raising and we should keep thinking about it.” – Marie

“I don’t think we have any formal policies beyond this obvious equity that we would expect all children to be equal…We don’t have anything that I’m aware of specifically about gender. I certainly don’t have any in my own planning and I know that the staff in the other rooms wouldn’t be doing anything about it.” – Margaret

“Sitting down and having a professional dialogue of this is an issue, what can we do to help these children? We haven’t had anything like that where I am.” – RC

“I think in the teams I’m working in now, I find that it happens more incidentally…I feel we’re all on the same page and…we don’t have to have an active plan or strategy for dealing with those situations because we all, let’s say, come from the same place. We have the same values and beliefs.” – Tegan

While many participants explained that their early childhood settings did not include a centre-wide approach, a number also expressed the view that a whole-team approach and professional development was important for a consistent approach to gender. The following two quotes are examples:

“I think you have to be approaching these things in the same way. If the children are getting the message from me that kinder is a safe place to explore different identity… but then the other educators are telling them, well, in their behaviour or explicitly with words…that’s not okay, then, obviously, there’s going to be some confusion and some frustration around that.” – Tegan

“...teams could go together [to professional development] ... Something like that would allow a number of people from the team to get together and learn about stuff.” – Marie
The participants discussed the complexities of working on a peer-to-peer level with those with conflicting views, and also how their settings approached gender as a whole. It was clear that the participants often related conflicts with colleagues to differences in generations or cultural contexts. This corresponded with the literature around the development of professional identities and how this can be multifaceted and complex (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). Considering the number of participants who described conflict with colleagues and the need to take note of generational logic and views around gender, it seems evident that a whole-setting approach to gender needs to be present to create a consistently supportive environment. This approach can consist of group discussions, policies, and professional development. This approach may lessen incidents of conflict between educators and help them to be on the same page in their practice.

iii. Navigating relationships with families

Family involvement has long been viewed as an important and vital aspect of early childhood education practice (DeMeulenaere, 2015; Morrison, Storey, & Zhang, 2015; Naughton, 2004). There have been multiple perspectives on the role of families in early childhood education over time (Hallam, Han, Vu & Hustedt, 2017). These have varied from families being seen as knowledgeable consumers, families as providers of information to support and extend the child’s learning, and families being viewed as partners in the decision-making processes around the child’s education (Epstein & Sanders, 2002; Morrison, Storey & Zhang, 2015). Regardless of these views, it is necessary that educators working with young children are aware of the importance of family and of the ways in which they can incorporate positive relationships with families into their early childhood settings (Hallam, Han, Vu & Hustedt, 2017).

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) includes a strong emphasis on the importance of fostering relationships with families. The introduction to the framework states that it has “been designed for use by early childhood educators working in partnership with families, children’s first and most influential educators” (p. 5). A focus on family is frequently mentioned under the explanation of the theme ‘Becoming’. In addition, references to family can also be found listed under four of the five learning outcomes, and there are multiple mentions under the elements of practice. The focus within the EYLF on the importance of family involvement and respect for families who are perceived as the “most influential
educators” fits with research that emphasises the value of family involvement in early childhood education (Morrison, Storey, & Zhang, 2015; Naughton, 2004).

Hughes and MacNaughton (2002) explain that relationships and communication with families can be complex and, at times, problematic due to conflicting ideas about practice. This can be particularly challenging to navigate if family members’ views contrast with what the educator has learned as a professional from prior teacher education and policy implementation, and may lead to confusion around what should be considered best practice, and which elements of practice should be prioritised. While the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was not designed to be a prescriptive framework, some educators have interpreted it as a document that outlines one ‘proper’ way of acting (Orlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). If educators strive to adhere to all elements of practice in the framework, this can become problematic when contradictions arise, especially when some areas of practice are silent within the EYLF. Gender, for example, is hardly covered in the framework and educators are left to interpret best practice individually, by potentially drawing on other contexts such as previous teacher education, early childhood setting philosophies and life experiences. In addition, research has found that gender stereotyped play is a common source of conflict between educators and families (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001).

The educator participants’ responses in this research touched on the difficulties that they have faced when navigating relationships, partnership dynamics and communication with families about gender. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, participants shared experiences they had had with families who expressed concerns about their child engaging in non-normative gendered behaviours. Many of these scenarios centred on children who were wearing dress-up clothing associated with the opposite sex and/or played with toys typically seen as belonging to the opposite sex. One example can be seen from JP, who referred to a situation with a family who were unhappy about their child wearing pink socks:

“You have spare clothes… ‘Why does my son have pink socks on?’ ‘It’s the only socks we had, sorry.’ They took them off …I have never heard anything like it. I don’t know whether it was a cultural thing or whether it was a gender identity thing…It was like, ‘oh, okay. Sorry. Totally didn’t think about it. Just thought middle of winter, you need socks on, buddy.’”
When discussing situations with families, Bertha expressed that it was important to talk to the parents about their feelings on how to proceed with the child. She stated:

“You’d have to go and talk to the parents and find out what the parents were feeling about the whole thing too rather than me deciding that it was a problem that I was going to fix because it’s no use trying to solve the situation in kindergarten.”

Bertha’s choice of language in the quote above signified the presence of multiple discourses. Her use of the phrases “problem that I was going to fix” and “solve the situation” indicated she viewed the presence of gender non-conforming behaviours as potentially problematic and something that needs to be fixed. This could link to discussions around societal correlations between non-normative sexualities and gender identities (Pogrebin, 1980) and the view that such discussions can challenge childhood innocence. In addition, Bertha’s deference to parents’ wishes can be linked with the EYLF’s (DEEWR, 2009) approach to partnerships with families. If the framework suggests that families are children’s “first and most influential teachers” (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) and advocates for educators to build respectful partnerships with families in early childhood practice, then it makes sense to involve families in the decision-making process around children’s gendered behaviours and respect family wishes. RC expressed compassion and understanding for families who may struggle with ways in which their children enact their gender identities. She stated “you’ve got to empathise with those parents who have that knee-jerk reaction of, ‘No this isn’t happening. This can’t happen. This is what I want for my child’”.

Another discourse that was present in participants’ responses was the child’s role in their own gender identity development. Some participants highlighted the conflict that can exist between what the child wants and what the families want, and their role within this. Marie, for example, explained that:

“You’ve got the conflicting roles there. Okay, the child has a role, but the family has a role and we have a role. So, where’s the line on allowing the child to have their own role in their identity formation?”

Margaret also expressed this view, stating “it’s a really hard one because you have to almost make a choice, do you do what the family wants or do you do what the child wants.” The
child’s agency and role in their own gender identity development is important. One of the approaches adopted in this thesis, feminist post-structuralism, recognises that children have agency in the construction of their gender identities. While the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was designed to be used with a variety of theoretical approaches, including “post-structuralist theories that offer insights into issues of power, equity and social justice in early childhood settings” (p. 12), there is no explicit guidance on the child’s role in the development of their own gender identities.

During the focus groups and interviews there were two particularly significant examples of conflict with families shared by participants. One was an abovementioned scenario that was shared by RC, which was previously touched on in section 5.1.1 (iii). In this scenario, RC had a child in her setting that was “completely non-verbal in [their] environment”, who pulled her aside and explained that “I don’t want to be a boy, I want to be a girl. Don’t tell my mum and dad.” She added that after he disclosed this information he began to speak in the early childhood setting. RC tried to support both the child and the family by bringing in a preschool field officer to assess the child and speak to the family. However, the situation culminated with the family appearing to withdraw emotionally. RC explained, “it was just a complete shutdown. We hardly ever saw the parents after that.”

Marie also discussed the potential conflict between a child’s exploration of gender and the family’s expectations and wishes for that child. She expanded on this line of thought in her response to one of the scenarios (Scenario B, see section 4.1.1 [ii]) given in the focus groups, stating “the difficulty here is, you have what the child wants, but you also have the child’s relationship with the father and what are the consequences for this child when they get home.” Marie directly referred to the father in this quote as the scenario centred on a father who was unhappy about his son wearing a dress; however, the discussion around this scenario led to further examples being provided from participants of situations where there were particular challenges from fathers in relation to their child’s gendered behaviours. In all of these scenarios, boys were performing their gender in non-normative ways by exploring aspects of stereotypically feminine clothing and toys. Layla, for example, referred to a situation she had in her setting with a boy who enjoyed wearing dresses, explaining that:
“Mum apparently encourages him wearing a dress. Encouraging him to wear whatever he wants and to play with fairy princesses and mermaids and all that sort of stuff but Dad’s a macho bloke and he’s really struggling with it.”

Bow offered:

“I did at the beginning of this year have a father who said, ‘I want my son to play with boys. He only plays with girls.’ I’m like, ‘Oh, my God. What’s going on here? What am I going to do about this?’ Then when I had the chance to follow it up, he expressed that he was worried that he doesn’t get many opportunities to play with boys and when he does, he tends to clash with them and fight with them a lot… That was interesting because initially, it left all kinds of wild conclusions about where the father was coming from and it really turned out to be quite unfair when I listened to what he had to say.”

In addition, Scenario B, discussed during the focus groups, led to multiple responses from the participants on ways they would handle situations with families that were concerned about their children’s expressions of their gender identities. Some participants explained that they would listen to the families, yet still encourage children to use the toys and dress-up clothing of their choice. Bow explained that she would say to the child:

“…now look, your father doesn’t like this. I’m fine with it. When you are at kinder it is my rules, but when you’re going home you’re going home to dad’s rules. So, let’s just make sure that you change your clothes by this time.”

“But there are times when I would, not in a real confrontational way, but there would be times when I would try to basically assert that I’m in charge here. This is my space. When children come to kinder [sic], this is how we do things. These are important for you. I might be even recourse to wave a bit of the curriculum at them… And it helps that we would be confident that the document would support us in having an environment where children are allowed to fantasy play and be whoever they like when they’re playing fantasy and also one that I feel supportive of challenging gender roles. I would feel as if I could say, “Look, this is the national curriculum framework and I am a teacher trying to do this.”

Bow expanded on this by explaining that she would refer to the curriculum to support her stance, adding that she would say “look, this is the national curriculum framework and I am a
teacher trying to do this.” (see section 4.1.1 [ii] for full response). Along with Bow, other participants described ways they would go against parents’ wishes about gender either directly, indirectly or a combination of both. As RC said:

“I just stand my ground. I’m like, ‘I’m sorry, it’s part of our program. It’s always going to be out here and we would never say that he couldn’t do it. At the end of the day if you’re not happy with it, see you.’ It’s not the best for the child, but, I would never put dress-ups away because the dad told me not to.”

Another example of this included Layla’s explanation of how she would respond to parents in this situation. She said that she would tell them “this is part of our frameworks. We allow children to explore roles through dramatic play and that helps them create a sense of identity.” Further, she added, “We’d just have to back up everything… some people would never take that seriously, but you still have to stand your ground.”

It was evident in the majority of the responses outlined above that a discourse of ‘the educator as a more knowledgeable other’ was being deployed. In addition, in some cases the educators struggled to respect both the child and the family’s wishes (i.e. Bow). Other participants discussed the use of policy to support their decisions to families. In Focus Group 4, participants discussed the value of having a centre policy on gender, and whether they would feel comfortable to suggest to families that they could take their children to other early childhood settings if they disagreed with the policy:

**EF:** – they’re not at the right place. I always feel perfectly comfortable saying things like that too.

**Tegan:** Yes.

**Hazel:** It’s very interesting to hear the parent’s responses when you say that. I mean, ‘You can’t say that.’ I had that last year. I said, ‘Maybe this isn’t the best environment for them… we have a kinder literally next door. We share a footpath. Maybe next door might suit you a bit better. They’re like, ‘You can’t say that.’ I said, ‘Yes we can. This is our philosophy.’

**EF:** You’ve got to know the philosophy.

**Hazel:** – this is my personal belief. This is why we say, ‘Look at both preschools. We’re very different. A child can learn anywhere, but they’ll thrive in a specific environment. This may not be the environment for your child.’
Tegan: Yes, and that’s the other concern…if we do have to draw the line in the sand and say, ‘Well, this is our philosophy. And I’m sorry if that doesn’t fit with your personal philosophy, but maybe this isn’t the right place.’ My concern then for that child is, ‘Where do they get to do that?’

Research has found that families often seek knowledge and support from educators in relation to gender (Kroeger & Regula, 2017). The relationship between educators and families can vary widely from feelings of partnership to frustration, helplessness and a sense of conflicting perceptions (Keyes, 2002). Educators who are attempting to navigate these dynamics while endeavouring to achieve best practice around gender, or to seek a “correct way to do it” (Bow), may struggle due to the silences around gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). While there is little direct support at the national level for educators (although Layla and Bow did refer to the EYLF as a resource that they would use to explain practice to families), it is evident that there is a need for whole-centre policies that educators may draw on. In the discussion above, all three participants referred to their setting philosophies and the ways they used these to support their explanations of practice with families.

Families’ views around gender may vary from what is considered to be best practice for educators. Tayler and Price (2016) explain that these views “can be rooted in the adult’s childhood [and] they can be out of step with current thinking” (p. 49). As with the educators and the children, the families’ understandings of gender can be shaped by multiple contexts, both personal and in wider society. It is important, therefore, that educators consider the variety of views that families may bring with them around gender and how they can work with them most effectively. The use of early childhood centre policies can be beneficial in providing educators with some guidance in deciphering best practice and providing them with a base that would help them to explain their pedagogical choices. Early childhood educators continuously provide information to families, and therefore “expanding parents’ and teachers’ resources to include ethical documents, policy frameworks and educational materials with anti-bias can help with advocacy” (Kroeger & Regula, 2017, p. 117). To support and communicate with families, educators need to take into account their individual contexts (Tayler & Price, 2016). Many of the participants’ responses indicated empathy and consideration for the families of the children in their settings who were concerned about various gendered behaviours. Discussion also centred on methods of approaching differing views from families. These included attempting to compromise with families, prioritising the
child’s freedom of choice over the family’s, or taking authoritative stances with families when they felt that the children’s needs were not being prioritised or that the family’s philosophical views did not match that of the early childhood setting. Regardless of the approach, it was evident that many participants would appreciate and benefit from further guidance on ways to navigate this topic with families.

5.1.3 Views on the EYLF

This section examines the educators’ views on the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). This consists of discussion around the educator participants’ views on the EYLF and the ways it can be used in relation to practice around gender. The participants had mixed views on the EYLF ranging from a perceived need for such a document, to an echo of the stated aim in the document that it provides a united voice for the profession, while others identified what is missing in the document or spoke of the document not having much of an influence on their practice.

i. Views on the EYLF and its uses in relation to gender

Throughout this study, the educator participants were asked to consider their views on the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). During the focus groups the participants were asked about their views on the EYLF, both in its entirety and with a particular focus on Outcome 1. The responses ranged widely, as can be seen through the quotes below.

Some participants found the EYLF to be very helpful to their practice:

“I use it a lot, and [the EYLF] is always in the back of my mind, especially when you are doing observations.” – Bertha

“…really helpful…it’s defined…nice and easy to understand for parents… I think it’s actually really helpful. Because it gives you some guidance about how things are supposed to be, especially if you’re a new person starting out in this field.” – Rose

While Rose described the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) as “really helpful”, she also stated “I do all of these things and have done them for a long time, obviously, being that I’ve worked in the field for a long time.” This statement suggests that she did not feel that she personally needed
the EYLF to guide her practice and attributed this to her years of experience in the field. Her reference to the EYLF as helpful guidance to those that are new to the field, while stating that she was already doing those things corresponds to the discussion around professional identities and how these may or may not be shaped by regulatory framework documents (see section 2.5). This aligned with the literature, including Ortlipp, Arthur and Woodrow (2011), who found that educators who were mid or late career did not engage with curriculum documents as frequently or consistently as educators who were new to the field. Other participants also stated that they were already doing the practices that were suggested in the EYLF:

“I don’t like [the EYLF] much… looked over and thought, ‘Oh, yeah. I’m pretty much doing that. That’s all right. I could do what I am doing.’ And then I started using the EYLF a bit more, mainly because I like the poetry of being, belonging and becoming dependable and I can relate to that but this stuff doesn’t really attract me hugely and I have a very light hand when it comes to really referencing these things.” – Jean

“Yes some like it, not sure, not sure if it is that helpful. When this came out I read it over and over and over again and I was having problems… And I just thought, like, there’s nothing in it that I think, I don’t like it or I disagree with it. But I don’t think it helps me. This piece of paper doesn’t help me getting in there and being with the kids is what you do.” – Margaret

All participants who suggested that the framework did not add to their current or previous practice were from the ‘10-18’ and ‘18+ years in the field’ focus groups. These findings may correlate with Fenech, Sumsion, Robertson and Goodfellow (2008), who found that the more experience an early childhood professional has, “the more dissatisfied they are with the regulatory environment” (p. 11). Many of the responses indicated a sense of frustration with the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). This can be linked to the lack of perceived autonomy from the framework as well as ways in which the context of a national regulated framework may conflict with other elements of their professional identities, which have been produced in other contexts.
The participants’ responses also focused on the ways in which they perceived the EYLF’s content. Some participants described the EYLF as being too broad:

“I think it’s really helpful. Definitely very helpful. I’m not sure that it covers everything, because everything is cultural… you need to think of it a little more deeply than what’s actually recent in the framework.” – Rose

“I still think that the curriculum has been written in such a way that we have it rather broad now…” – Marie

Other participants appeared to appreciate the broadness of the EYLF:

“It gives you a fair bit of room to move, it’s not a prescriptive document and the ideas tap into some very big ideas but that also means there is a lot of scope for moving around.” – Jean

“I have been working with the EYLF ever since it started. I don’t tend to look at it as in depth, as I would have many years ago. I tend to just look at the broad outcome and then figure a way at how we can tie it to the individual circumstances of a child, or whatever is happening. But, reading it again, because the statements are quite open and broad that when you read through them, you can connect them to a lot of situations.” – RC

“I was delighted when it came out that it didn’t get incredibly deductive and prescriptive and this is what you must do.” – Bow

Bow also described the ways in which the EYLF was not broad enough:

“It’s compartmentalising it too much for me. It would be better if instead of having these statements, …it’s not an outcome that ‘I ticked this in term 1, let’s move on to the next’ because [if this is the case] some things are never going to change.”

The variation in ways participants perceived the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) may be due to their perception of how the framework is supposed to be used. As discussed previously, despite the EYLF being designed as a non-prescriptive document, some educators may still perceive it to be prescriptive and feel that it contains guidance on the ‘correct’ way to teach (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). If this is the case, then the EYLF may be seen as too broad. In
addition, educators who are aware of silences within the framework may also view it as too broad. Gender, in particular, is one area that some participants discussed as lacking in the framework. When asked about their views on the EYLF and if there were any additions they would like to see made, three participants discussed the inclusion of gender:

“It doesn’t cover that aspect of how do we see gender.” – Bertha

“They mention [gender] maybe once, maybe twice.” – Margaret

“Having written my Honours thesis on gender... I read that and go, ‘Well, I feel like they could say more about gender, specifically.’ And particularly in this day and age where there are children that are identifying as the opposite gender quite early… You could quite clearly use that under [‘sense of identity’] without it specifically being pointed out there. But they’re the kind of things that would get a lot of backlash if things were put in there like that because that concept of children having an awareness of gender, and maybe questioning gender is such a taboo subject.” – Tegan

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) offers numerous insights and suggestions on how educators should provide children with a strong sense of identity, but in relation to supporting their gender identity development there are no suggestions offered (see section 2.5). It is evident from the participants’ responses that some educators have recognised this silence in the framework. This may be due to multiple reasons, including their involvement in this research, and in Tegan’s case, conducting her own research around gender. Tegan’s response (also examined in section 5.1.1 (ii), referencing the ‘sense of identity’ outcome, acknowledges that gender is listed under Outcome 1; however, it also suggests that this can be seen as vague and possibly even tokenistic. The framework is a context within which professional identities are produced and ultimately has the potential to make particular discourses visible (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011), as the participants’ responses indicated. Tegan’s response, and the idea that the EYLF can make particular discourses visible, indicated that further guidance on gender could be useful for educators. However, as participants also indicated that they may not actively refer to the framework in their practice, this suggested that it could be beneficial to have further support through other methods as well as the framework, such as professional development.
5.1.4 Impact of personal context on educators’ approaches to gender

In this section, the impact of educators’ personal context on their approaches to gender has been examined. This includes consideration of their years in the field, teacher education and personal context, which have been analysed in relation to a multiplicity of identities, cultural contexts and performativity.

i. Years of experience in the field

There are many factors that impact on educators’ professional identities (see sections 5.1.1 [iv] and 5.1.2 [ii]), including “generational logic” (van der Tuin, 2009), or perspectives connected to “but not confined to age” (p. 17). A variety of generational logics can be seen within the early childhood workforce and in educators’ perspectives on gender. These perspectives can vary depending on age, personal and political context, teacher education, and cultural and societal influences. One factor that has been previously discussed in this chapter, in relation to years in the field, is the perception of the EYLF (section 5.1.3 [i].)

Two other areas of practice that can be linked with the educators’ years of experience in the field consist of navigating conflicting views with colleagues and children’s families. As discussed in section 5.1.2 (ii), multiple participants reported experiences of conflict with other educators around gender. In fact, all educators offered examples of these experiences except for EF, Marie, Margaret and Jean. With the exception of EF, the other three participants had been working as early childhood teachers for over a decade, ranging from a minimum of thirteen years (Margaret) to a maximum of 18 years (Jean). This could suggest a decrease in conflict from colleagues after working in the field for a lengthy period of time. However, Rose and Bow, whom had worked in the field for the longest time, did share experiences of conflict. While a direct correlation between experiences of conflict with colleagues and educators’ years in the field cannot be drawn, it is important to recognise the discourses being deployed in the participants’ responses. For example, Jean reflected on the ways she used to encounter opposing views and now does not, stating of her current experiences:

“Sometimes, I’ve had, particularly, with other assistants in the past…But it doesn’t happen so much anymore.”
“I don’t find that I’m confronted with things very often that I feel the need to stop or get challenged over. I don’t recall anyone thinking that I’m trying to get them to do anything different in relation to gender. Not very easy to make me do anything differently.”

Jean’s reflection on the way she used to encounter challenges from colleagues but now rarely encounters this suggests that it is possible that this change was partially due to the number of years she has worked in the field and the evolution of her professional identity and confidence as an educator. Conversely, when examining educators’ experiences of conflict with families around children’s gendered behaviours (see section 5.1.2 [iii]), nine out of eleven educator participants interviewed reported having experienced conflict. The two educators that reported they had not encountered any challenges from families both directly attributed this to their years in the field.

Bow discussed this in her focus group response and in her interview:

“They do treat me very much as a source of expertise on children and family life. They don’t challenge me very much. I think working a long time is probably the difference. I don’t think you get treated with same respect as you would an old timer.” – Bow (focus group)

“I have never had a parent come in and say they don’t want their son in dress ups or that it’s unfeminine for girls to do particular things. That doesn’t necessarily mean that they don’t think it and particularly I have been teaching for over thirty years, people do not take me on in a way they would have in my first year to 10 years out now that I have perhaps the advantage of getting older.” – Bow (expanded on this in her interview)

Margaret reflected:

“Maybe I’ve just been lucky. I don’t know. I think where I am now, certainly I’ve been there about eight years and I think I’ve built up quite a lot of goodwill in the community. The families that might have that attitude I think would have sufficient trust in me.” – Margaret

In this section, two factors were considered that can be linked to educators’ years in the field. However, multiple other factors could be linked to years in the field and could account for differences in opinion. These include personal, societal and political contexts, as well as teacher education. Educators’ professional identities are partially constructed through
regulatory frameworks, which can be seen as policy level performativity (Kilderry, 2015). Another important factor in the development of professional identities is teacher education.

**ii. Teacher education**

Five participants had some form of official teacher education on gender and three had been involved in personal research or reflection. While all of the participants were qualified as early childhood teachers, there were differences in their tertiary backgrounds (see descriptions of the participants in Chapter Three). Firstly, those who studied in New Zealand and Columbia were likely to have received different guidance, content and resources during their studies than those who studied in Australia. Those who pursued further study, or had previous qualifications, would have gained different knowledge. Qualifications were completed at different times and in different decades. Students who graduated at different times would have different study experiences as policies and ideas of best educational practice change. The participants who completed their qualifications in Australia prior to the launch of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) would have received an education that was geared towards the old quality improvement and accreditation system (QIAS) (National Childcare Accreditation Council, 1993), which was heavily developmental. The qualifications received in Australia since the EYLF was released would have emphasised the outcomes in the EYLF and the national quality standards (ACECQA, 2018b).

In a follow-up questionnaire, early childhood educator participants were asked about their experiences with their early childhood tertiary education. When examining the experiences of participants who completed their teacher education in Australia, Tegan (six years in the field) explained that she enjoyed her experience at university and “found many of the classes prepared [her] well for [her] teaching career, particularly those with a focus on practical and usable skills” but explained that some subjects, like programming and planning, did not meet her needs. Marie (15 years in the field), described her experience as “good but too idealistic. Reality is different from theory and ideals…. [she] was left feeling like there’s not a lot [she] can do to change things.” Bow (31 years in the field) reflected on her feelings about the Bachelor program, stating that “[she] didn’t appreciate it so much at the time – too many people who weren’t in the field telling you what to do – but now [she] recognise[s] its value.” Jean (18 years in the field), who completed the Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education, highlighted the positive and negative aspects of her experiences. She felt that it
prepared her well for kindergarten teaching but not for “working with 0-3” year olds. In terms of participants who completed their studies overseas, EF (eight years in the field) studied the Bachelor of Education Studies in New Zealand and found it to be a very positive experience. She stated that “the content was absolutely excellent and is still reflected on in my practice today.”

The participants were also asked whether their qualification taught them about the EYLF and, if so, how much importance was placed on it. Tegan, who completed the Bachelor of Early Childhood with Honours, stated that her degree had a “strong focus on the EYLF” which helped her to become “very familiar with the document.” It is evident from Tegan’s experience that studying during the introduction or subsequent implementation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) would have helped her to become aware of and “familiar” with the expectations of the document. Interestingly, Jean, who completed the Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Education, explained that despite her education taking place prior to the introduction of the EYLF, she felt she was taught to meet similar goals and “the way [she] learned to teach was consistent with the EYLF.” When EF was asked how she transitioned from studying and teaching in a country that does not use the EYLF to working and implementing the framework in Australia, she explained that the New Zealand early childhood framework, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996), had “a heavy influence in the development of the EYLF so this is why it hasn’t been too tough as that is what [she] learnt with.”

When asked about the educator participants’ experiences with teacher education in relation to gender, many shared their views and experiences when considering the value of receiving training about children and gender identity and the role of the early childhood educator:

“I certainly wouldn’t have considered it at all before I went to start my teacher training…” – Bow
“I believe that everybody should have an open mind and think widely about lots of things… the education has certainly made me think more broadly than I might have if I hadn’t had that experience…I had a wonderful [teacher]…and she really made us very aware of, I never segregate children and count how many boys and girls there are…I still do come across sometimes other educators that haven’t had that experience or training or awareness or whatever it is, and they do put on their own personal values about gender to the children.” – Rose

“Part of our studies were on gender and what it can look like in the classroom. We were kind of schooled up on it and then here was me thinking, ‘That’s never going to come up because who really cares?’ But no, people do care.” – EF

“Some [ideas around gender] have become mainstream…and] form part of the training that staff get in early childhood.” – Jean

“Reflection comes into it so much. It’s not one of those things where you can just probably have a curriculum of what you need to teach.” – Marie

Some participants discussed their thoughts on professional development on gender:

“We all definitely need to get onto the same page about it, and challenging our own beliefs as well. Some people may still believe certain ways because of how they’ve been brought up. Then just challenging that [belief] and just more information and learning more. It would definitely have to be really compelling and really like, maybe professional development and maybe a workshop or… a lecture or something like that.” – Layla

“…it doesn’t happen so much anymore. It’s probably partly because the staff is fairly stable and perhaps also because some of those ideas have become mainstream now and very much, they form part of the training that staff get in early childhood. I think trained people are much more gendered in their private lives, [and] know not to bring too much of that into [the] work setting.” – Jean

The participants’ experiences indicated that tertiary education on gender can make a difference. EF’s teacher education in New Zealand included six months of training on gender. She mentioned that as a pre-service educator she questioned the relevance, as she believed people did not care about gender. However, she had come to realise since that “people do
care”. Teacher education can enable educators to become more aware of issues relating to
gender diversity, to recognise and respond to any problematic practices, and to highlight and
support any opportunities for further work in their settings (Robinson & Diaz, 2006). Pre-
service educators may struggle with gender-related content in their teacher education since it
can be a sensitive area. This can leave a great deal of room for error (Hogan, 2012). However, the participants’ responses demonstrated that they placed a great deal of
importance on teacher education and professional development.

The quotes outlined within this section suggest that a focus on gender in teacher education,
both within higher education and professional development, is necessary. It needs to be
quality education that includes foundational concepts around gender, sex and sexuality in
order to reduce confusion, and to promote informed practice in these areas. Kroeger and
Regula (2017) urge the early childhood field to work with other education sectors, and want
educators to consider the ethical responsibilities involved in supporting young children. It is
evident from the participants’ responses that they have had a variety of experiences in teacher
education around gender. If educators do not receive consistent education around working
with gender, then how can they be expected to provide high-level support for children? It is
necessary for educators to be aware of the ways in which their personal contexts can impact
their views of gender. Biases may interfere with educators’ practice (MacNaughton, 2000).
As discussed in section 2.4, the first tenet of the early childhood ‘anti-bias curriculum’ is for
educators to identify and confront their own biases (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2009),
which, if performed, would be consistent with educators who might seek to promote
expansion and diversity of gendered identities (Fraser, 1996/1997).

iii. Personal context

The educator participants’ approaches and understandings of gender were likely impacted by
their personal context. Just as years in the field and teacher education may impact educators’
approaches to gender, other aspects of their personal contexts that are also likely to play a
role. While these participants were split into categories based on their years working as early
childhood educators, other variables also inform their beliefs, attitudes and practice. In
particular, each educator’s childhood experiences and upbringing would have influenced their
understanding of gender and their own perceptions of their position within society. Gender
identities and interactions have been linked to social processes, situations and interactions
suggesting that gender is performed (Butler, 1990) or something that people “do in interaction with others” (Messerschmidt, 2009, p. 86). This section explores the contexts of the educators, both in their childhoods and in their adult lives and how these link with their present perceptions about gender and gender formation.

The participants largely fit into two categories when describing their family background. There were those who described their childhoods as traditionally gendered, stating that one or more of their parents had “very strong beliefs about it” (Rose). In this context it was common for there to be a strong focus on the patriarchal figure as the source of income for the family. The maternal figure often focused on the household and raising the children. The educators described an upbringing that involved markedly different roles for siblings. The daughters were often expected to “help…with the housework” (Marie) and learn about running the household (Hazel). The sons in the family were given more physical tasks (Rose). In one case they were given larger portions of food. Rose recalled that her brothers “would be served first and [she] would be expected to serve them.” For some, there were differences in expectations of them recreationally. JP recalled that her “brother played rugby while [she] had to go dancing”. Marie reflected on her feelings about growing up in a traditional household, explaining that “as a child [she] felt like why does God like boys better than girls?”

Other educator participants described a childhood that included parents or a parent, often a mother, with strong feminist ideals (Margaret, Jean, EF). “Identifying as part of that feminist movement was part of my mother’s nook,” Jean explained. “I don’t remember feeling gender roles were ever problematic for me as a child or teenager. I was aware of feminism as a political issue but not as a personal one. I always felt powerful enough in my own world.” The notion of empowering their daughters was present in a number of cases (EF, Layla, JP). Despite these ideals being present in the home, some of the educators recalled a division in expectations of them and their brothers. “My parents had [a] very traditional demarcation of chores, for example, dad did the garden, mum did the inside… my brother would be expected to say, mow the lawns but he was never expected to iron his clothes” (Margaret). Tegan reflected on her upbringing, explaining that her parents did not live together and the times that she “got to live with [her] mum, [she] really just wanted to be like her.” Hazel recalled her relationship with her father and how it veered between expansive and traditionally limiting. “Dad would let me do things when it was just him and I together…But as I got older that changed to the expectation that you stay home with mum and I’m taking the boys, but
when we were in a group situation it was more the, “Oh no, you can’t do this because you’re the girl.”

When asked how they believe their understanding of their gender identities formed, many of the educators linked back to these childhood experiences. EF explained that when she thinks about her understanding of her gender identity “it really stems back to [her] very early days…watching [her] parents have very mixed roles in whatever needed to be done”. Layla explained that her mother also tried to foster expansive gender roles during her childhood. “Mum was trying to challenge gender roles. She didn’t want us to be princesses. She didn’t want us to play with Barbies and like pink and stuff”. Despite this, she described herself as “just a princess”, explaining that she was always “going to go and do this because this is what girls do.” She believed that her gender identity was something she developed by being “led internally”. In the interview, Layla questioned her pre-existing notions of herself as “a princess”, stating “maybe [she’s] not like this. Maybe [she] just think[s] that [she’s] like this.” She concluded that it was just who she was and that she identified more strongly with her feminine side than her masculine side.

Bow described her family dynamic as “Mum was the cook. Dad did the housework. Mum looked after the kids. Dad went playing sports…just because I was a girl didn’t mean that I had to be the little princess.” Despite this division of labour, she described her parent’s household as traditional. She explained that her current context varies greatly from her mothers’. In her home her husband is involved in raising the children and cleaning the kitchen. Her mother tells her “you’re so lucky that he does that for you.” RC recalled her grandparents’ home and the traditional lessons she learned in that environment. She shared how she used to bring her grandfather his sandwich for lunch, and then explored this through her play. She explained:

“Everyone [was] like, ‘aww, that’s so sweet. Look at that little four-year-old pretending to make a sandwich for her husband’. I’m training to be a servant. That’s what it’s like. That’s what I knew. This is my role. This is what it meant to be female in this world.”

Margaret reflected on her childhood and her thoughts on gender identity as a child, stating that “in [her] generation there was no consideration of anything other than that binary male-female.” Hazel also discussed her views of gender as a child, explaining about her
understanding of her gender identity “you reflect on it and go, ‘Oh my gosh,’ it’s so deeply embedded that you don’t realise until you start asking the questions, and go, ‘wait’.”

The participants’ personal stories outlined a variety of backgrounds that are likely to have impacted on each educator’s understanding and personal enacting of gender roles. Butler (1990) explains how the performance or acts of gender are often performed within the context of “forces that police the social appearance of gender” (p. 44). It was evident in the participants’ responses that they attributed many aspects of their gender development to interactions and life experiences with various individuals in their lives. Many mentioned mothers, fathers, grandparents and siblings, when asked to explain their earliest encounters with gender identities. Some participants directly linked and attributed their gendered behaviours to these significant individuals. Layla, on the other hand, suggested that her gender identity was in opposition to what her parent desired for her:

“Sometimes she looks at me and she’s like, ‘What did I do wrong?’… She’s like, ‘I tried so hard.’ I say, ‘Mum, I’m just a princess.’”

Butler (1988) believes that the individual has little choice over how they enact their gender roles. This suggests that whether the participants conformed to the projected gender identities or opposed them, these actions were likely to have been produced innately and not through choice. Hughes and MacNaughton (2001) explain that children develop their understanding of gender, masculinity and femininity through the people and the world around them, but once they have an understanding of what these ideas mean, a child tends to ignore or reject ideas that do not fit within the current understanding of gender discourses that they have developed. While the participants were influenced by their immediate family members’ beliefs of gender and how this was enacted in the family environment, they also displayed a sense of agency in how they applied these ideas to themselves. It was also apparent that these understandings of gender evolved as they grew into adults.

Several of the participants referred to the way they dressed or presented themselves in their adult lives, and attributed this to gendered behaviours, norms or stereotypes. Other participants made no mention at any stage of their own clothing, or other aspects of their presentation, which suggested that this wasn’t a strong concern for them in relation to gender.
Layla, in particular, discussed her struggle with the realisation that she was a “princess” despite her mother’s teachings.

“I’ve actually been battling with an internal battle thinking maybe this isn’t really me. I’ve had recent realisations like, ‘No, this stuff brings me joy. This is actually me. I’m just an ultra-feminine person’. Then I realise that’s okay.” – Layla

Jean stressed the importance of separating an understanding of gender identity in work life and home life, stating that “people who are much more gendered in their private lives, [should] not bring too much of that into [the] work setting.” While this idea seems to be a practical one, it is not always an easy task to achieve. Bow explained her struggle to not “get sucked into the girls wear pink, boys wear blue” dynamic, highlighting that in educational settings this can be present in many ways. She referred to donated doll’s clothes that were all pink, which inadvertently perpetuated stereotypes, as this meant that all of the doll’s clothes were pink. She described another aspect of this struggle, outlining the ways she greets the girl children in her setting as they arrive, stating that she would say:

“…‘don’t you look pretty, you’ve got a pretty dress on today’, that sort of thing. That’s something that I attempt to pull myself up on…but it’s really not that simple. I feel it’s becoming increasingly difficult.”

Hazel also found it difficult to censor gendered language around the children. She stated that she had “been very guilty” of attributing some of her clothing choices to her “being a girl” that day. Hazel explained that she worked actively at not passing these ideas onto the children, “now I realise it’s inappropriate to say, but it’s the natural response because if I was in a skirt that twirls then I was feeling girly and that was who I was.”

“The other thing we do more or less consciously is model doing things that are sometimes stereotypically not female. We have women working at the kindergarten who can use tools, who know about science. We don’t exclusively do girly stuff. We do girly stuff too but we don’t only do that…” – Jean

“I still wear dresses nearly every day now, but that’s because it’s my choice, I like it.” – Hazel
As the quotes above suggest, many of the participants focused on the feminised nature of the early childhood workforce. This aligns with research that argues that early childhood settings can be highly gendered environments (Alloway, 1995). While this is well-established about the early childhood workforce, the diversity within the participants’ responses on this topic is noteworthy. The beliefs and discourses deployed in the following quotes are both products of feminised environments and produced within such highly gendered environments. Multiple participants referred to early childhood education as a feminised workforce:

“Traditionally, early childhood teaching is a very girly thing to do and a lot of young women choose it because they like the idea of being part of a very feminised world.” – Jean

“I suppose I’ve taken a fairly traditional female job as kindergarten teacher but that’s been my choice.” – Margaret

“Still a very female dominated industry and it’s very rare to see a male in it, but even when I was studying we had 120 all around that – in our year level, only two were males.” – Hazel

“I’ve never been forced, but I think I see other women pushed, whether forcefully or not, into work with young children…” – EF

“It’s hard to say whether I naturally fell into this or whether it was something that I just absorbed…” – Bow

“Yes, I was to be a nursery teacher or kinder teacher, yes, female, female roles, traditional female roles, going to a girl’s high school…I still did more female things, that’s really embedded in me, I suppose.” – Rose

Rose went on to discuss her views on early childhood teaching as a career and ways she views it as lesser than some other professions. She explained:

“Somebody who goes to be a physiotherapist, for example, or a doctor or anything, a scientist, might… why do I think they are better? Because they are not, whereas an early childhood teacher is amazing. I still have that, I don’t know that sort of, yes, it’s like not quite good enough work.”
Rose’s description of her feelings around being an early childhood educator is complex. She expressed admiration for early childhood teaching but then also described feeling less important than individuals who pursue other professions. This can be linked with early childhood education being a highly feminised workforce (The Social Research Centre, 2014). It is certainly worth nothing that the three professions Rose listed are not considered to be highly feminised workforces. In fact, the fields of medicine and science were traditionally, and sometimes still are, perceived to be male dominated industries (Banchefsky & Park, 2018; Seebacher, 2017). Rose’s perceived feelings of inadequacy around her career may stem from early childhood education being viewed as a profession centred on caring (Dillabough, 2005), and the ways in which society views women as particularly suited to caring and therefore specifically suited for this role (Owen, 1998). Andrew and Newman (2012) explain that early childhood education can be associated with a need for the skill of emotional management of the self and others and that this skill is often undervalued within discourses of feminised socialisation.

Multiple participants expressed dissatisfaction around aspects of their work as early childhood educators:

“It’s an abysmally sexist industry.” – Jean

“The way [the situation] was handled was so catty and bitchy and degrading and that’s the side of early childhood that I really despise.” – JP

“I don’t like the word passion... That is code for people who will work long hours, do stuff at home… and not get paid for it…” – Margaret

Another topic that was discussed in association with early childhood as a feminised workforce was feminism. One example came from Jean, who described her frustration about the fact that, while the early childhood profession contains mostly female educators, she has found that a great deal of professional development programs are delivered by male “experts”. She explained:

“It is impossible to escape the impact of the image of all these women fawning over these male experts who on some occasions have been flown in from other realities to tell us how to
suck our Australian eggs. It’s disturbing and it says [that] the minute that you created, and the minute you remove the expertise about teaching from the classroom, and it becomes a bit more prestigious, you immediately open up the opportunity for men to be involved.”

The quotes above demonstrate the need for consideration around the contexts of early childhood educators and the cultural contexts in which their professional identities are being produced and enacted. It is evident that for some participants there is frustration around the conditions in the early childhood workforce and the public perception of their roles. Multiple participants discussed early childhood education as a feminised profession. Some questioned the reasons behind them ending up in this career, which may be due to societal discourses around women as carers that they subconsciously “just absorbed” (Bow). The various aspects of personal context that emerged in the focus groups and interviews demonstrated the multiplicity of identities that educators construct within their cultural contexts. It is necessary for educators to be reflective on their personal contexts and aware of aspects of their identities that may impact and influence their practice with children (MacNaughton, 1996).

5.1.5 Suggestions from participants to assist them in providing gender equity programs

The educator participants were asked in the interviews about the support they require to implement gender equity programs in their settings. Their responses were analysed and categorised into seven suggestion areas, including professional development, resources, curriculum, information, self-reflection, guidance and policy. Their suggestions were further grouped into two areas. Some of the suggestions centred on individualistic actions, including behaviours, resources, discussions, sharing of knowledge, and professional learning, while others focused on the need for a consistent, whole-setting approach and policies, and external support and resources. In this research, most participants focused on interventions at the individual level, but it was evident that some educators were also focused on addressing interventions at a whole program level or broader societal level. RC referred to Safe Schools, stating that educators need “something like that…something that all teachers are using, all children are getting the same information in at least that one environment.” Margaret referred to the need for a specific policy on gender rather than “diversity in general”.

Alloway (1995) suggests that being involved in research can lead educators to become more aware of unequal power relations in their education settings. Through involvement in this
research, educator participants may have developed a greater awareness of their own 
perceptions of gender and the potential presence of varied gender dynamics and inequalities 
in their settings. The researcher was cognisant of this awareness and attempted to capture and 
represent participants’ ideas.

5.1.6 Analysis of verbal and nonverbal forms of communication

In this research, both verbal and nonverbal forms of communication were observed during the 
focus groups and these have been analysed in relation to the educator participants’ responses. 
The focus groups were used as a tool to examine the participants’ views on the ‘sense of 
identity’ outcome of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), their beliefs about what a child’s sense of 
identity entails, and to explore what children’s sense of identity might entail through the use 
of the EYLF document, scenarios and artefacts. The focus groups were designed to gather 
each participant’s thoughts, and to identify the themes present and discourses deployed in 
their responses, as well as the ways in which these were present in a group setting. This 
enabled the researcher to examine the group dynamics as well as individual perspectives, and 
to distinguish between ‘what’ and ‘how’ in the focus group data analysis (Morgan, 1997). 
Often, analysis of focus group dynamics and interactions can be focused on conversation 
analysis and discourse analysis (Kitzinger, 2008; Morgan, 2010), but as relationships within 
the group are important, it can be helpful to focus on interactions within analysis (Harding, 
2013). Group discussions can display participants’ similarities and differences in opinion 
(Morgan, 1997). Nonverbal communication is often neglected in research (Onwuegbuzie, 
Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009), but was emphasised in this project so the nonverbal 
communication displayed by the participants became part of the data collected (Stewart, 
Shamdasani & Rook, 2007).

As it can be difficult to run focus groups and capture nonverbal communication (Sutton & 
Austin, 2015) as data, this project utilised a research assistant. The research assistant was 
instructed to observe the dynamics between participants, as nonverbal responses may be more 
indicative of views than verbal responses (Caputo, Hazel, McMahon & Darnels, 2005). The 
researcher examined the questions and topics that correlated with verbal and nonverbal forms 
of communication noted during focus groups. This section explores how the data on these 
forms of communication relate to the themes identified in the participants’ responses. The
data interpreted suggests that particular questions or topics were more challenging or caused more discomfort for participants than others.

Particular questions and discussion topics elicited noticeable verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. The areas associated with the most responses were scenarios A and B on gender, followed by possible changes or additions participants would make to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the educator’s role in fostering the child’s sense of identity. The most prevalent forms of verbal and nonverbal communication observed were emphatic gestures and tones. For particular questions or topics, the research assistant noted the presence of defensive and surprised tones, and frowning.

Cultural contexts can be steeped in binaries related to gender and sexuality that in turn support gendered versions of children’s play and interactions, as well as gendered teaching practices. For this reason, it was very important to observe verbal and nonverbal forms of communication that were present during focus groups as they offer an additional source of data about the participants, their comfort levels with particular topics, their reactions to particular themes and discourses, and their interactions with the other participants. These have been further discussed in Chapter Six in relation to specific discourses.

5.1.7 Key thematic group identified from the educator participants’ artefacts

The research participants in focus groups were asked to present an artefact. Artefacts can provide information not available from interviews or other sources of data (Norum, 2008). They were asked to bring in an artefact that symbolised the concepts of sense of identity and gender identity, and were then prompted to explain their choices. Interpretations of artefacts can be subjective as the researcher is often unable to clarify the context behind the item (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), but this limitation was countered through the inclusion of the participants’ own interpretations about their chosen artefacts. The researcher analysed the artefacts individually and then considered them in relation to the descriptions and interpretations provided by the participants.

Artefacts provided the researcher with another analytical tool to interpret the participants’ cultural contexts and multiple identities in a new way (Bartlett, 2005, p. 7). One way of understanding the cultural contexts in which individuals are produced is to recognise the role
that cultural artefacts play in social constructs, including interactions and activities (Hodder, 2000). Thematic analysis and feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) were used to analyse the themes present in the artefacts and the participants’ explanations of their choices. These are outlined below, and the key thematic grouping identified was ‘influence of family, background and upbringing’.

![Diagram of Artefact Themes]

**Figure 5.2: Themes that emerged from educator participants’ artefacts**

The most prominent theme that emerged for the ‘sense of identity’ artefact and the associated explanations from participants was ‘influence of family, background and upbringing’, which was linked to participants from all groups. In contrast, for the artefacts and responses relating to gender identity, the theme ‘influence of family, background and upbringing’ was only linked to the artefacts and responses from participants who have been in the field for 5-10 years or 10-18 years. In all but two cases, the participants who referred to the influence of family in relation to sense of identity were different from those who referred to family in relation to gender identity. This is significant for the research, particularly when considered in relation to the discussion of the role of family in gender identity development in section 5.1.2 (iii). Dillabough (2006) says that “gender identity is not a coherent or stable narrative to be known in any ultimate sense” (p. 22). Artefacts offered an additional strand in the participants’ complex narratives surrounding their own gender identities, and those of the children they work with. The discourses deployed in the participants’ choice and description of artefacts will be unpacked in Chapter Six.
5.2 Key thematic groups identified from the EYLF developer participants’ responses

In addition to the early childhood educator participants, the research also endeavoured to understand how the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was developed by interviewing two of its developers. One academic and one policy maker involved in developing the EYLF agreed to be interviewed about the process. Jamie was involved as a policy maker on the consortium who developed the EYLF. She previously worked for the government and was responsible for early childhood curriculum in her state, and assisted with the development of her state’s curriculum framework. Lisa was involved as an academic on the consortium who developed the EYLF. Interviews were conducted with these participants in order to determine their role in the framework’s development, the strategies used when planning and developing the content, why and how gender was included in sense of identity, and what changes they would make if they were developing the framework again, especially in relation to gender and equity. The themes that were identified in the participants’ interview responses were grouped into three key thematic groupings: ‘content of the EYLF’, ‘development and implementation of the EYLF’ and ‘silences in the content of the EYLF’ (these groupings have been outlined in Figure 5.3).

![Figure 5.3: Key thematic groupings in EYLF developer participants’ responses](image-url)
5.2.1 Content of the EYLF

This section explores one of the three key thematic groups: the content of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). It consists of the focus on outcomes, the terminology used and the brevity of the framework. These have been considered below in relation to performativity and accountability in education policy.

i. Focus on outcomes in the framework

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) consists of five outcomes (see section 2.5). These were designed to provide educators with some guidance on what outcomes they should strive to achieve with the children in their settings. However, while the framework includes outcomes, it is designed to be a non-prescriptive document, which means it does not tell educators exactly what they should do to achieve these outcomes. For this reason, like many other early childhood education frameworks, the EYLF may leave educators uncertain about how the outcomes can be achieved (Krieg, 2011). Krieg considers how content knowledge is positioned in the EYLF and implications for educators’ professional identities. Krieg acknowledges that the EYLF has begun significant work in outlining learning outcomes, yet that it is necessary to shift beyond the “tensions between child-centred or subject-driven approaches” (p. 53). An inquiry approach to teaching and learning, in which educators and children co-construct knowledge, may lead to more possibilities and more diverse ways of being and working with knowledge (Krieg, 2011). As Jamie said:

“We had to think very carefully about whether or not [the outcomes] were to do with traditional cognitive areas or academic learning or much more holistic… We thought that these five interrelated outcomes should bring together a holistic view of children.”

Lisa expanded on the way outcomes were approached:

“…it became a matter of just trying to get in some really key examples and some key strategies, but just stating them as examples only. We didn’t want people to feel that anything in there in terms of strategies they must do.”
Jamie explained that in the development process with the government group, learning outcomes were discussed very early on. She acknowledged that in the government, “the field of education is very much focused around outcomes.” She outlined the process of developing the outcomes, which often involved debate, as follows:

“There was a lot of tentative feeling about outcomes, even from a number of the consortium members because of some of the ways in which outcomes had become very narrow, so we had to really sort out what we meant by an outcome… There was a lot of debate about, ‘Well, what do we know from the research? What do we know from the work that we’ve done in practice? What helps children have a strong sense of identity?’ In some ways it was a bit of a practical thing and we had that as an overarching thing and we think what contributes to, what are the key ideas we could pick as focus sub-outcomes that would contribute to that, rather than having five outcomes say identity.”

Jamie elaborated on the way the sense of identity outcome was developed:

“We did say, ‘Oh, well that’s not an outcome. How can identity be an outcome?’… I think we had words like positive sense of identity. A lot of debate over the words because there was that debate around, is identity a culmination or an overarching outcome of having all of the other things, the other outcomes?”

The process of developing the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) outcomes required negotiations around content, structure, and pedagogical and philosophical approaches. These ‘debates’ can be understood further in relation to the cultural context within which the framework was constructed. The negotiation process over the representation of outcomes, which Jamie explained was partly due to the government’s focus on learning outcomes, corresponds with literature on policy level performativity (Kilderry, 2015) in early childhood education, which relies heavily on outside validation and rules. This form of performativity may be present “where performance related practices, such as teaching and learning, are expected and regulated through measurable criteria” (Kilderry, 2015, p. 632). Jamie’s attempts to balance a “holistic view of children” within the learning outcomes indicated her awareness of the constraints of regulatory frameworks. These were explored further, and in relation to gender, in section 5.2.3 below.
**ii. Terminology used in the framework**

When describing the process of developing the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), Jamie and Lisa indicated the challenges faced when selecting the language and terminology for the framework. Jamie described their attempts to find a balance between “bringing the professional knowledge forward by using terms that are professionally legitimate”, referring to curriculum, whilst “helping people to begin where they’re at, in terms of the language that they used.” She added that there was a big debate about “is this for qualified educators or is it for all educators?” Lisa also referred to the intricacies of language choice, describing the potential issues with including the word ‘critical’ in the framework:

“A lot of educators might have [been] a bit turned off by that thinking that maybe we were pushing a particular barrow, and I think I was concerned that ministers might think that we were encouraging people to critique and criticise. It’s just so often seen as a word that people wouldn’t be comfortable with.”

Lisa discussed one strategy developed in response to these concerns:

“There are quite a few examples throughout, where we just scale things back but try to use [certain words] where we could slip them in. I was literally trying to slip things in, under the radar where we thought they wouldn’t fit in the ministries concerned. They would still speak in some way to people who were looking for signs or probably a more critical approach.”

The participants’ references to strategies and language choices indicated that rather than being an intuitive or natural process, the words selected for inclusion in the framework were a constant negotiation. Lisa’s reference to “trying to slip things in” for “people who were looking for signs” suggested that rather than her professional knowledge being recognised and valued throughout the process, at times she was required to use particular phrases creatively or furtively in order to achieve particular goals. These descriptions indicated her awareness of the cultural context and constraints faced by early childhood educators, and that she herself was navigating a complex discursive arena. It appeared that she drew on her awareness of context and constraints to negotiate terminology that could be freely interpreted by educators, or perhaps indicative of particular stances.
iii. Brevity of the framework

While the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is an important document for educators to guide their practice, it is not the only guiding policy document that exists for early childhood education. As mentioned in section 2.5, the EYLF is part of the National Quality Framework (NQF) (DEEWR, 2008a). Under the NQF is the National Quality Standard (NQS) (ACECQA, 2018b), which consist of standards for practice at all levels of early childhood settings. The EYLF was designed to be used in conjunction with the NQS to guide practice and centre policy. This enables the EYLF to be a concise document as the NQS provides another regulatory framework for practice. However, like the EYLF, the NQS does not directly mention gender. There are multiple standards and elements that relate to respectful and equitable relationships and interactions with children, yet gender is not discussed apart from in supporting guides to the NQS. As with the EYLF, gender is mentioned in the supporting documentation that is listed alongside the standards (ACECQA, 2018c; DEEWR, 2010). However, in both cases, the supporting documentation is not a legally binding document.

Jamie described the way government “felt very reassured in having a brief framework, and not something that was far more detailed.” At times, they ran consultations around the design of the framework. Jamie said that these involved asking “Was it big enough? Was it small enough? Did it cover everything that the early childhood sector felt needed to be covered?”

Lisa provided additional details on the negotiation process around length:

“The draft that we were working on really did start to blow out in length. It got to be – I don’t know I think over 100 pages. Then we were asked to cut it back to no more than 20 pages, even though the actual document is about 47 pages. The request that we cut it back to 70 pages I guess was in a way a wake-up call or a short tactic by the government people, to make us realise that we couldn’t possibly say all that we wanted to say, because we’d just get too lengthy.”

Jamie explained that she wanted the framework to be concise, as she related the length, format and style of the document to the way it might be used by educators.
“We didn’t want people to resort to checklists: that was important… how do you keep it short, and how do you keep it as exemplars rather than prescriptive, so trying to come up with a list that wasn’t like a list, if you like.”

These considerations around brevity suggested that in addition to the content of the framework, the structure and length were critical aspects in its development. Jamie appeared to equate a short document with one that would not be prescriptive. A lengthy document could have been perceived as a “checklist”, according to Jamie, which may have added to growing “professional accountabilities” (Kilderry, 2015, p. 649). Fenech, Sumsion, Robertson and Goodfellow (2008) found dissatisfaction amongst experienced educators with the “regulatory environment” (p. 11), as regulations and expectations undermined their professional autonomy. Within highly regulated environments, educators may lack autonomy and may have to construct professional identities that comply with policy frameworks.

5.2.2 Development and implementation of the EYLF

In this section, the development and implementation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) have been explored. This includes the strategies used in the development of the framework, implementing the framework and changes the developer participants would make now. These have been considered through the lens of performativity and the construction of professional identities, and feminist post-structuralism.

i. Strategies used in the development of the framework

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was developed by a consortium of academics tendered by the DEEWR to work alongside policy makers by the Australian government. Lisa, an early childhood academic, and Jamie, a policy maker, had to develop the framework within a particular political context. They had to consider each aspect of what went into the work, including some areas that are highly contentious, and how these might be received. This required them to think about possible media attention and controversies. The participants reminded the researcher that “we have to be mindful of confidentiality” (Lisa). The strategies used to develop the framework have been considered in relation to the performative roles enacted during its production.
“As part of putting together the tender, we knew that we wanted to have a big group of people and that we deliberately wanted to have people from a range of different sectors. That is practitioners, academic people from the union, a couple of employer organisations and we also wanted to have people that came from very different philosophical and theoretical perspectives. We felt that if we had a huge diversity in our team … that would reflect the diversity in the field or go some way towards reflecting the diversity in the field.” – Lisa

It was evident that media attention around the new framework was challenging for both participants. Despite Jamie writing briefs about the potential issues and “what might be controversial”, they experienced backlash. Lisa described the response to early drafts making reference to critical perspectives, gender diversity, and other sorts of diversity:

“That was a huge issue and that prompted us receiving 6:00 AM phone calls, from people asking for a briefing for the relevant minister… That was the time and it was really, really pretty awful, the way those shock jocks can just cut and just zoom on just a tiny, tiny part of something much bigger. Then there were all these horrible posts to blogs and letters, especially to the Murdoch Press, asserting all sorts of things in much the same way. You know the whole thing about the Safe Schools program and how the press has got into a tizzy about that, an uproar about that from the work that’s been done at La Trobe… That’s reminded me really of… what it was like although in our case we were able to shut it down or the bureaucrats were able to find a way to shut it down so that it didn’t go on and on and on like the Safe Schools program has.”

Jamie provided a perspective on this backlash as a policy maker:

“It’s not so difficult for government employees because you can explain why but it’s very difficult for policy makers, the politicians who do something which flies in the face of public opinion, even if that public opinion might be from a minority. Make enough noise: it can be very controversial and difficult.”

Both participants were aware of the need to negotiate over some of the content and terminology in the framework. This required performing their roles in the contexts provided by the government, while facing pressure to represent early childhood education appropriately and respectfully in a limited number of words. They also may have faced political pressure as another motivation for removing particular parts of their content.
“Each of the groups each of those working groups had to backpedal I say a bit. It was the
gender and diversity group who had to give up the most, around the most of what they hold
dear.” – Lisa

“We had to come up with something that none of those people would find threatening in any
way, like politically threatening and even before it got to the ministers we had to come up
with something that the key advisers, the key bureaucrats would be happy to take to the
minister. There were all these filters that it had to go through.” – Lisa

During the drafting and redrafting process, a risk-averse version began to emerge (Millei &
Sumson, 2011). However, despite these pressures, Jamie and Lisa continued to strive for the
inclusion of particular content they deemed important, and they described the compromises
made, and victories won, during this process.

“I think that it was a combination of the expert knowledge in the consortium group, the
research papers that informed the policy knowledge of the government group, and making
compromises, I think, and having debates in order to get to those compromises.” – Jamie

Lisa described the way she wanted to include a feminist post-structural perspective in the
framework but “knew we’d have to, I don’t want to use the term, water it down.”

“We knew that there’d be lots and lots of negotiations and that we wouldn’t end up with a
purely feminist post-structural perspective by any means…”

Instead, Lisa found out who would be approving the processes, and “learned that sometimes
you have to be circumspect in trying to get through what you want to get through.”

“It meant really extraordinary compromise but as it turned out I think it’s basically done what
we had hoped it would do. That was people to find enough of what was important to them to
really be able to run with it in ways they felt were important for them. The whole feminist
post-structuralist thing got watered down ultimately, I suppose, to just a very few words
across the whole document. We hope that people – and especially if they became aware of the
story behind its development – we hope that that would give them enough license to continue
to run with, say, the feminist post-structuralist and critical ideas for that gender role or
whatever they were passionate enough about.”
Lisa outlined how this “compromise” occurred:

“While we’d start out with what we saw as the ideal, I think we would know that we would have to probably water it down, turn it down. I’m not quite sure what the right phrase is. Again, I think we would want to start with the ideas that are important with feminist post-structural perspective or a critical perspective. We would want in terms of diversity and equity, I guess we would just want to be upfront about the importance of diversity, respect for diversity, appreciation of diversity in all its many forms.”

Jamie acknowledged the difficulty of some of these decisions:

“You have to make a decision about whether we’re going to get this through, or whether it is going to collapse in the heat and we’ll have nothing…”

Lisa recalled one particular “victory” after she “pushed hard” for a particular approach, which considered the contexts of each setting. She stated that “the whole thing was…the result of huge negotiation”. She wanted the framework to be usable across all types of settings, as she did not want it to be prescriptive.

“…looking at page 24, which is Outcome 1 on children having a strong sense of identity. There are a couple of boxes on the top half of the page, and in each of those boxes the example is just really clear. That was something that we pushed hard for having there, just for example, all the way through. Then when the two government people we worked closely for, they actually suggested that in the blank part underneath…we have ‘add your own examples from your context’. We just thought well, we achieved a victory when I said let’s do that.”

Jamie described the fraught nature of this process:

“If you start to get a little bit too explicit or you hang onto something which is probably almost like an ideology in a way, politicians do have to make final decisions about this, get very worried if it’s seen as being exclusive or leaning in one particular direction that the general public might not understand or accept.”
Lisa referred to the use of “code”, in which she would try to “slip things in”:

“We tried to scatter words throughout … an example of code I suppose … There are quite a few examples throughout, where we just scale things back but try to use where we could slip them in. I was literally trying to slip things in, under the radar where we thought they wouldn’t fit in the ministries concerned. They would still speak in some way to people who were looking for signs or probably a more critical approach…” (see section 5.2.1 [ii])

Just as they experienced some victories, there were also many incidents of not being successful with these compromises or codes. Lisa questioned how much of the content that she had wanted to include was used:

“We’ve tried as far as we can, because we did feel silenced in so many ways, so many things that we would have loved to have seen in there weren’t able to be in there. That whole thing of, well, is it better to get 80% of something or 100% of nothing? … I wouldn’t say that we’ve got 80% of what we would have liked in there, I think it’s a lower percentage than that but it doesn’t take away from the fact that people suddenly seemed to have engaged with it, and the people who are engaging deeply seem to be finding enough space to run with pretty interesting ideas.”

Ultimately, the development of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) involved a range of strategies, including considerations over when to ‘push’ for content to be included. Lisa and Jamie would have both had to construct their professional identities in a complex context, in which their professional knowledge and perspectives may have been considered secondary to the ‘needs’ of the government and media. Feminist post-structuralism is a useful lens through which to consider the discursive nature of the participants’ interactions within these contexts, not only with the consortium but with the government and media as additional stakeholders.

ii. Implementing the framework

Just as developing the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) involved many complex negotiations, implementing the framework in settings was also contentious.
“We had to go out, reassure people, say in some ways it’s not as different as what you’ve been doing. That was particularly people who might have been your untrained or your cert three staff or perhaps hadn’t had as much as experience as diploma and degree trained people.” – Jamie

Research into regulatory frameworks suggests that educators newer to the field engage with and have their identities shaped by curriculum documents more than educators who are mid or late career (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011).

“I guess the main thing is that it serves as a springboard for people to do … this critical post-structural work if they would like to do that… It doesn’t hold them back anyway. One of the really strong principles of the brief that we had was from policy makers, was that they really, really wanted it to be something that educators would be engaged with, not stuck up on the shelf somewhere, and knowing that there is such a huge diversity amongst educators. Well, again we couldn’t go out on a limb in a very particular way.” – Lisa

Lisa’s comment about not wanting the framework to be “stuck up on a shelf” was interesting considering that some educator participants in the research said they did not refer to the framework often because it was similar to work they were already doing. However, she also acknowledged that “people in a way feel reassured and encouraged that they can really take it far beyond what the words on paper say.” This is important for educators working with the framework, as the potential flexibility of the document may mean that they are able to construct their professional identities within their contexts independently of some parts of the framework or, perhaps, find ‘permission’ within the framework to do so.

iii. Changes they would make now

The EYLF developer participants appeared to be very reflective about the process of developing the framework, and aware of the constraints they worked within as well as the changes they would make if they could.

“I would argue, I’d be much bolder and lay the issues on the table. If I was working for the government, I would be much more assertive in briefings. However, I would also be quite cautious still because still in my mind there would be the issue of getting it through, getting something through that. Also now, the controversy that surrounded the revision of the
Australian Curriculum and Safe Schools projects. We are still so conservative. In fact, it’s possible that Australia has become more conservative in lots of ways so it might be even harder to deal with it now, I don’t know. There are so many pressing issues around diversity and equity that it’s just so important because if you do nothing, you’re really reinforcing the views that you don’t want to reinforce.” – Jamie

The participants were also mindful of the broader societal context within which the framework would operate, and referred to the media backlash against Safe Schools in the media (Louden, 2017) as an example of how fearful discourses about gender, sex and sexuality could be brought into education policy and curriculum. The place of gender within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) will be further explored below in section 5.2.3.

5.2.3 A silence in the content of the EYLF

This section examines the third key thematic group: a silence in the content of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), which refers to the inclusion of gender under the ‘sense of identity’ outcome. This has been analysed in relation to queer theory, feminist post-structuralism and performativity.

i. The inclusion of gender under the ‘sense of identity’ outcome

The inclusion of gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was discussed with Jamie and Lisa. It was evident that they had initially intended to include far more content pertaining to identities, including gender identities. As Lisa explained:

“We felt that bringing a feminist post-structural perspective to that was very important but at the same time we knew that they would have to be, we wouldn’t be able to run with a full on feminist post-structural perspective because … not everybody felt really comfortable with that. We knew we’d have to, I don’t want to use the term ‘water it down’”.

After multiple negotiations with the government, compromises were made, and it was agreed that gender would be placed under the ‘sense of identity’ outcome. Jamie explained why it was placed under Outcome 1:
“…my assumption would be it fits best there because it is about ‘Who am I?’... I went back and had a look at places where we possibly could have strengthened it and... under the second outcome is ‘connected with and contribute to their world’. We looked at diversity and when I look at how it’s written, it’s written very much in terms of cultural diversity.”

Jamie’s explanation that the emphasis on cultural diversity in Outcome 2 meant that Outcome 1 was the more suitable placement suggested that the decision on where to place gender may have been made in relation to where it did not fit rather than where it did, and in relation to getting the document approved. Jamie added:

“We may have put it there and emphasised it in other areas because of the potential controversial nature of it in getting it through, I don’t know. I can’t remember if we did that. That’s a possibility, but also, in any of this writing, we tended to try and be inclusive. It wasn’t just about gender but it was about any particular group including age groups. A lot of debate about when you start to be specific, who do you exclude? …the opposite point was if you get so general you’re actually excluding those specificities that people need to think about.”

These comments suggested that a complex aspect of developing the framework was balancing specificity and broadness, and constantly attempting to be inclusive. Through each draft, more and more content was removed. As Lisa explained:

“... in relation to the diversity and equity outcome at one stage, there was quite a lot of writing about gender being fluid and so forth and socially constructed… Mainly there was writing about children that means they can be marginalised because of gender. Ultimately, we were asked, but by then we could see that it was a good idea not to actually include any specific examples...They said one should stop putting in examples that can be read as excluding in itself, because you can’t… we can’t realistically hope to have an example that relates to every type of discrimination or marginalisation. I’m sure that at one stage we probably had as an example, something to do with say children who are experimenting with a range of gender identities.”

The conflicts that Lisa referred to in terms of gender identities can be connected to similar concerns mentioned throughout this thesis about the framework becoming too prescriptive. While the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) was not intended to be prescriptive, some educators have
interpreted it as such (Ortlipp, Arthur & Woodrow, 2011). Similarly, Lisa’s comments above suggested that by attempting to be inclusive by mentioning specific examples of gender identities or situations relating to gender, she encountered the view that this was “excluding” in itself. Jamie stated similar concerns:

“We had an agreement that we meant it very broadly but we knew that once we started to define it we would run the risk of leaving somebody out and that was a real risk. If we defined it too specifically, we would also run the risk of not getting it through ministers.”

Jamie described the reasoning behind these arguments:

“An old argument … [is] that our young children don’t notice these things. They don’t notice diversity, they don’t notice difference, everyone’s the same. We know that’s not true but if there’s a perception in the community, then the government will take notice of that and go, ‘Oh, how do I deal with this?’”

Jamie’s comments suggested that if the government believes that the general population’s perception is that children are too young or innocent to hear about gender that is going to impact decisions they make around policy. The link between childhood innocence and the shutting down of work around gender is complex and multifaceted, and has been discussed in section 5.1.1 (ii).

Jamie and Lisa’s understandings of gender, and the associated identities and issues to be considered, varied widely, paralleling the educator participants’ understandings. Jamie referred to the way gender binaries are “prevalent in things like advertising, toys, a whole lot of things” but also mentioned “the cross-gender stuff, intersexual stuff”.

Lisa referred to transgender identities, just as many of the educator participants had in the focus groups and interviews:

“We’re probably heading down towards transgender, but I don’t think we actually use the term transgender, but that’s certainly where we were heading...”
Jamie explained that if the development process had had to take into account these identities:

“I don’t know how we’d deal with it. If we think about the governments we’ve got now, we might not get anywhere. It’s really tricky.”

Having acknowledged the diversity of gender identities, Jamie emphasised that children require a strong sense of identity in order to be able to feel comfortable about gender:

“…if you don’t have a strong sense of identity and you’re not surrounded by people who also do and there’s a sense of openness, then you’re actually not necessarily going to feel very comfortable with your gender and breaking some of the stereotypical moulds that might be around.”

Jamie explained further that:

“We’ve put [gender] in identity because it… [the way] it’s perceived by other people is such a powerful thing in terms of who you are, who you’ve come to be, and how you actually decide what you’re going to reveal to other people.”

Despite both participants acknowledging the important of gender identities, a number of concessions were ultimately made in the development of the EYLF, as discussed in the quotes above. These have been further discussed in section 5.2.2 (i). In addition to the research data, is also possible to view the way this occurred through the drafting process of the framework. In the process of developing the EYLF, multiple drafts were produced. The first publically available draft was released in November 2008 (DEEWR, 2008b). Millei and Sumsion (2011) link the changes made between drafts to the government’s risk aversion. They argue that the original draft of the framework had the potential to be “transformative of society” (Millei & Sumsion, 2011, p. 80), while the final version reflects conservative community views, including traditional gender roles.
5.3 Conclusion

The participants’ responses in sections 5.1 and 5.2 were considered together in order to compare the themes that emerged and how these related to educators’ professional identities and practices around gender. The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) can be viewed as the common thread between the two groups of participants, with the EYLF developer participants involved in the conception, development and implementation of the framework, and the educator participants involved in enacting or performing the framework to some extent in their practice. The EYLF developers emphasised their deliberate choices around creating a framework that was broad and able to be interpreted dependent on context, which was then echoed in the ways educator participants interpreted and made use of the framework. The EYLF developer participants’ ‘victories’, such as the inclusion of suggestions and the space for educators to link the suggestions to their contexts, can thus be considered alongside quotes from the educators making use of the framework:

“I have been working with the EYLF ever since it started. I don’t tend to look at it as in depth, as I would have many years ago. I tend to just look at the broad outcome and then figure a way at how we can tie it to the individual circumstances of a child, or whatever is happening. But, reading it again, because the statements are quite open and broad that when you read through them, you can connect them to a lot of situations.” – RC (see section 5.1.3 [i])

“I rarely use it these days…I felt for me it was superficial. It really didn’t impact all that much on what I was doing…” – Bow (see section 4.1)

Much can be learned from examining the two sets of participants together, both in their intersections and conflicts. In both groups of participants, it was evident that their professional identities were shaped, created and enacted within multiple contexts. These multiple contexts, in turn, created multiple layers to their professional identities. Ultimately, despite the way EYLF developers’ aims were often not realised, or their “codes” not decoded by the educators, the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) can be seen as a context through which professional identities were, are, and will be constructed. Throughout the data analysis, the silences around gender became more evident. The EYLF developer participants had wanted to include more content on gender, an area in which the educator participants acknowledged they required additional guidance as well as resources. In order to support an expansion of
ways of being gendered in the world (Fraser, 1996/1997) within early childhood settings, it is essential that the EYLF, as a context, acknowledges gender as a distinct form of identity that needs to be addressed for children.

This thesis set out to answer multiple questions under the main research question, which was ‘How do early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities influence their practice?’ Under this main question were five sub-questions, each of which were addressed through the analysis in this chapter. Below are the questions and the key findings in relation to each question.

- **Where do educators believe that their understanding of gender identity has come from?**

  Educators attributed their understanding of gender identity development to parents and families, culture, religion, their tertiary studies and their workplaces. There was some reference made to the role of biology, and sex assigned at birth.

- **How do educators believe that children develop their gender identities and what do they believe their role should be in this development?**

  Educators expressed the belief that children’s gender identities emerged in a similar way to their own. However, they also referred to popular culture, social media, social pressures, and the debates and controversies over curriculum and school programs like Safe Schools. There were a range of views about their role in children’s gender development. Some opinions corresponded with the notion of the parent as the most influential educator (DEEWR, 2009), some views indicated that educators as professionals knew more than parents in this area, while others’ ideas were comprised of elements of both of these.

- **What interactions and issues have educators encountered in relation to gender equity in early childhood settings?**

  The educators referred to a variety of issues, interactions and conflicts associated with gender equity. Many of the participants mentioned conflict with colleagues, management
and/or the children’s family members in relation to gender. This led to challenges around implementing particular programs, ensuring consistency with approaches across the setting, and disagreements over responses to parents who held views that clashed with their own. Some educators mentioned that they had used their setting’s policy, and others mentioned using the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), to support and reinforce their responses during challenging interactions with families.

- How can educators be supported, and what is required to provide practical solutions for change?

The educators provided many examples of what they felt were required to support them in their work around gender. These included resources, centre-wide policies and additional material in the framework. They also discussed whole-team professional development, and indicated how this could be implemented in a way that was effective and relevant to their setting.

- Why is there silence surrounding gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009)?

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) participants indicated that the government and the media influenced the development of the framework. The government restricted the inclusion of particular content, which limited their opportunities to promote expansive work around gender. The media’s numerous ‘moral panics’ (Robinson, 2008) around childhood and sexuality reproduced discourses that could be seen as having constrained or suppressed expansive work. The participants described the section on gender being edited down and, ultimately, removed, apart from symbolic codes that one participant described using for those looking for signs supporting critical work.
Four key discourses were identified from the data and analysis in this chapter that could build and support pro-diversity spaces and contexts in early childhood. These are:

1. Equity and inclusion
2. Deconstruction of binaries
3. Collaborative practice
4. Gender as part of holistic practice.

The contexts that enable these discourses to be deployed have been considered. These have been discussed further in Chapter Six, and have been analysed in relation to the research questions, and implications of the research, in Chapter Seven.
Chapter Six – Performativity Discussion

6.1 Introduction

A number of key discourses were evident in participants’ responses and were examined in relation to the aim of enhancing gender diversity. Four key discourses identified at the end of Chapter Five were ‘equity and inclusion’, ‘deconstruction of binaries’, ‘collaborative practice’ and ‘gender as part of holistic practice’. These discourses may support gender diversity if they are present in early childhood contexts. They have been considered in relation to building a context that is productive of diversity. This is consistent with performativity, as educators – who have been discursively produced in particular contexts – may wish to support gender diversity by enacting practices consistent with gender diversity in early childhood settings. By doing so, and repeating these practices over time, educators may construct an early childhood space that enables other educators to do the same, with the aim of supporting diversity.

In this chapter, these discourses and the contexts that enabled them have been explored through the lens of feminist post-structuralism. The discourses that are deployed within cultural contexts may enable or constrain the construction of identities. Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis (FPDA) was used for two main purposes. Firstly, to identify dominant and competing, or oppositional, discourses in participants’ responses. Secondly, to analyse their beliefs about gender and their thoughts on how practices around gender could be improved in early childhood settings. This analysis involved examining participants’ language choices, verbal and nonverbal forms of communication used, and artefacts selected. The discourses were also considered in relation to the contexts they create and reproduce in which educators’ practices are shaped and in which early childhood spaces are constructed that enable or constrain children’s gender explorations.

This discussion refers to discourses that were identified in both groups of participants’ responses, as these intersected, supported and challenged each other at times. One dominant discourse prominent in FPDA is ‘gender difference’ (Baxter, 2003). Baxter (2003) describes the way FPDA must move away from “the old issues of the oppression and subordination of women” and rather should involve “highlighting key discourses on gender as they are
negotiated and performed within specific, localised contexts” (p. 66). This is especially necessary when addressing competing gender discourses within early childhood settings (Castañeda-Peña, 2008). The four key discourses that have been examined in this chapter offer insights about cultural contexts that enable educators to deploy them. While these discourses may constrain or enable work in the area of gender, a closer examination can offer insight into how to provide expansive and diverse approaches to gender in early childhood settings.

The lens of performativity was also applied to consider the context within which participants’ identities were shaped, and how these identities in turn enable the production and performance of practices around supporting gender diversity in early childhood settings. This involved consideration of the contexts that supported these practices, and the variety of discourses deployed within these contexts that enabled and constrained practice. Butler (1993) explains that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act,” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (p. xii). Thus performativity is not a single action but a series of continual acts and performances informed by discourses.

This analysis took note of the discourses used by participants and discussed cultural contexts within which their identities and practices were performed and produced. These discourses might also function as useful principles or values consistent with performativity theory that are currently, or may become, present in cultural contexts that support gender expansion and diversity. In this research, Fraser’s (1996/1997) notion of combining strategies that focus on seeking equity with strategies that seek to support an expansion of ways of being gendered in the world was considered alongside Kristeva’s (1981) three tiers of feminism. The first tier is an equal opportunity model, the second tier is a gender-inclusive model that questions why females should have to break into male domains, and the third tier looks at expanding the way gender is done, which may involve contesting existing gender binaries. The third tier is aligned with a post-structuralist approach (Alloway, 1995). A feminist post-structuralist theoretical approach was applied with a view to making a diversity of ways of being gendered available to all people (Alloway, 1995; Davies, 1989).
6.2 Constraining discourses

A potential difficulty with combining Fraser’s (1996/1997) expansion and equality strategies is that gender is situated within a cultural context and history of strictly separated gendered identities from birth. In many cultures, gender is understood as a natural fact (Davies, 2003) that may in turn constrain work around gender expansion. The male–female binary has become one of the most basic metaphysical constructs in society, upon which so much rests (Davies, 2003). Davies (1989) believes that work at the third tier level needs to be combined with work at the other two levels to “eventually bring about significant change” (p. 71). This work may be challenging as the effects of constructions of gender are deep and subtle, and the contexts are constructed via the deployment of particular discourses, which have been explored in this section. Many of the constraining discourses used by participants in relation to work around gender focused on the innocence of children, and fears about this work being considered contentious by parents, colleagues or broader society. These discourses have been explored further in the following sections.

6.2.1 The ‘innocence’ discourses

Several educator participants expressed the view that children are too innocent to discuss their gender identities. Margaret’s comment, as discussed in section 5.1.1 (ii), that “a three- or four-year-old child might not be able to explain [gender] in ways you can understand” suggested that childhood innocence might be deployed as a discourse to constrain further work in this area. Developmental theories, in particular Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), often views childhood through the lens of an underlying discourse of childhood innocence, which is often equated with sexual immaturity (Robinson, 2008). Educators deploying these discourses may believe that children need to be guarded from aspects of sexuality and gender in order to protect their innocence. This belief has been discursively produced. As gender and sexuality are commonly linked, ‘innocence’ discourses may frame work around gender and sexuality as a threat to children’s innocence.

Further to the broader discourse of childhood innocence, ‘sexualisation’ in early childhood was a related discourse used by the educator participants in this research (see section 5.1.1 [iii]). Two participants (Bow and Hazel) made emphatic comments about wanting to steer clear of “inappropriate sexuality” and “sexualisation” as topics during their separate
interviews. Discourses of sexualisation and innocence often intersect and may work to constrain practice around gender and sexuality in early childhood spaces. Other responses from both of these participants indicate a strong willingness and interest in enacting expansive gender practices in their respective early childhood settings. It could therefore be argued that fears around sexualisation, rather than merely constraining practice, may function to enable deliberate work around gender in some areas.

It is worth examining verbal and nonverbal components of educator participants’ responses in relation to sexualisation during the focus groups (see Appendices Q & R). The data indicated that body language often appeared to reveal participants’ levels of comfort and discomfort. The inclusion of this data was not to make a definitive statement about their emotional states, and it was not the case that all participants responded in these ways, but the data served to provide further insight into their responses. The emphatic nature of the statements indicated potential discomfort around the topic of sexualisation. There may be a performative aspect to these forms of communication. It was clear that there was emotion or affect associated with the participants’ responses, which was discursively produced. The researcher considered the contexts that produce comfort or discomfort, as they may be a factor or an obstacle preventing more expansive gender work. If comfort and discomfort are contextually generated and discursively produced, then the discourses within the contexts need to be analysed and deconstructed for further work on gender to be achieved. It is necessary to determine ways to encourage people to be comfortable with not being comfortable, or to identify spaces where this has occurred.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, sexuality and sexualisation are often discourses deployed to shut down work around gender in early childhood. The notion of children as too innocent to be introduced to these topics may cause educators to perceive work around gender as inappropriate and as potentially contributing to societal forces leading to the increased sexualisation of children. In addition, the ‘innocence’ discourses may place pressure on the early childhood educator in relation to a number of factors and contexts in the broader culture. The media is one such context that targets and possibly prohibits work in this area. However, as discussed above, sexualisation can also work alongside more enabling discourses of change and gender expansion. When this is the case, the discourse of sexualisation may even act as a catalyst for change.
6.2.2 The ‘contentious’ discourses

Many educator participants and the EYLF developer participants referred to the politically fraught, contentious and controversial nature of work around gender in early childhood. One commented that educators should be mindful of “not projecting or having an agenda” (RC). In this thesis, the way particular positions – including those perceived as political, radical, feminist or queer – are considered to be ‘having an agenda’, while the status quo or normative positions are considered neutral, despite also having values embedded, has been considered. A common discourse that targets educators who endeavour to do work around gender is that they have a ‘radical agenda’, which may mean they are positioned as being political and pro-queer (Taylor, 2017). This discourse may produce contexts that constrain educators’ work and make it more difficult to make change in this area. This can be further complicated by policy.

While the political pressures associated with work around gender may influence early childhood educators directly, it may also influence on them indirectly. The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), as a framework that guides early childhood educators’ practice nationally, is an example of a context that may mediate work that educators do around gender. The creation of the EYLF itself was steeped in political discourses. It can be seen as another context that influences educators’ work as it impacts the identity constructed. When interviewing the EYLF developers, a number of questions and responses led both participants to discussing the political and contentious nature of work around gender, which they felt constrained their ability to put everything they wanted into the framework. It can be seen that political discourses and policy influences the content of the EYLF, which in turn would have influenced educators at multiple, interrelated levels. These levels included what went into the EYLF when it was developed, how educators interpret the framework based on their context, how educators enact the framework and perform their professional identities, and the political pressures faced around work on gender in any form.

Curriculum documents can be seen to be inherently political, and this is certainly true of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), as the developer participants described the political constraints they encountered in selecting content for the framework. Therefore, the political nature of the EYLF can directly impact early childhood educators’ practice. This impact can be seen in the way the framework refers to gender, but does not provide any clear guidance on what practice
in this area should entail. The silences in the framework around gender can constrain practice as they may lead to some educators thinking that work around gender is unnecessary, or may leave some educators feeling unsupported and uncertain about how to pursue work around gender. However, these silences do not always constrain practice as some educators may be aware of the gaps in the EYLF. This was evident in responses from multiple educator participants in this research. Tegan, in particular, discussed the need for more content on gender in the framework but reflected that the addition of this content would likely bring about “a lot of backlash” as “gender is such a taboo subject” (see section 5.1.3). In addition, the educators’ view of the EYLF as a prescriptive or non-prescriptive document can impact their interpretation of the framework and the performative nature of the work emerging from the framework.

6.3 Enabling discourses

The participants deployed multiple discourses that could be seen as enabling the construction of pro-diversity spaces. These discourses ranged from focusing on addressing inequality to deconstructing discourses around gender or drawing on discourses of radical performance of gender. This research taps into the participants’ stories with an understanding that the stories, like gender identities, are culturally produced within a broader context that influences the discourses people are enacting and produces the performance. Four key discourses were identified, as mentioned earlier, that may support gender diversity in early childhood contexts. These were ‘equity and inclusion’, ‘deconstruction of binaries’, ‘collaborative practice’ and ‘gender as part of holistic practice’. Educators who wish to support gender diversity may use these discourses within particular cultural contexts in which these identities and their associated practices are performed and produced. These cultural contexts produced pro-diversity educators, and these processes in turn may construct and reproduce contexts that produce or enable diversity.

6.3.1 Equity and inclusion

In order to think about ‘inclusion’ it is important to notice exclusions, and recognising inequalities is a first step. The first key discourse, ‘equity and inclusion’, correlates with Kristeva’s (1981) first tier of feminist struggles. In the educator participants’ discussions around their practices on gender, they often referred to equity and “equally representing boys
and girls” (Bow). RC stated “we try, in anything that we do, [to] make sure that it’s inclusive of gender.” Many participants discussed their attempts to counter issues around gender inequities in their settings. One trend in the responses was educators who indicated they did not plan a specific program around gender (e.g., RC, Jean, Marie, Hazel, Margaret). Margaret explained that her approach involved addressing gender incidentally by focusing on the individual needs of each child. She stated that her “role is to meet their needs and if that involves dealing with gender equity issues, then [she will] deal with them in the moment”. RC explained that while she has never “specifically planned a program around gender”, she just “[tries] to include it”. This could be interpreted as a potentially constraining discourse, as without deliberately watching for representations of gender identities in the early childhood setting, it is possible to miss problematic or limiting gendered interactions and identities within the setting. However, it was evident in the responses of some participants that despite the lack of pre-designed gender programs, they attempted to be vigilant around the enacting of gender in their settings, particularly in looking for gender stereotypes. As Layla stated, her setting required extra work in the area of gender as it was “very gender stereotyped even though [they] weren’t trying to be. It just happened”. She explained that this was why she chose to participate in this research and other studies around gender. Many of the educators similarly used discourses that focused on the removal of stereotypes to ensure equality.

Gender-neutrality was mentioned as another strategy used by several participants to achieve gender equality. Neutrality was used as a discourse in the participants’ responses to refer to removing gender stereotypes, constructing gender-neutral spaces, and in some cases attempting to remove gender itself. Some participants indicated that gender stereotypes were not present in their settings, and outlined the methods they used to keep the spaces gender-neutral. JP, Layla and Bow discussed their attempts to provide play spaces, activities and materials that were “as gender-neutral as possible” (Layla). Tegan stated “I think what we offer is an attempt at gender-neutrality, for lack of a better word, but kinder is always a safe space where you’re not sorted or classified.” Post-structural theory would argue that all spaces are gendered. Gender-neutrality would therefore not be seen as an absence of gender but rather an awareness and avoidance of gender stereotypes and limiting practices. Gender-neutrality as a concept can be aligned with Kristeva’s (1981) first tier of feminist struggle. Some participants appeared to view neutrality as a necessary step in achieving gender equality. The concept of gender-neutrality, which may involve moving away from prescriptive and limiting stereotypes, is difficult. Educators who pursue the construction of
gender-neutral space may not be critically aware of what this means, which may require expanding their social and cultural understandings of gender. It could be argued that every space is gendered. Gender can be seen as a performative role shaped and produced by the cultural contexts the individual inhabits (Butler, 1990). Therefore, ensuing performances of gender would in turn shape the contexts that the individual inhabits. Thus, each early childhood setting would consist of contexts shaped by performative enactments of gender of the individuals within them.

In addition to inclusion and gender-neutrality, another common focus amongst educator participants was the provision of materials and resources such as books, dress-up clothing, toys, posters, and puppets that reflect equality. Rose stated that in all of the activities and learning experiences she provided, and conversations she had with children, she emphasised “it’s okay to do what you like regardless of whether you are male or female. Actually, we really don’t talk about male and female. I don’t. We just treat everyone equally as much as we possibly can.” The words ‘equality’ and ‘equal’ was mentioned frequently in participants’ responses, including in response to questions about equity. RC stated that “equality doesn’t mean we treat them the same” and clarified that “it means we treat them with respect so they have the same opportunities.” Many of the participants referred to equality in the descriptions of their practice but may not have had the same understanding of equality. RC’s description of the pursuit of gender equality in her setting can be aligned more with equity, and perhaps even expansion.

Providing children with an environment that is respectful of their interpretations of gender and that makes opportunities available to all children can be aligned with Fraser’s (1996/1997) notions of equality and difference. The coexistence of the discourses of equality and difference could also be seen in multiple participants’ responses around practice, which may be due to educators engaging in the beginning stages of work around gender expansion. This work can be regarded as consistent with the aim of building pro-diversity spaces. It is therefore important to reflect on the contexts that have supported the construction of these professional identities and practices, and then to support these to repeat over time, and in doing so to build pro-diversity early childhood spaces.
6.3.2 Deconstruction of binaries

The second key discourse, ‘deconstruction of binaries’ is best understood through feminist post-structuralist theories, which can be aligned with Kristeva’s (1981) third tier of feminist struggle. This tier provides ways to interrogate, deconstruct and expand notions of gender, and perceives maleness and femaleness as a culturally constructed binary. Third-tier supporters contest gender binaries and power relations these categories produce (Alloway, 1995). A post-structuralist deconstruction of binaries aims for a diversity of ways of being gendered to be made available to all people (Alloway, 1995; Davies, 1989), rather than gender being constraining and limiting based on predefined, normative and stereotypical notions. Proponents of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory seek to determine how discourses pertaining to a gender binary become evident in society. These theoretical approaches question how the binary has managed to maintain power over marginalised identities and discourses (Butler, 1990; Rich, 1980; Sedgwick, 1990). White, Wyn and Robards (2017) promote non-oppositional understandings of social groups rather than adhering to binary relationships. They state that reducing males and females to single groups, which assume sameness and do not value difference, further marginalise and produce inequalities and social injustices.

Many educator participants (see section 6.3.1) deployed discourses of equality and difference in their responses relating to their practices around gender. Some of these practices suggested that these participants could be engaging in initial work around gender expansion and building pro-diversity spaces. The work involved in the deconstruction of binaries can be seen as challenging in several ways. These approaches value alternate ways of being and emphasise diverse experiences and performances of gender (White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017).

By drawing attention to the way gender is performatively constituted (Butler, 2004); the deconstruction of binaries can create possibilities for disruption and the deployment of discursive agency (Youdell, 2006). Discursive agency refers to deploying existing discourses and moving them into contexts where they might be absent. While discursive agency may generally refer to deliberate use of discourses, it can also refer to discourses used unconsciously by the person speaking or interpreted by their audience. An example of discursive agency might be a discursively produced educator subject creating gender expansive contexts within early childhood spaces.
The participants discussed gender in a variety of ways, using discourses that indicated intentional and incidental practices around gender. Rose stated, “children need to be experiencing everything regardless of what gender they are,” which may be interpreted as containing gender inclusive and expansive discourses. Bow, conversely, stated “the books that we have out and that we read have strong protagonists of either sex”, which perhaps unintentionally reinforced a binary view of gender. Other participants (e.g., RC, Hazel, JP & Jean) differentiated between “boys” and “girls”, even when making the argument that they did not restrict either group from participating in particular activities or using certain toys, and some participants referred to particular activities, careers or items as “girly” and “not girly” (Jean). RC, however, explained that in her setting they did not say “boys will do this session and girls can do this session. We never try and distinguish gender in that way.” The discourses used in this response suggested that RC recognised there was a binary – whether natural or constructed – and worked to oppose it in various ways. RC had been produced as a subject within a particular context, and was deploying or bringing some of the discourses into the early childhood setting. RC’s discourses around gender would have been produced in multiple contexts. Her arrival at the early childhood setting where she worked and her deployment of particular discourses around gender are examples of her discursive agency. It can be said that some of the discourses deployed by participants who discussed the male and female binary could be seen as enabling in that they recognised the binary and tried in various ways to expand the children’s experiences of gender.

Jean acknowledged the need for some children to have access to approaches and spaces that acknowledge gender, as opposed to gender-neutral spaces. She discussed transgender children and gender dysphoria, and described “people who need to identify as a particular gender” as having to “put on the cloak of gender in order to feel like they’re really themselves” (see section 5.1.2 (ii). Furthermore, she argued that “in trying to actually reduce the presence of gender in the classroom you might actually be depriving some children of opportunities that they need in order to explore their feeling that they’re in one gender and they belong in it.” This supported the argument against gender-neutrality in early childhood spaces, and the need for creating expansive gendered spaces for work with children. Jean’s response contained multiple discourses, including the notion of gender performativity being quite a literal act or costume that one could wear. Jean’s comments suggested that rather than aiming for neutrality, it was necessary to acknowledge the investment children had in their current identities. Marie questioned whether there was “an ideal gender identity or is
everyone’s idea of gender identity perfect for them in different ways?” (see section 5.1.2 [i]). This response indicated an expansive view of gender identities, without the constraints and limitations of the binary. Marie’s statements could clearly lead to an expansion of gender, but her other responses indicated that she did not consciously do any formal work or practice around gender in her setting. MacNaughton argues children’s gender politics must be deconstructed “before we can remake them” (2000, p. 151), which may require educators to become aware of gendered meanings and assumptions, determine who benefits from them, and offer alternate meanings in their work with children.

It is important to consider the contexts in which educators may be produced and in which gender expansive practices may be enacted. Within this research, multiple educator participants deployed discourses that could lead to an expansion of gender identities. It is necessary to consider the contexts that enable or constrain this work. Marie and Rose made statements that critiqued the need for a gender binary. However, Marie’s other responses indicated that she did not implement any formal practices around gender apart from using reflection journals to raise awareness of gender with families. Rose, conversely, described multiple ways in which she challenges gender normativities and stereotypes. It is important to take into consideration the other contexts that may have informed the educators’ practices. These could include pressures from families, workplaces dynamics, personal experiences, cultural contexts and policies within settings and nationwide.

While multiple contexts come into play in producing gendered identities for children, they can also lead to differences in their enactments of professional identities. These differences are generative and are what discursive agency draws upon: a multiplicity of identities. Educators may have been produced as subjects in multiple contexts. Accordingly, they may deploy expansive discourses, which then become present in environments where they are absent. Rather than focusing on the educator as an individual with agency, this research considers the way educators, as subjects, have been discursively produced in other contexts. Discursive agency still recognises the agency educators have as individuals, but uses performativity to theorise the contexts within which they are discursively produced and therefore enact discourses that may enable or constrain more expansive work.
6.3.3 Collaborative practice

For successful work around expansive gender, it is important to consider the contexts that educators inhabit and consider the ways these contexts can either coexist or sit in conflict with each other. Educators’ professional identities are multifaceted and are shaped by, and produced within, the various contexts they inhabit. It is necessary for educators to become aware of and reconcile – or at least sit with the complexities of – various aspects of their own professional identities and ways this can influence their work around gender. In addition, successful work in this area requires support at the whole-centre level (White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017) and through partnerships with families, colleagues and relationships with management. In addition, support is necessary at a political level through centre-wide policy and national policy.

The educator participants referred to conflict with colleagues, management and families in the area of gender. It is therefore important to consider the practices that support working relationships at these levels. Multiple responses from educator participants outlined ways they responded to families in situations of conflict around gender. For some participants it was evident that they struggled with the discourse of the ‘family as expert/first teacher’ that is used and heavily reinforced within Australian early childhood settings. Discourses around the importance of family were used within some of the educator participants’ responses and in some of the artefacts selected (see section 5.1.7).

JP discussed an experience that she had with a child in her setting who attended each day wearing his mother’s shirt as a dress. She explained that the child’s father was upset that the child had been teased by school-aged children and that he was concerned as “the little boy was going to be starting school and he wouldn’t be allowed to [dress like this]”. JP described the steps that she took, in consultation with the father, to help the child adjust to not wearing those clothes by implementing a system where the child would remove his mother’s shirt during outdoor play time. She explained that the decision caused controversy with other educators, management and from the child’s mother, whom she later discovered did not share the same views as the father. JP reflected on the situation, stating:

“In hindsight I feel really bad that I did push it upon him, not to be able to express himself like that, but in an early childhood setting you’re theoretically also meant to follow the
parent’s beliefs and attributes that they want their children to have. It’s a Catch 22, but what do you do?”

It is evident that the dual discourses of ‘family as expert/first teacher’ and ‘respect for the child’s own identity’, and the expectations that arise from these, can sometimes clash if the family make requests that may be seen to sit outside of what the educator considers to be best practice. This may be particularly challenging as each family brings with them different contexts that educators need to take into account (Tayler & Price, 2016). Hazel described the way she would handle situations that involved these dual discourses, explaining that:

“We’d just have a conversation about that so we’re all on the same page. And speaking to his mum about it and then being aware of what his dad’s feelings towards it, and just trying very hard to make sure that we’re respecting his wishes within the program, but also aware that there could be consequences.”

It can be seen from JP and Hazel’s responses that this struggle is not conducive to enabling expansive work around gender. Hazel’s response suggested that she straddled the line between prioritising the child’s personal choices around gender and what the families wanted for their child. She explained that, while she was aware of potential consequences, she would respect the child’s “wishes within the program”. Like Hazel, other participants described situations where they would prioritise the children’s choices in their practice (e.g., Bow & Tegan). The decision to disregard parents’ requests indicates underlying discourses of ‘confidence in best practice’.

Multiple participants’ responses about their dynamics with families indicated the deployment of discourses that suggested confidence in what they considered to be best practice. While the educators never outright described themselves as confident, it was evident that discourses of professional confidence were used within multiple responses. The reasons behind their confidence varied. Some participants referred to their years in the field as a reason that they were seldom challenged by families (Margaret & Bow). Bow explained that some families see her as a source of “expertise”. In addition, a few participants discussed reinforcing their pedagogical decisions around gender by referring back to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) (Layla & Bow), their teacher education (Jean) or whole centre policies (EF). It can be seen that discourses of confidence in best practice can enable expansive work around gender, which
may be consistent with the aim of diversity. However, it is apparent that educators need to be provided with support at the whole-centre level (White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017) to develop a consistent approach to work around gender. This is particularly important, as early childhood educators continuously provide information to families (Kroeger & Regula, 2017) about gender.

Despite Layla and Bow referring to the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) as a resource that they would use to explain practice around gender to families, the lack of direct support and guidance in the framework may provide the context which supports enabling discourses around gender. As discussed in section 6.2.2, silences around gender in the framework can constrain practice and the creation of pro-diversity spaces. However, silences in the EYLF can also create opportunities for individually interpreted practices and the flexibility for educators to deploy discourses around gender that may be enabling and expansive.

The EYLF developer participants indicated they felt constrained by political and social forces in their development of content. Lisa described her attempts to “scatter words throughout … an example of code I suppose”, and referred to trying to “slip them in” as these ‘codes’ would “still speak in some way to people who were looking for signs or probably a more critical approach” (see section 5.2.1 [ii]). This description could be interpreted as the construction of a framework that was flexible and non-prescriptive enough to be interpreted by educators in ways that could enable expansive work around gender. However, Jamie described the pressures from government to reflect society’s views around gender, including the belief that “young children don’t notice these things. They don’t notice diversity, they don’t notice difference, [and] everyone’s the same” (see section 5.2.3 [i]). Jamie argued that while they did not believe that to be true, they were constrained by the government’s expectations for the content of the EYLF. Lisa also referred to feeling “silenced in so many ways” as there were “so many things that we would have loved to have seen in there weren’t able to be in there.” She acknowledged that while the final framework contained far less of the content than she may have wanted, “it doesn’t take away from the fact that people suddenly seemed to have engaged with it, and the people who are engaging deeply seem to be finding enough space to run with pretty interesting ideas.” In this respect, the EYLF can be viewed as an enabling context for early childhood educators and a space in which they can develop expansive work around gender.
Considering silences around gender within the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009), it is therefore necessary for policies to be developed within individual early childhood settings. JP’s scenario discussed above, in which her attempts to meet the needs of a parent were met with backlash from colleagues and management, highlighted the difficulties that can occur if the team within the setting does not work together to develop a policy on practice around gender. The majority of participants stated that whole centre approaches to gender did not exist within their settings. Many acknowledged (e.g., Rose, Tegan, & Layla) that this would be helpful in providing enabling work around gender as well as support when navigating conflict with families and colleagues. A whole-centre approach has the potential to build a context, and practices over time, in which all staff are on board. Despite not having a whole-setting approach, several educator participants discussed working with colleagues to produce an environment that was inclusive and pro-diversity. As outlined in section 5.1.2 (ii), EF stated, “it’s just about finding the clusters of people and other teachers who have had similar experiences to you”. This is consistent with the arguments and theoretical approaches in this thesis, which explore how educators may build spaces by performing and enacting particular discourses.

An enabling discourse used within some of the participants’ responses was around ‘positive and collaborative whole team approaches to gender’. One example came from Layla who described the way her setting had worked to make change in the area of gender after acknowledging there had been many stereotypes present. She stated “we’re all trying to get on the same page and it is changing and we’re all learning” (see section 5.1.2 [ii]) Additionally, Tegan referred to the importance of “approaching these things in the same way.” She explained that if the children learned from her that the setting was a safe place to explore different identities, but then received opposing messages from other educators, “there’s going to be some confusion and some frustration around that.” Layla and Tegan indicated the need for educators to work collectively as a team to provide consistent contexts for the children. Team collaboration would involve the blending of multiple professional identities being performed consecutively. It is therefore necessary to create contexts in which a multiplicity of professional identities can coexist. It may also be necessary to acknowledge that these coexisting identities may create conflict and disagreement, but that these disagreements can be tolerated. Through developing a consistent, evolving and collaborative approach to gender at policy and practice levels within a workplace setting, educators may
feel emboldened and supported to explain their choices and enact expansive and pro-diversity practices around gender.

6.3.4 Gender as part of holistic practice

The fourth key enabling discourse around looking at gender as part of holistic practice contains and reinforces the three earlier enabling discourses. These three discourses – ‘equity and inclusion’, ‘deconstruction of binaries’ and ‘collaborative practice’ – are important individually, but are also part of the complex and dynamic process of expansive work in gender. The first element of practice listed in the EYLF (DEEWRR, 2009) is ‘adopting holistic approaches’, which is considered a key component of early childhood pedagogy. The framework defines these approaches as recognising the connectedness of mind, body and spirit, and explains that this involves paying attention to “children’s physical, personal, social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing as well as cognitive aspects of learning” (p. 16). Kilderry (2015) suggests that early childhood education in Australia relies heavily on outside validation and rules, including the EYLF and the NQS (ACECQA, 2018b). She states that it is within these contexts that educators will often performatively enact their practices.

In this research, it is argued that gender should be a critical component of holistic approaches to early childhood education. These may vary between those with obvious connections to gender, while others may be subtle. Gender can be integrated across all aspects of practice, including materials, resources, various elements of the program and reflective practice. One of the educator participants, Marie, described the way she incorporated gender into her reflective practice through the use of weekly reflections. In these reflections, she asked herself where the children’s ideas about gender came from, including what they considered acceptable and whether they were their own ideas, or there were “other reasons why they chose these roles”. The use of weekly reflections to reflect on the children’s engagement with gender is useful, both on an individual pedagogical level as well as for engaging families in the area of gender identity. The act of being reflective as an educator is listed within the NQS (ACECQA, 2018b). In addition, reflective practice is one of the principles listed in the EYLF (DEEWRR, 2009), along with respect for diversity, high expectations and equity, partnerships, and secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships. These principles correlate with the discourses around practice discussed within this chapter, and therefore it can be argued they
could be interpreted as components of holistic practice around gender, considering their focus on children, families, equity and diversity.

Holistic practice around gender can also be examined through the lens of performativity (Butler, 1990). Educators that work towards building spaces that support diversity can be seen to be performing a multiplicity of identities. These include their professional and personal identities, which are shaped by cultural, social and political contexts. It is these contexts that enable or constrain the educators’ work around the building of pro-diversity spaces. Within the descriptions of their practice, multiple participants used discourses around recognising, responding to and planning for gender equality and expansion in their programs on a holistic level. This could be seen through some participants’ responses about directly planning for gender, through the inclusion of multifaceted and non-stereotyped materials (e.g., Bow, Hazel & EF), and incidentally, through being responsive to perceived gender inequalities (e.g., Margaret & RC).

Considering the EYLF’s (DEEWR, 2009) focus on holistic practice, it can be argued that including gender explicitly within holistic practice could legitimise it as a part of early childhood educators’ professional practice. This could lead to a stronger focus on gender within many contexts in which identities are constructed, including professional development, setting policies, collaborative work and teacher education on practices around gender. The inclusion of gender in teacher education is likely to encourage pre-service educators to assess their own place in the gender hierarchy and consider their own gender identities, as well as recognise any limitations gender may have created in their lives. This reflection is an important step in creating pro-diversity spaces in early childhood (Hogan, 2012). Through this process, pre-service educators may then begin to incorporate gender into their professional philosophies. This could develop the educators’ discursive agency and impact their professional identities, as they would potentially begin to enact work around gender, which would then help to create a context that enables further work around gender.

It is necessary to consider that educators inhabit multiple contexts, each of which impact on professional identities (Rodgers & Scott, 2008). These multiple subjectivities and professional identities are comprised of multiple relational elements that have been constructed in multiple contexts over time. These afford various awarenesses and generative opportunities (Crowhurst & Emslie, 2018). For this reason, the inclusion of gender as a
component of holistic practice may be an important enabling discourse deployed within work around gender. It may help to create a culture and contexts that then produce pro-diversity work around gender in early childhood settings.

6.4 Conclusion and implications

In this chapter, key discourses were examined that enabled and constrained practice around gender in early childhood spaces. FPDA was used to identify the discourses deployed by the participants that create contexts in which their practice is shaped and which enables or constrains children’s gender explorations. The way participants were discursively produced was considered in relation to their discursive agency, with a view to promoting practices and building contexts in which gender expansive work is possible. In order for these discourses to be used within early childhood settings, certain components of practice need to be present to promote educators enacting expansive work around gender. The acknowledgement of spaces as inherently gendered can be seen as important in developing an approach to working around gender. Discourses of gender equality can function alongside discourses of gender expansion, which can correlate with Fraser’s (1996/1997) notions of equality and difference. This notion is consistent with holistic approaches to early childhood education. Working towards expanding children’s opportunities around gender could involve seeking to construct contexts that both address inequalities and support further diversity. In addition, early childhood settings that are consistent, supportive and cooperative in their approach to gender are likely to produce contexts that promote diversity spaces. Furthermore, holistic practice that includes gender explicitly within multiple areas of practice can provide a context that produces discourses of confidence around working in the area of gender.

Based on this chapter, the following three implications have been identified:

1. It is important to build educators’ confidence in the area of gender. There is a dominant discourse around the ‘family as expert/first teacher’ that is dominant in early childhood training, textbooks, government policy and social attitudes to children in a neoliberal society. This discourse can lead to conflict or challenge with educators. This can be addressed through additional support in the workplace, at policy level and in teacher education.
2. It is necessary that teacher education around gender explicitly addresses constraints such as misconceptions around gender and encourages educators to reflect on their own experiences with gender and how this has impacted their own identities.

3. Gender should be considered holistically as part of early childhood practice, pedagogy and philosophy.

The discussion around the discourses within this chapter was explored in relation to the research question outlined in this thesis, which is ‘how do early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities influence their practice?’ This question has been examined further alongside the five sub-questions in the concluding chapter.
Chapter Seven – Conclusions and Implications

The research question, ‘How do early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities influence their practice’ was answered through the focus groups and interviews. Participants’ responses, both verbal and nonverbal, and their selection of artefacts provided insights into their understanding of gender identity formation in children and in their own lives, as well as how this impacted their practice. Several key themes and discourses were identified via their responses. These have been explored in relation to the five sub-questions (see section 7.1) and the implications drawn from the research (see section 7.3).

7.1 Research questions

The key themes and discourses were explored in relation to the main research question and sub-questions (see section 5.3). These were then considered further in relation to the possible implications of the research (see section 6.4). The first two sub-questions – ‘where do educators believe that their understanding of gender identity has come from?’, and ‘how do educators believe that children develop their gender identities and what do they believe their role should be in this development?’ – should be considered alongside the first implication, which is that it is important to build educators’ confidence in the area of gender. The discourse of the ‘family as expert/first teacher’ is dominant in early childhood education and associated resources, policies and social attitudes. In the research, the educator participants attributed their understanding of gender identity formation to their parents and families, among other variables and influences. They suggested that children’s gender identities emerged in a similar way to their own, but also referred explicitly to popular culture, social media, pressures, and debates over curriculum and school programs to provide context to their current work with children. Some participants’ views corresponded with the notion of the parent as the most influential educator (DEEWR, 2009), some views suggested that educators as professionals knew more than parents in this area, while others’ views comprised elements of both.

Therefore, the first implication of this research listed in Chapter Six, that it is important to build educators’ confidence in the area of gender, provides an important lens through which to consider current beliefs about, and discourses pertaining to, the relationships between
families and early childhood educators. This is particularly relevant when considering some of the stories participants shared, such as JP’s conflict with colleagues, management and a parent when she tried to intervene in relation to a child’s gender expression. Many of the educator participants acknowledged that children have rights in the representation of their identities. While these rights are not recognised broadly as a definitive fact, many people believe this argument, including several of the participants in this research. The researcher does not seek to solve these conflicts, but rather to draw attention to them and to emphasise that these clashes can, and often will, be present. Rather than suppressing dialogue and conflict around gender, it is argued that more education, relevant policy and support in the workplace would provide guidance to educators, which may then enable them to have open and complex discussions with families about gender. This research focused on the importance of encouraging educators, who had been discursively produced in other spaces, to build expansive spaces in early childhood settings.

The third and fourth sub-questions – ‘what interactions and issues have educators encountered in relation to gender equity in early childhood settings?’ and ‘how can educators be supported, and what is required to provide practical solutions for change?’ – can be considered in relation to the second implication listed in Chapter Six, which is that it is necessary that teacher education around gender explicitly addresses constraints such as misconceptions around gender, and encourages educators to reflect on their own experiences with gender and how this has impacted their own identities. In relation to these sub-questions, participants’ responses indicated challenges and disagreements with colleagues, management and families in relation to gender. Teacher education that addresses gender could ensure more consistency with approaches, less confusion around terminology, and more awareness about educators’ own gender identities and the ways in which they enact work around gender. In terms of how educators could be better supported in their work, and what they felt might lead to change in the area of gender, these educators provided extensive examples of what they felt was required to support them (see Appendix BB). They referred to resources, centre-wide policies, additional material in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and whole-team professional development. In this research, it is not argued that professional development or teacher education are the ultimate solutions for addressing gender in early childhood, but rather, like with other areas of knowledge and practice, they will provide educators with expansive knowledge, the space to reflect on their practice, and support and tools for making educated decisions.
As discussed in section 5.1.5, involvement in research can lead to educators becoming aware of unequal power relations in their settings (Alloway, 1995). In the follow-up questionnaire, several participants indicated an increased awareness of elements of gender in their settings. One example was from Layla, who said she was:

“…beginning to change my approach to children and gender, looking at gender stereotypes in toys and play spaces. I found the interviews with you to be of great value to my practice and to myself personally, allowing me to reflect on gender, bias and stereotypes in ways I hadn't before. Thank you.”

Layla’s response indicated that her involvement in the research led to increased awareness and reflection on gender in her setting. This has implications for future work on gender within early childhood teacher education, as teacher education can offer educators similar opportunities to engage deeply with their understandings of gender and its presence in early childhood settings. This suggests that, as has occurred with this research, involvement in teacher education on gender may lead to increased reflection from educators. This reflection, alongside information about best practice, could allow educators to expand their professional identities in relation to gender. This in turn may produce contexts that enable more expansive practices in relation to gender.

In relation to the fifth sub-question, ‘why is there silence surrounding gender in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009)?’, the EYLF developer participants indicated that government and the media impacted the development of the framework, which restricted their opportunities to include particular content and promote expansive work around gender. This can be explored in relation to the third implication referred to in Chapter Six, that gender should be considered holistically as part of early childhood practice, pedagogy and philosophy. It could be argued that if gender was widely considered to be an element of holistic and inclusive practice, both educators and policy makers would be supported in providing gender expansive contexts rather than being constrained by ‘moral panics’ (Robinson, 2008) in society, the media and in political discourses. This in turn would enable educators to provide these contexts for children, and for policy makers to provide these contexts for educators.
7.2 Concluding comments

As mentioned in section 5.3, four key discourses were identified in this research that could build and support pro-diversity spaces and contexts in early childhood. These were equity and inclusion, deconstruction of binaries, collaborative practice and gender as part of holistic practice. While these discourses were identified for their potential to enable expansive gender practices in early childhood settings, two key discourses were identified that may constrain work in this area: ‘innocence’ and ‘contentious’ discourses. While the enabling discourses offered strategies for making change in this area, the constraining discourses needed to be considered as they were grounded in historical and cultural contexts. For this reason, discursive agency can be considered an essential aspect of expansive work on gender in early childhood contexts. By drawing attention to the performative nature of gender (Butler, 2004), it is possible to disrupt gender binaries, challenge stereotypes and normative notions of gender, and to promote the deployment of discursive agency (Youdell, 2006).

Discursive agency is particularly important for educators who may seek to use enabling discourses in contexts where they might be absent. Multiple contexts produce gendered identities for children and adults, and for educators they can also lead to differences in their enactments of professional identities. This multiplicity of identities is necessary for achieving aims relating to gender expansive work. Rather than placing blame or responsibility on the individual agentic educator, this research sought to understand the discourses that produced the educators and the spaces themselves. The following implications (section 7.3) and future recommendations and directions (section 7.5) identify strategies that can aid in building cultures and contexts that in turn support diversity and discursive agency.

7.3 Implications

The following implications were identified through considering the four key discourses listed in the conclusion of Chapter Five and discussed in Chapter Six, the three implications listed in the conclusion Chapter Six, and in relation to the research questions:

- Gender should be considered part of a holistic approach to early childhood practice, pedagogy and philosophy. Fraser’s (1996/1997) notion of equality and difference is
consistent with holistic approaches to early childhood education, which can provide a context that produces discourses of confidence relating to gender.

- Gender could easily be integrated with each of the EYLF’s (DEEWR, 2009) five learning outcomes, which include a focus on children’s identity, connection with and contribution to the world, wellbeing, confidence around and involvement in learning, and communication.

- Gender can be seen to be a discursive space in which negotiation and multiple approaches exist. Rather than narrowly defining gender, approaches can still be flexible and open. Rather than government policy and curriculum constraining educators’ work, they could help to navigate discursive spaces within early childhood settings.

7.4 Limitations

One of the limitations associated with this study was around the recruitment of participants. The educator participants in this study were recruited via contact with multiple early childhood settings and contact with educators directly through a Facebook group for early childhood educators in Australia. The only requirement was that participants had taught in an early childhood setting as a kindergarten teacher and were able to attend a focus group in Melbourne. The participants lived in a range of areas across metropolitan Melbourne and as far as two hours away, and two participants mentioned they had moved to Australia from overseas. The participants taught in early childhood settings that covered a range of demographics. Other demographic information about participants included their ages, which ranged from 28-57 years, and their years of experience, which spanned four to 31 years in the field. All of the participants were female, which was likely to have been impacted by the statistics behind the early childhood workforce. Statistics about early childhood educators in Australia found that 97.3% are women and only 2.7% are men (The Social Research Centre, 2014). This may have been a limitation, as having a wider representation of gender identities – including educators who identified as male, gender non-conforming, gender diverse or transgender – could have contributed meaningfully to the dialogue and personal reflections about gender identity formation. However, while discourses of gender balance and equality are often used as rationales for increasing the participation of men in early childhood (Huber
& Traxil, 2018), it is necessary to recruit, train and retain practitioners who are gender conscious and respond to children in gender-flexible ways (Warin, 2019).

Another limitation was that the two EYLF developer participants were limited by their confidentiality agreements. These may have meant that they could not answer some of the questions in full due to confidentiality. Both of the developer participants acknowledged this limitation in their responses, and endeavoured to answer each question in as much detail as possible.

A limitation of the research design was that it did not include discourse analysis of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) itself, which may have provided interesting data and findings. Instead, the framework was interpreted through interviews with the two developer participants, and through discussion with the educator participants about their understanding and enactment of the framework. Considering that the research endeavoured to capture educators’ personal experiences with gender, the design of the thesis was to extract participants’ perspectives and generate ideas for change, and therefore it was heavily data focused. Another limitation of the research decision was in the inclusion of artefacts. While they may have stimulated further exploration of certain topics, this is not measurable, and therefore the efficacy of this method is not clear. Additionally, the observations of the educator participants in the focus groups provided some useful data. However, while it may have provided some insight into the participants’ emotional responses and comfort levels during the discussions, this data did not serve to further or strengthen the in-depth analysis, and may not have been necessary for this research project.

Finally, there were also theoretical limitations to this research. The chosen theoretical frameworks of feminist post-structuralism and queer theory may be regarded as inaccessible, impractical, ineffective or radical (Fleming & Banerjee, 2016), particularly due to the controversy and backlash associated with Safe Schools in Australia (Louden, 2017). For educators working with children and families in contexts constructed around traditional or conservative discourses, any work around gender based on feminist post-structuralist or queer theory approaches may be perceived as radical or inappropriate. For these reasons, the researcher considered suggestions that the educator participants proposed, other solutions generated in relation to theoretical approaches as well as the researcher’s own experiences working in the field. This meant, however, that rather than proposing any prescriptive
solutions to problems, the implications raised in this thesis are intended to promote debate, discussion, discursive agency and further research aimed at improving practices around gender in early childhood.

7.5 Future recommendations and directions

After concluding this study, the researcher returned to several ideas pivotal to the initial conception and design of this project. Egalia (Södermalm, 2015), a preschool in Stockholm described as ‘gender-neutral’, was one of the original inspirations behind this research. As discussed in this research, the concept of ‘gender-neutral’ spaces has been critiqued (Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Doan, 2010). In discussion in this research, the researcher questioned whether it was possible to create gender-neutral spaces and if, rather, it was necessary to provide expansive gendered spaces in early childhood settings.

In order to achieve expansive gendered spaces, it is necessary to develop strategies that take into account broader contextual dimensions of gender imbalances and inequalities, rather than focusing on removing inequalities from the setting. Future research could aim to identify the types of practice that enable expansive gendered spaces. In this thesis, it was identified that gender could be included holistically within early childhood programs and frameworks. Future versions of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) should include more explicit suggestions for practice in relation to gender as part of holistic practice. Alternatively, or additionally, a supporting guide about gender could be created and used by educators alongside the EYLF.

It is important to implement whole-setting approaches (White, Wyn, & Robards, 2017) through policies that are accessible for educators and families, and which are fully encompassing of their knowledge. It is necessary to consider that work around gender involves multiple stakeholders, including families, educators, management and the children themselves. Future research should offer opportunities for the child’s voice to be heard, as much of the pre-existing research, including this study, does not include children’s perspectives.

Early childhood higher education programs should implement consistent approaches to gender. This could include clarification around terminology, self-reflection on pre-service educators’ own gender identities, which can lead to reflective practice, a background
understanding of gender and why it is an important aspect of practice, and strategies for
expansive work around gender. Consistent approaches within teacher education could
provide educators with the confidence and knowledge to develop discursive agency (Youdell,
2006) in their work around gender in early childhood settings. However, this raises issues
around early childhood educator qualifications, as there are currently multiple qualifications
that exist. Gender would need to be addressed at multiple levels, including both vocational
and tertiary qualifications.

To answer the research questions within this thesis fully, it is necessary to include the
participants’ suggestions alongside those of the researcher for future recommendations and
directives. The educator participants provided the following examples of what they felt was
required to support them (see Appendix BB). They referred to:

- **Professional Development** – The presenters need to take into the account the context and
  experience of the people in the room, it needs to be team based and affordable, it should
  include talking not just information, and that teacher registration criteria should include
  gender as an area of professional development.

- **Resources** – Settings should provide resources that assist in enabling best practice. These
  should be relevant, current and inclusive. Resources might include books, prompt cards,
puppets, links to online resources, family-friendly websites that explain gender, and
resources that explain a gender expansive approach to educators and to families.

- **Curriculum and policy** – Easy to follow curriculum with frequently asked questions on
  potential problems educators may encounter, and specific policies that address gender
  rather than diversity in general.

- **Self-reflection** – Provide opportunities for educators to engage in reflective practice.

- **Guidance** – Provide guidance on particular areas and suggested activities relating to
gender. Discuss gender more at a whole-centre level and have a consistent provision of
gender related knowledge to all employees. Engage in professional dialogue around
gender and update all educators on current research.

Some of the suggestions provided by educator participants complemented and corresponded
with suggestions proposed by the researcher. In particular, these included the focus on whole-
centre approaches to early childhood, the provision of guiding documents in relation to gender, and reflective practice. These were also considered in relation to the assemblage of broader contexts in which these practices are enacted, and which are gendered themselves.

The researcher identified a need for further research in the following areas:

- Educators’ verbal and nonverbal communication, and the role of affect and comfort levels in enabling or constraining gender expansive work.
- The connection between children’s identities and their wellbeing.
- The role of artefacts in understanding participants’ identities.
- The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) as an artefact.
- The role and enactment of policy in early childhood education in the current context of policy overload.
- Generational logics in relation to policy changes in early childhood.
- Practices around gender in early childhood settings.

In this research, gender is viewed as a critical area that needs to be addressed urgently in policy and practice. Rather than promoting small, tokenistic changes in this area, the researcher advocates for systemic change. She acknowledges that for this change to happen, further research needs to be conducted that provides all stakeholders involved with a voice and examines direct correlations between personal philosophies, professional practices and policies. The recommendations and directions provided above could be used to shape the creation of future policy frameworks and resources to support educators in the creation of gender expansive spaces. By empowering educators to have discursive agency in the enactment of their professional identities and through promoting collaborative and holistic practice, further work in this area could ultimately allow children the freedom of gender expression, and both equal and diverse opportunities for gender exploration.
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INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Project Title: An exploration of early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities

Investigators:

Name: Ms. Rachel Chapman
Qualification: Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Hons.)
Currently undertaking PhD in Education at RMIT University
Contact details: [Redacted]

Name: [Redacted]
Position: Associate Professor, RMIT University
Contact details: [Redacted] or phone - [Redacted]

Dear ____________________.

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University, Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

Who is involved in this research project? Why is it being conducted?

The purpose of this research is to gather early child educators’ experiences with gender equity programs and their understandings of the development of gender identity. This research is being conducted by Ms. Rachel Chapman, as part of her PhD in Education (Early Childhood) at RMIT University. [Redacted] is her supervisor and will be supervisory investigator. This research project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Training.

Why have you been approached?

The participants of this research will consist of early childhood educators from kindergartens across Melbourne. You have been contacted through your setting management.

What is the project about? What are the questions being addressed?

The research aims to discover ways to assist educators in fostering an environment that will provide children with equal opportunities to develop an understanding of themselves, in the context of gender-related pressures that occur in the outside world.
The primary research question is:

- How do early childhood educators’ views on children's gender identity impact on practice and influence children's sense and understanding of gender identity?

This research is expected to have approximately 12 participants.

**If I agree to participate, what will I be required to do?**

If you agree to participate in the research project you will be asked to be a part of a focus group and three interviews. These will be conducted across 2016 and take place in Melbourne CBD. The focus group will be conducted in the first half of 2016 and the interviews will take place afterwards during the subsequent months.

The focus group will be an hour in length. In it you will be asked to consider your thoughts on children's sense of identity and how this is addressed in the Early Years Learning Framework.

The interviews will be 45 minutes in length each. In these there will be a focus on children's gender identity. You will be asked to consider your thoughts on how children's gender identity develops, any ways that gender roles are catered for in your setting and how you believe your views on gender came to exist.

**What are the possible risks or disadvantages?**

It is highly unlikely that there will be any risks to any participants in this research. In the event that you do not wish to answer a question/s asked in the focus group or interviews please inform the investigator and they will skip the question/s. Your responses throughout the research will be available to you on request.

**What are the benefits associated with participation?**

The results of the research will be analysed and presented in a thesis. The thesis will be shared with participants once research is complete. The benefits of being involved in the research may include an increased awareness of the role and influence that an educator plays in the area of children's gender identity.

**What will happen to the information I provide?**

The data collected during the research (such as the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups) will not be identifiable or traceable to individuals. The transcripts will use codes instead of names, so that your privacy is protected. This continues in the thesis, in which all results will be presented in code so that none of the information can be identified or traced back to participants.

Only the two investigators will have access to the data collected. The research process will be monitored by the supervisory investigator to ensure that all research is completed appropriately. All recorded and research data will be stored securely at RMIT for 5 years and will then be destroyed. Any information that you provide can be disclosed only if (1) it is to protect you or others from harm, (2) if specifically required or allowed by law, or (3) you provide the researchers with written permission.
The results from the research will be published as a thesis. This thesis will be stored in the RMIT Repository, which is a publicly accessible online library of research papers. The thesis will remain online.

**What are my rights as a participant?**

- The right to withdraw from participation at any time
- The right to request that any recording cease
- The right to refuse to answer questions
- The right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed, provided it can be reliably identified, and provided that so doing does not increase the risk for the participant.
- The right to be de-identified in any photographs intended for public publication, before the point of publication
- The right to have any questions answered at any time.

**Whom should I contact if I have any questions?**

In the event that you have any questions or concerns, please contact the investigators via email at [redacted] or via phone at [redacted].

Yours sincerely,

Ms. Rachel Chapman  
Bachelor of Early Childhood (Hons.)  
[redacted]

Associate Professor, RMIT University  
[redacted]

If you have any concerns about your participation in this project, which you do not wish to discuss with the researchers, then you can contact the Ethics Officer, Research Integrity, Governance and Systems, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476V VIC 3001.
Consent Form

1. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the information sheet.

2. I agree to participate in the research project as described.

3. I agree:
   - to participate in a focus group with three other educators.
   - to be interviewed three times during the year.
   - that my voice will be audio recorded.

4. I acknowledge that:

   (a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied (unless follow-up is needed for safety).

   (b) The project is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.

   (c) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.

   (d) The security of the research data will be protected during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes will be provided to the management of my early childhood setting. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant’s Consent

Participant: ___________________________  Date: ___________________________

(Signature)
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

Project Title: An exploration of early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities

Investigators:

Name: Ms. Rachel Chapman
Qualification: Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Hons.)
Currently undertaking PhD in Education at RMIT University
Contact details: [redacted]

Name: [redacted]
Position: Associate Professor
Contact details: [redacted] or phone - [redacted]

Dear ________________.

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

Who is involved in this research project? Why is it being conducted?

The purpose of this research is to gather early child educators’ experiences with gender equity programs and their understandings of the development of gender identity. This research is being conducted by Ms. Rachel Chapman, as part of her PhD in Education (Early Childhood) at RMIT University. [redacted] is her supervisor and will be supervisory investigator. This research project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Training.

Why have you been approached?

The participants of this research will consist of early childhood educators from kindergartens across Melbourne. In addition the research is examining the Early Years Learning Framework. You have been approached as you played an integral role in the development of the framework content.

What is the project about? What are the questions being addressed?

The research aims to discover ways to assist educators in fostering an environment that will provide children with equal opportunities to develop an understanding of themselves, in the context of gender-related pressures that occur in the outside world.
The primary research question is:

- How do early childhood educators’ views on children's gender identity impact on practice and influence children's sense and understanding of gender identity?

To answer this question, the research will be examining the Early Years Learning Framework in relation to the content that it provides about children’s gender identity.

This research is expected to have 2 participants that were involved in the development of the EYLF.

**If I agree to participate, what will I be required to do?**

If you agree to participate in the research project you will be asked to be a part of an individual interview. This will be conducted mid-2016 and take place over Skype, at your own university or at a place of mutual convenience.

The interview will be 50 minutes in length. In it you will be asked about the process behind developing the Early Years Learning Framework. The questions will be on the content about children's sense of identity, with a large focus on gender identity.

**What are the possible risks or disadvantages?**

It is highly unlikely that there will be any risks to any participants in this research. In the event that you do not wish to answer a question/s asked in the interview please inform the investigator and they will skip the question/s. Your responses throughout the research will be available to you on request.

**What are the benefits associated with participation?**

The results of the research will be analysed and presented in a thesis. The thesis will be shared with participants once research is complete. The benefits of being involved in the research may include an increased awareness of the role and influence that an educator plays in the area of children's gender identity.

**What will happen to the information I provide?**

It is important that you are aware that you *may* be identifiable as you are part of a small group of individuals who assisted in developing the content for the EYLF.

Despite this, the data collected during the research (such as the transcripts of the interviews and focus groups) can be coded at your request. The transcripts would use codes instead of names, so that your privacy is protected. This continues in the thesis, in which all results would be presented in code.

Only the two investigators will have access to the data collected. The research process will be monitored by the supervisory investigator to ensure that all research is completed appropriately. All recorded and research data will be stored securely at RMIT for 5 years and will then be destroyed. Any information that you provide can be disclosed only if (1) it is to protect you or others from harm, (2) if specifically required or allowed by law, or (3) you provide the researchers with written permission.
The results from the research will be published as a thesis. This thesis will be stored in the RMIT Repository, which is a publicly accessible online library of research papers. The thesis will remain online.

**What are my rights as a participant?**

- The right to withdraw from participation at any time
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- The right to refuse to answer questions
- The right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed, provided it can be reliably identified, and provided that so doing does not increase the risk for the participant.
- The right to be de-identified in any photographs intended for public publication, before the point of publication
- The right to have any questions answered at any time.

**Whom should I contact if I have any questions?**

In the event that you have any questions or concerns, please contact the investigators via email at [redacted].

Yours sincerely,

Ms. Rachel Chapman
Bachelor of Early Childhood (Hons.)

Associate Professor, RMIT University

If you have any concerns about your participation in this project, which you do not wish to discuss with the researchers, then you can contact the Ethics Officer, Research Integrity, Governance and Systems, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476V VIC [redacted].
Consent Form

1. I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the information sheet.

2. I agree to participate in the research project as described.

3. I agree:
   - to participate in a focus group with three other educators
   - to be interviewed three times during the year
   - that my voice will be audio recorded.

4. I acknowledge that:
   
   (a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied (unless follow-up is needed for safety).
   
   (b) The project is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
   
   (c) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
   
   (d) The security of the research data will be protected during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes will be provided to the management of my early childhood setting. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant’s Consent

Participant: __________________________ Date: __________________________

(Signature)
Sample questions for semi-structured focus groups with early childhood educators

The focus group will be semi-structured therefore the questions may be addressed in a different sequence for each focus group. In addition, they are likely to follow different interest directions and will therefore include questions that cannot be anticipated here.

1. The focus group will start with an introduction for the researcher and each member of the group. They would share how long they have been teaching in the early childhood field and the types of experience they have had in the early childhood sector. The researcher will then outline the goal of the focus group, what will be discussed and explain the session rules (ie. Everyone will get a chance to share their opinions, etc.)

2. What do you believe is a child’s sense of identity and what is included in this?

3. Participants will be asked to bring in an artefact that symbolises ‘sense of identity’ to them.

4. Why have you chosen this artefact to bring today? How does it symbolise ‘sense of identity’ to you?

5. How do you believe that we can help children to develop a positive sense of identity in early childhood programs?

6. Participants will be asked to examine the ‘sense of identity’ outcome in the Early Years Learning Framework prior to the focus group.

7. How helpful do you find the EYLF to be when planning for children’s ‘sense of identity’?

8. What, if anything, would you like to be added or expanded on in the ‘sense of identity’ outcome in the EYLF?

9. Four scenarios in early childhood settings (general identity then gender identity related) will be shared and participants will be asked how they would respond to the situations.

10. Review purpose of focus group (to gather educators’ views on children’s ‘sense of identity’) and ask if there are further points any participants would like to make.

11. Thanks and goodbyes.
Sample questions for semi-structured interviews with early childhood educators

These interviews will be semi-structured therefore the questions may be addressed in a different sequence for each interview. In addition, the interviews are likely to follow different interest directions and will therefore include questions that cannot be anticipated here. The first interview will consist of mostly these questions and the subsequent two interviews will revisit the questions asked and topics discussed in the first interview.

1. How do you believe that children develop their gender identity?

2. What do you believe is the educators’ role in the development of children’s gender identities?

3. What type of gender equity program is implemented in your setting, if any and why?

4. What is your setting’s team approach to gender identity in children?

5. Have you faced any challenges from peers in relation to gender identity in children or gender equity, if so what has happened?

6. Have you faced any challenges from families in relation to gender identity in children or gender equity, if so what has happened?

7. What support and guidance do you believe would be helpful to you in providing a gender equity program in your setting?

Educators will be asked to bring in an artefact that symbolises their personal development of gender identity.

8. How does your artefact link to your personal development of gender identity?

9. Where do you believe that your understanding of gender identity has come from?

10. What are your earliest memories of being aware of gender roles?

11. Did you ever feel forced into certain gender roles, and if so, by whom/what?

12. Can you recall any significant scenarios that you feel may have helped to develop your understanding of gender?
Sample questions for semi-structured interviews with Early Years Learning Framework participants

The interview will be semi-structured therefore the questions may be addressed in a different sequence for each interview. In addition, the interviews are likely to follow different interest directions and will therefore include questions that cannot be anticipated here.

1. How did you become involved in developing content for the EYLF?

2. What was your role in the development of the EYLF?

3. What was the strategy used when selecting content to be included in the EYLF?

4. How were the five learning outcomes developed?

5. How was the learning outcome ‘sense of identity’ developed?

6. How were the strategies for meeting the five learning outcomes developed?

7. What process was used to determine which development areas were supported with strategies?

8. In your ‘Insider Perspectives on developing Belonging, Being and Becoming’ article from 2009, you discussed areas in which you would speak ‘in code’ and were using words that may appear innocuous to politicians but would have an impact in the early childhood sector. For which content areas did you use this technique?

9. In the article, you also mentioned that there was substantial toning down of potentially controversial ideas and alluded to the political toning down of diversity and equity. What was initially stated about this topic and what changes were made?

10. Why was gender included under the ‘sense of identity’ outcome?

11. What research informed this inclusion?

12. Why does the EYLF not provide strategies for gender identity?

13. What were the next stages in developing the EYLF once you completed your role?

14. If you were developing the content for the framework again, how would you phrase the diversity and equity (possibly others if discussed in interview) content so that it might be included?
Follow-up questionnaire questions

1. What is your name?

2. What pseudonym would you like me to use for you in my research?

3. What is your age?

4. Do you have any children? If yes, what are their ages?

5. What qualifications do you have in early childhood education?

6. What did you think of your Grad Dip/Bachelor of Education/Teaching, how it was delivered and the content that it delivered? (No need for the name of the uni, just general details)

7. Did your Bachelor/Grad Dip teach you about the EYLF and what importance did it place on it? If not, why? (ie. undertook course before it was implemented, etc./not in Australia)

8. How many years have you worked in early childhood? Describe your work history here.

9. What studies, if any, have you done in the area of gender development?

10. Have you had any thoughts about gender since our interview that you think would be relevant to my research?

11. Is there anything else you think I should know?
I am pleased to advise that your application has been granted ethics approval by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network as a sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Terms of approval:

1. **Responsibilities of investigator**
   It is the responsibility of the above investigator/s to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by the CHEAN. Approval is only valid whilst the investigator/s holds a position at RMIT University.

2. **Amendments**
   Approval must be sought from the CHEAN to amend any aspect of a project including approved documents. To apply for an amendment please use the ‘Request for Amendment Form’ that is available on the RMIT website. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from CHEAN.

3. **Adverse events**
   You should notify HREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

4. **Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF)**
   The PICF and any other material used to recruit and inform participants of the project must include the RMIT university logo. The PICF must contain a complaints clause including the project number.

5. **Annual reports**
   Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report. This form can be located online on the human research ethics web page on the RMIT website.

6. **Final report**
   A final report must be provided at the conclusion of the project. CHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

7. **Monitoring**
   Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by HREC at any time.

8. **Retention and storage of data**
   The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

In any future correspondence please quote the project number and project title.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network I wish you well in your research.

Research and Ethics Officer
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University
Dear Ms Chapman

Thank you for your application of 2 June 2015 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian early childhood settings titled An exploration of early childhood educators’ views on children’s gender identities.

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Training.

2. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from centre directors. This is to be supported by the Department of Education and Training approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.

3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee, must be submitted to the Department of Education and Training for its consideration before you proceed.

4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.

5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education Training in any publications arising from the research.

6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study’s indicative completion date.
I wish you well with your research. Should you have further questions on this matter, please contact [redacted], Project Support Officer, Insights and Evidence Branch, by telephone on [redacted] or by email at [redacted]

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

A/Director
Insights and Evidence Branch

20/08/2015
Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN)
Sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

Notice of Approval

Date: 21 April 2017

Project number: CHEAN

Project title: An Exploration of Early Childhood Educators’ Views on Children’s Gender Identities

Risk classification: Low Risk

Investigator: Ms Rachel Chapman

Approved: From: 21 April 2017 To: 5 April 2018

I am pleased to advise that your amendment request has been granted ethics approval by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network (CHEAN), as a sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The CHEAN approves the replacement of follow-up interviews of recruited participants with online interviews.

Terms of approval:

1. Responsibilities of investigator
   It is the responsibility of the above investigator/s to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by the CHEAN. Approval is only valid whilst the investigator/s holds a position at RMIT University.

2. Amendments
   Approval must be sought from the CHEAN to amend any aspect of a project including approved documents. To apply for an amendment please use the ‘Request for Amendment Form’ that is available on the RMIT website. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from CHEAN.

3. Adverse events
   You should notify HREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

4. Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF)
   The PICF and any other material used to recruit and inform participants of the project must include the RMIT university logo. The PICF must contain a complaints clause including the project number.

5. Annual reports
   Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report. This form can be located online on the human research ethics web page on the RMIT website.

6. Final report
   A final report must be provided at the conclusion of the project. CHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

7. Monitoring
   Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by HREC at any time.

8. Retention and storage of data
   The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

Please quote the project number and project title in any future correspondence.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network, I wish you well in your research.

DSC CHEAN Secretary
RMIT University
A case study of gendered play in preschools: how early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influence children's play

Rachel Chapman

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A case study of gendered play in preschools: how early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influence children’s play

Rachel Chapman
School of Education, The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

ABSTRACT
This research aimed to explore children’s play in relation to gender stereotypes and beliefs and practices of educators in preschool settings. A feminist poststructuralist approach framed the design of the research and data were collected in two settings through predetermined categories of play during periods of spontaneous free play. The question asked in this research was, do early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influence children’s play? Findings suggest that there were differences between these two settings and these differences are explained through individual beliefs and practices of the educators.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 May 2015
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KEYWORDS
Gender; early childhood education; educators’ perceptions; stereotypes

Introduction
This research aimed to explore early childhood settings in relation to how gender roles might be displayed or supported without the educator being aware. It examines how educators’ potentially influence where children play, what children play with and how they engage in the play. A feminist poststructuralist approach was taken for this research. Research has revealed that gender is a complex and sensitive area, with a wide range of opinions on how it is formed in individuals and the role it plays in society. It is argued that a consistent and child-oriented early childhood education is important to children’s growth and development, and that educators play a pivotal role in supporting this when they establish physical and social environments that do not implicitly or explicitly encourage gender stereotypes.

Gender is defined as the social division of femininity and masculinity (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Differences in gender roles become evident in children at a young age. Maccoby (1988) and Whiting and Edwards (1988) suggest that by the time boys and girls are three years old they show different communicative styles, participate in different activities, play more with same-sex peers and avoid peers of the opposite sex. While it is widely recognised that gender exists, there is a broad difference of opinion on the importance of addressing the gendering of children’s identities.

Common views may range:

from the view that gender doesn’t matter to young children, through a sense that good early childhood practice produces equity for all, to beliefs that pursuing gender equity compromises partnerships with parents and clashes with multicultural perspectives in early childhood. (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 1)

These views do not consider the impact and limitations that gender can place on a child’s sense of identity. Society has linked the division of people into males and females so closely with our understanding of identity that it is generally understood as a fact rather than something we have learned to see as natural (Davies, 2003). This research utilised a feminist poststructuralist approach to gender formation to deconstruct a discourse of gender that questions the necessity of gender roles in
contemporary society. The use of such an approach allows the researcher to critically analyse societal practices and question the relevance of these practices in our societal context. The segregation of males and females through constrictive gender roles, dictated by earlier work demands, like hunting and gathering, has become redundant. We must recognise gender formation in a context that is relevant.

This research was conducted in two preschool settings located in Melbourne, Australia. In each setting two educators and one class of four-year-olds were participants. Educators were interviewed about their views on play and gender, and the children were observed playing. The observations were carried out to gain an understanding of the types of play that the children in each setting engaged in, as well as noting the number of males and females engaging in stereotypically gendered play. Analysis was conducted using the stereotypical categories outlined in research conducted by Harten, Olds, and Dollman (2008), Twarek and George (1994), Tonyan and Howes (2003), Oncu and Unluer (2010), Kristensen (2006), and Rekers (1975).

The study examined the influence that educators’ values, perceptions and actions can have on children’s play, particularly how ideas of gender roles are manifested. The research gives an account of practices within the educational setting and presents a review of relevant research literature, describes the research and reports on findings that suggest that these educators did, unknowingly, support the children’s social interactions and stereotypical gendered play in the early childhood setting. The question addressed in this paper is, do early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender influence children’s play?

Literature review

A common belief through the lens of feminist poststructuralism is that gender inequalities exist because we live in a society that has dominant ideas about the correct way to be male and female (Blaise, 2005; MacNaughton, 1996, 1998). Normalising gender discourses can problematise children’s choices in taking up different gendered performances and activities (Robinson & Davies, 2007). Society has linked the division of people into males and females so closely with our understanding of identity that it is generally understood as a fact rather than something we have learned to see as natural (Davies, 2003). The societal binary of masculine and feminine can be extremely limiting and it is important that individuals, particularly those in a position of authority with children, recognise this gender binary. The desired result is that rather than society being coerced and guided by predefined notions of gender, all social ways of being and relating and gender activities would be available to all people (Alloway, 1995). The research literature that is relevant to this paper has examined the question of gender formation and the impact of stereotypes on gender formation, young children and play and the experience of gender in educational settings.

Gender formation

Oakley (1993) explains that sex is the ‘biological differences between male and female’, whereas gender is ‘a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into “masculine” and “feminine”’ (p. 16). Gender is a societal process that begins at birth (MacNaughton, 2000) and then expands and develops with the child (Snowman et al., 2009). Yelland and Grieshaber (1998) suggest that in some societies it is ‘the major status indicator’ (p. 1). Weigman (2006) posits that gender is ‘made and remade according to the political desire that seeks it in the first place’ (p. 99). Blaise (2005) suggests that societies’ desire for acceptable gender roles extends to the preschool classroom. She proposes that changes should be made to the structured view of gender, stating that ‘non-oppressive gender order can only come about through a radical change in our conventional notions of understanding gender’ (p. 86).

In the 1990s, the approach to gender changed from a focus on the sex-role socialisation theory to an emergence of feminist postmodern and poststructuralist pedagogies (Hogan, 2012; Skelton &
Francis, 2005) which asserts that people can and should ultimately form their own gender identity (MacNaughton, 2000). MacNaughton (2001) explains that with this change of approach, researchers began to focus on developing ‘an understanding of how gender is understood and practised in specific domains of learning’ (p. 22). She suggests that these studies helped to provide ‘strong evidence that children’s living and learning is deeply affected by the gendered limits children place on themselves and others’ (p. 23).

Creaser and Dau (1996, p. 2) suggest that children are quite aware of gender, cultural, racial and physical differences. In relation to gender, they explain that ‘children aged between two and five years have been documented commenting on and asking questions about gender differences’ (p. 3). In fact, children as young as one-and-a-half have been documented selecting roles that are viewed as appropriate for their gender (Rainey & Rust, 1999). MacNaughton (2000) explains that ‘young children have a deep knowledge of the perceived rules about gender in society’ (p. 32). Blaise (2007) believes that ‘how children are showing and telling us what they know about gender is in the strategies that they use to regulate gender amongst themselves’ (p. 31).

One common belief is that gender inequalities exist because we live in a society that has dominant ideas about the correct way to be male and female (MacNaughton, 1996, 1998). This belief produces a ‘gender order’ where some ideas are seen to be better and more right than others (MacNaughton, 1998), creating inequalities and segregation. Without a gender order, or correct way to be male and female, these inequalities would not exist (MacNaughton, 1998). Normalising gender discourses can problematise children’s choices in taking up different gendered performances and behaviours as children may not fit completely into the dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity (MacNaughton, 1998; Robinson & Davies, 2007).

Some feminist poststructuralists believe that children learn their gender by positioning themselves inside the masculine and feminine discourses that are available to them in our society (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Davies, 2003; MacNaughton, 1996). Despite this, in the event that an adult tries to convince the child masculinity and femininity have differing meanings, the child tends to ignore what does not fit with the current understanding of gender discourses they have developed (MacNaughton, 1998). This supports the need for carefully crafted gender equity plans for early childhood educators that address not only the resources provided to the children but also language, agency, subjectivity, discourse and power (Halim & Linder, 2013; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001; Ebbeck, 1998). It is believed that learning gender is an ongoing struggle by children to interpret and make sense of the messages around them (Davies, 1989; MacNaughton, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990), and that early childhood educators need to engage actively in this struggle with them (MacNaughton, 1998). It is important for educators to help children to deconstruct their gender binaries.

**Stereotypes on gender formation and children’s play**

Turner-Bowker (1996) defines stereotypes as ‘learned, widely shared, and socially validated, general beliefs about categories of individuals’; she suggests that they are often inaccurate but ‘are widely shared as truth and very powerful’ (p. 461). These ‘powerful truths’ can be present from early childhood as the early childhood years can be seen as a highly sensitive and influential time where children begin to understand themselves and the world around them (Davies, 1989). It is also a time when children begin to recognise and adhere to gender roles. Aina and Cameron (2011) stress that the early childhood years are a ‘critical period’ for combating gender stereotypes (p. 11). This is particularly important as gender stereotypes can be limiting to a child’s emotional growth and development (Narahara, 2000) as children may internalise messages about negative or rigid stereotypes that place boundaries on the child and how they should act.

Gender stereotypes are present and prevalent in children’s play (Boldt, 1996; Wohlwend, 2011). Research into children’s play outlines what is considered to be stereotyped play differences of boys and girls, or gendered play. Harten, Olds, and Dollman (2008) suggest that boys are more
active than girls and that they rely on ‘space-using standardised games, such as football, and [that] they occupy more space than girls during free play’ (p. 386). They also believe that boys are more competitive, exclusive, play in large groups and that ‘good players tend to dominate’ (p. 387), whereas Twak and George (1994) suggest that girls tend to ‘be more inclusive and co-operative’ than boys, and engage in ‘passive, small-group games which use less space’ (pp. 1–2).

Tonyan and Howes (2003) completed a study on children from 192 randomly selected childcare centres across Florida, USA. From their research they concluded amongst children aged 37 months and older, boys were more likely to engage in gross-motor-skill activities than ‘creative activities, language art activities, high-level adult involvement, and activities involving manipulatives’ (p. 138). They also discovered that girls in this age group were more likely to become engaged in ‘creative clusters’ in comparison to ‘gross-motor clusters’ or activities. Oncu and Unluer (2010) conducted a study on 40 children selected from four preschools in Kocaeli, Turkey. They observed children engaging in creative play, noting which materials were selected by the children and how they were used. They found that girls ‘tend to play with real objects’ or ‘household devices’ (p. 4459) more often than boys.

Kristensen (2006) completed a study into dramatic play of six-year-olds and the effects of gender difference on how it is carried out. He studied 16 girls and 16 boys recording their dramatic play and analysing it based on various dramatic elements. He found that the boys often extended their play space beyond the set area, using the props to create diverse situations, and that they would predetermine their roles while the girls tended to keep their dramatic play closer to the set area, developing their storyline around the props and surroundings that were already present. Relationship building and family themes were common in the girls’ play.

Rekers (1975) studied cross-gender play among a group of five- to eight-year-old boys. The results of the study found that whilst observed directly, the boys engaged in masculine or ‘appropriate’ play (p. 140) but when left alone in the play room, all children engaged in predominantly feminine play. Herbert and Stipek (2005) states that children intuitively understand their parents’ and teachers’ gender-related beliefs and expectations and this can impact on the way they view their own gender identities.

Research is frequently conducted into reducing stereotyped gender roles to develop gender equity (Coffey & Acker, 1991; Freeman, 2007; Karniol & Gal-Disegni, 2009), examining the importance of ‘building pedagogies that challenge sexism’ that can increase children’s chances of learning and living more fully’ (MacNaughton, 2000, p. 23). Karniol and Gal-Disegni completed a study in two first grade classrooms about gender stereotypes in readers. They provided one setting with ‘gender-stereotyped’ readers and the other setting with ‘gender-fair’ readers. They then showed the children a mix of activities and asked if they were appropriate for males or females. They discovered that the children who had the ‘gender-fair’ readers suggested more activities were appropriate for males and females, whereas the children given the ‘gender-stereotyped’ readers assigned most activities to either male or female. This enforces the idea that it is important to actively counter gender-stereotyped materials in the early childhood setting.

**Gender and educational settings**

In Australia, the early childhood education programme is being progressively advanced through the addition of a new national Framework for early childhood, the early years learning framework (EYLF) (DE&T, 2010). The framework was designed to provide children aged birth to eight years of age a consistent start regardless of their socio-economic background or the type of prior-to-school setting they attended (Docket, 2009). The framework has a strong focus on identity; however it seems to skip over the area of gender equity (DE&T, 2010). The EYLF only mentions gender in the introductory paragraph about identity. The framework aims to cater for children’s identities through multiple methods; however the solutions for supplying children with gender equality seem to ignore gender differences and identity.
As reported in the literature review, research suggests that early childhood settings can represent highly gendered environments (Alloway, 1995). Considering the highly gendered environment in early childhood settings, it becomes important for educators to consider the ways in which their practices might be encouraging or discouraging children’s participation in the programme (Tonyan & Howes, 2003).

Every educator has individual experiences and beliefs surrounding the concept of gender (Riddell, 2005; Scott & Morrison, 2005). The variance in responses and perceptions may contain ‘the essence of gender bias based on deep-seated values and stereotypes’ (Snowman et al., 2009, p. 126). Eckes and Trautner (2000) believe that boys and girls receive different treatment from educators, suggesting that this is due to ‘a complicated pattern of teacher expectations and children’s preferences’ (p. 76). Fagot and Patterson (1969) observed two preschool classrooms and found that the educators gave boys and girls ‘different amounts of feedback’ (Eckes & Trautner, 2000, p. 77). They discovered that educators were most likely to interact with children when they were engaging in art activities and indoor table play, and not when they were engaged in construction or outdoor experiences. They also noted that it was mainly girls engaging in the art and indoor table play, and consequently the boys received less feedback.

Ewing and Taylor (2009) believe that educators ‘have gender-typed expectations for children’s behaviour in the classroom and differentially reward and punish boys’ and girls’ behaviours in accordance with these expectations’ (p. 93). Fagot (1977) found that educators often praised boys for engaging in traditionally male activities and tended to criticise them for doing stereotypically feminine activities. Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, and Roberts (2005) completed a study into educators’ understanding of and commitment to gender equity in the early childhood setting. They explored educators’ feelings about their ability to intervene in gender equity and their reliance on socialisation theory in gender-related practice. They found a tendency towards a sense of fatalism, in which educators felt helpless towards creating change in children’s concept of gender. This fatalism discourages many educators from working towards gender equity (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). Another influencing factor is that the majority of educators in early childhood are female (Saluja, Early, & Clifford, 2002). This might also influence the way in which educators interact with the children (Ewing & Taylor, 2009).

**Research**

**Theoretical framework**

A feminist poststructuralist approach was taken in the development of the research project and a feminist poststructuralist lens was applied to the analysis of the data collected. The research was qualitative interpretive and examined individuals’ theories and experience in-depth and therefore was subjective in nature. The data were used to theorise children’s play activities and were used to frame the data analysis. This is a view of gender as a socially constructed concept and allows for a feminist method of critique and analysis as the practice of gender is seen to be a result of the relational and mediational influence of the historical, cultural and social environment of the child.

**Methods**

**Participant – preschool teachers**

There were a total of 43 participants in the study. They consisted of two preschool teachers, two assistant teachers and 39 four- and five-year-old children. The subjects were selected from two preschool settings located in differing socio-economic neighbourhoods of Melbourne, Victoria. Preschools were chosen as they offer consistent attendance and hours, so children were likely to be familiar with each other, thus ensuring that the results were as consistent as possible.
Participant – researcher
Research was conducted from July 2010 to September 2010 by one researcher. Each setting was visited for two days. During this time the researcher interviewed the preschool teacher and assistant teacher on a range of aspects of children’s play as well as the impact that gender has on how play is carried out in their settings. The researcher also spent two sessions observing the children at play and tabulating this. Notes were taken on the types of play children engaged in, whether the children were male or female and which experiences were frequently used.

Settings
Setting One. Setting One is a sessional preschool located in a predominately upper class suburb in Melbourne’s south east. Setting One is community based, with most decisions being made by a committee of families, but is managed by a not-for-profit organisation. The setting also has a director who works directly with the families. The four- to five-year-old session is run by two educators, one of whom is also the director. The session consists of 26 children, of whom 22 were involved in this research.

Setting Two. Setting Two is a not-for-profit childcare centre and preschool located in a predominately working class area with middle- to low-income families. It is located in a culturally diverse suburb located in inner city Melbourne. Setting Two is community based, depending on active involvement from families in all areas, including policy planning. The four- to five-year-old session is run daily by two educators. The programme offers both indoor and outdoor play for the majority of the session. The session consists of 22 children, of whom 17 were involved in this research.

Data collection
A qualitative approach to data collection was taken. Semi-structured interviews of the educators and observations of the children were used to collect data. Data were analysed through the perspective of the feminist poststructuralist approach, which meant looking for trends in the research that support the idea that educators’ perceptions of children’s play will be observed in their actions which in turn is a way of articulating their own theories of children and children’s play. This included examining educators’ perceptions by sorting the observations into gendered or non-gendered play types. The play was split into categories based on predefined definitions of what is considered to be stereotypical male play and stereotypical female play (Harten, Olds, & Dollman, 2008; Kristensen, 2006; Oncu & Unluer, 2010; Rekers, 1975; Tonyan & Howes, 2003; Twarek & George, 1994). The data collected were analysed by setting, and then the observations were compared against the responses from the educators in that setting. The researcher looked for trends that occurred in the educators’ responses, in particular ideas that were repeated across settings and how these linked with the data collected from the observations. Whilst predominantly qualitative data were utilised in this research project, the research used descriptive quantitative data in order to capture the types and frequency of play occurring at each setting.

Observations of the children. For each interaction the researcher included the sex of the child or children involved and what they were doing, and then later considered how it contradicted or conformed to gender stereotyped play. The observations were measured based on the frequency of each experience, noting the number and the sex of the children engaged. This data were then collated and presented in a table, differentiating between indoor and outdoor play.

The play types were based on the stereotypical categories outlined in the literature of this paper as outlined in the previous section. Based on that research, stereotypical boy play was defined as gross-motor activities (Tonyan & Howes, 2003), dramatic play involving few props (Oncu & Unluer, 2010) and a large play space and ball games (Twarek & George, 1994). It was also considered to be active and physical experiences (Harten, Olds, & Dollman, 2008) and larger group experiences.
Stereotypical girl play was defined as dramatic play with family themes (Kristensen, 2006), creative activities, language art activities, manipulatives or sensory play (Tonyan & Howes, 2003), and small group games (Twarek & George, 1994). Play that did not fit into these categories was considered to be non-stereotyped activities.

Observations were documented in a table split into three columns, listed by the types of play (stereotypical boy play, stereotypical girl play and non-stereotyped play). All observations were anonymous. For each interaction, the sex of the child or children involved and what they were doing were documented, and then later analysed for how they contradicted or conformed to the predefined research parameters of gender-stereotyped play. The observations were measured based on the frequency of each experience, the environment and noted the number and the sex of the children engaged. This data were then collated and presented in a table, differentiating between indoor and outdoor play.

**Interviews with educators.** The questions ranged from the educators’ general background and history to questions about gender and play. The specific topics addressed were:
- the value of play;
- play observed and encouraged in their setting;
- the educator’s role in the children’s play including intervention and support;
- current interests in the setting;
- perceptions of ‘typical’ boy and girl play;
- how gender affects their planning;
- opinions about how a child’s gender affects their play;
- gender-related issues observed in children’s play;
- opinions on the importance of gender in their setting.

**Data processing**
Once the results for each setting were collected, they were then compared, contrasted and analysed, looking for correlations between the educators’ perceptions and the amount and types of gendered play in each setting, taking into account the social environment and diversity of each preschool. The experience of the educators was considered, taking into account variables in the length and type of training, such as tertiary or vocational, and years of experience. The data were presented in a case study format, documenting the information through the use of quotes as well as displayed visually through tables and charts.

**Data and findings**
Within each setting, data from the observations of children and responses from the educators’ interviews are presented. The observations are summarised in tables. Each unit within a table represents one child engaging in a particular experience. In the case that children played in pairs or groups, they have still been represented individually. The main points and opinions from the interviews with the educators have been summarised, quoted, paraphrased and discussed in the sections below.

**Setting One**

**Frequency and type of children’s play**
Thirteen girls and 11 boys from Setting One participated in this research. Their play was observed and recorded. Below is a table depicting the type and frequency of their play indoors and outdoors. This is followed by a summary of the data collected.
Indoors
Summary of data. Children in Setting One spent the majority of time indoors engaged in art experiences, construction experiences and sensory play. The art experiences included drawing, painting, collage and constructing with boxes. Both boys and girls engaged in the experiences; however a significant number of girls returned repeatedly. The construction experiences included Lego, small blocks and big blocks. Children built castles, trains, cars and houses. Both boys and girls engaged in the use of the Lego and small blocks. Only boys used the large blocks. Sensory play included play dough, clay and slime. A large number of girls engaged in all of the sensory experiences and a few boys explored the slime. Other activities included puzzles, books, imaginative play with puppets and dramatic play in a post office environment (Table 1).

The play was detailed and the children changed experiences frequently. Children played both individually and in groups. Groups mostly consisted of boys playing together or girls playing together. In a few instances girls and boys played together. These included collage and drawing.

Outdoors
Summary of data. Children in Setting One spent the majority of time outdoors engaged in dramatic play, climbing equipment and running. The dramatic play consisted mainly of props, such as dress-up costumes. A number of children dressed up as bats or princesses. Some children also engaged in family scenarios, acting the part of mother or baby. This play was engaged in by girls and boys; however the girls only participated in the princess or family play. The boys participated in the bat play and family play. The climbing equipment included climbing frames, ladders, slides and monkey bars. The climbing equipment and running were frequented by both girls and boys. Other activities included exploring plants to find snails, bikes, sand pit/dirt patch and use of the swing set (Table 2).

The play was detailed and the children spent a long time at some experiences and less time at others. Children played both individually and in groups. Groups mostly consisted of boys playing together or girls playing together. During a few instances of play on the climbing equipment, girls and boys played together.

Setting Two
Frequency and type of children’s play
Seven girls and 10 boys from Setting Two participated in this research. Their play was observed and recorded. Below is a table depicting the type and frequency of their play. This is followed by a summary of the data collected.

Indoors
Summary of data. Children in Setting Two spent the majority of time indoors engaged in dramatic play and art experiences. The dramatic play centred around the workforce, namely running a café. There was also some dramatic play about working in a post office. The art experiences mainly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art experiences</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book area</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction experiences</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puzzle table</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic play</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative play</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensory play</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
focused on the theme of money and included painting, drawing, cutting, box construction and tracing. Other activities included puzzles, a dollhouse, book area and threading (Table 3).

The play was detailed and the children generally remained at the same experiences for lengthy periods of time. Children played both individually and in groups. Groups often consisted of boys and girls playing together.

Outdoors

Summary of data. Children in Setting Two spent the majority of time outdoors engaged in construction and dramatic play. The construction included the use of large blocks, Lego and some building in the sandpit with smaller blocks and buckets. This play was mainly engaged in by boys and mostly in groups. The dramatic play consisted of train trips on the climbing equipment, families with babies, spaceships and cooking in the kitchen. This play was engaged in by a mix of boys and girls. The play was mostly in groups with some occurrence of individual play. Other activities included letter writing, sand pit, water play, painting, musical instruments and the book corner (Table 4).

The play was detailed and the children generally remained in the same experiences for lengthy periods of time. Children played both individually and in groups. The groups were often separate with boys engaging in one experience while girls engaged in a different one. However in some instances boys and girls did play together. These included drawing and dramatic play.

Discussion of educators’ perceptions

In this discussion quotes from the educators in the two settings are provided to illustrate the findings from the interviews conducted in each setting. Each preschool session is run by two educators, who

Table 2. Frequency of indoor experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Art experiences</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book area</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction experiences</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puzzle table</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic play</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginative play</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Frequency of outdoor experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bikes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climbing equipment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandpit/dirt patch</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic play</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other includes: Exploring plants to find snails.

Table 4. Frequency of outdoor experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art/writing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climbing equipment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandpit/dirt patch</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic play</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other includes: Musical instruments and book corner.
play different roles within the setting. These roles include planning, choosing resources, setting up experiences and encouraging play. Tonyan and Howes (2003) believe that it is important to examine the way that educators’ perceptions and practices might be ‘encouraging or discouraging participation in activities’ (pp. 138–139). In order to evaluate how the educators’ perceptions of gender influence children’s play, the possible links between these perceptions and what was observed in each setting are considered.

There are a number of ways in which educators’ perceptions may influence children’s play. The educators’ perceptions emerge, and are thus transferred to the children, through their programme planning, resources offered, feedback provided, general interactions with other educators and the children themselves, and, most significantly, the amount of facilitating and involvement in the children’s play. As outlined in this research, children learn and develop understandings through their interactions with society and individuals. Learning gender can be an ongoing struggle by children to interpret and make sense of the messages around them (Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990), and therefore early childhood educators need to engage actively in this struggle with them (MacNaughton, 1998). It is important for educators to help children to deconstruct their gender binaries. Herbert and Stipek (2005) believe that educators’ perceptions and views are ‘in part responsible for gender differences in children’s own beliefs’ (p. 280), which can affect the way that the children interact with each other and engage in play. This discussion will examine significant incidents observed where this appears to have occurred.

Whilst the majority of educators were able to identify a distinction between the categories of typical boy and girl play (Harten, Olds, & Dollman, 2008; Oncu & Unluer, 2010; Kristensen, 2006), their perceptions as to why the different play types occurred varied. This was evident when juxtaposing Setting One and Setting Two. In Setting One the educators believed that these differences in play were caused by biological differences, ‘the nature of the person and how they are born’. It was also evident that this belief affected their planning. Educator A explained that they planned based on children’s interests and that in previous boy-dominant groups they had focused on offering more stereotypical boy play. It could be seen from her response that children in Setting One were provided with opportunities to engage in gendered play. This was evident in observations that showed a large number of boys engaging in physical play and girls engaging in sensory play.

Educator B mirrored the beliefs of Educator A in relation to planning, stating that she would plan the programme differently if there were more children of one sex in the group. Despite stating that they focused on the individual child, Educator B stated that for a boy-heavy group they would ‘plan a little more outside time’ and both educators stated that they would do the opposite for a girl-dominant group. This shows that the educators in Setting One held particular perceptions and beliefs about the play types of males and females. MacNaughton (2000) would describe this as gender bias which she defined as an individual’s method of perceiving others based on gender. MacNaughton, Rolfe, and Siraj-Blatchford (2001) explained that gender bias might involve positive or negative responses to one gender in particular, based on preconceived ideas about what gender entails.

The educators in Setting Two had many commonalities in their responses, as well as articulating other views. Educator C provided an explanation of typical play for boys and girls but Educator D stated that ‘there is no typical girl play and no typical boy play’. Educator C believed that gender had an effect on the children’s play at times, but that it was not always evident in their setting. She explained, however, that they planned for children’s interests. Educator D believed that the boys had higher energy levels, and suggested that this was a biological difference, whereas the girls engaged in a range of experiences. She explained that her planning was aimed at the children’s interests, but that she was also ‘conscious of not applying the [gender] roles’ into the experiences. She aimed to incorporate ‘male and female role models’ into the programme and explained that each experience and play type was for all children. It appears that the educators in Setting Two worked to implement strategies to acknowledge gender issues. As illustrated by the following quote, Educator D explained that she consciously provides ‘non-gender-specific areas for the children’ in her programme, representing all activities as relevant to all children. This could be observed
in the children’s play as both boys and girls in this setting engaged in a wide range of experiences outside of the set stereotypical play parameters.

While educators in both settings focused on the children’s interests, their views on typical play and the reasons behind it influenced the way in which they planned, and thus the way that children played. One example of this can be seen in Setting One. The educators defined typical girl play as ‘drawing, drawing families’ and ‘structured specific play’. Their programme offered a number of structured art activities and the results showed that there was a large difference in the frequency of girls engaging in art experiences to the number of boys. Although both boys and girls participated, a number of girls returned repeatedly to engage in them again. This supported Tonyan and Howes’ (2003) theory about art and language experiences being stereotypical girl play, and also aligned with the educators’ beliefs about what constituted typical girl play.

Another example of the impact of educators’ planning occurred in Setting Two. Many boys participated in dramatic play, while a slightly smaller number of girls took part. Children took on the roles of people in the community, with play scenarios including train trips, families, spaceships or astronauts, and cooking in the kitchen. Both educators in Setting Three noted that dramatic play or ‘role playing’ is an interest of the children and this was evident in the large amount of dramatic play occurring both indoors and outdoors. The dramatic play present in this setting involved many props in addition to family and community scenarios, and this contradicted the research, as Kristensen (2006) and Oncu and Unluer (2010) define this type of dramatic play to be girl type play. The educators’ perceptions in this setting, particularly those of Educator D, would have influenced the way that children are attracted to the experiences in this setting. Educator D’s belief in gender equity led her to make a conscious effort to provide ‘male and female role models’ and thus provide for and encourage all children to engage in the experience.

The educators’ understanding of the causes of typical play is important. If they attribute this solely to biological differences, as stated by the educators in Setting One, then it appears that they are less likely to become involved and challenge children’s understanding of gender. This can be problematic as children’s understanding of their own gender identities can be an ongoing struggle as they attempt to interpret messages from the outside world (Davies, 1989; Walkerdine, 1990). MacNaughton (1998) stressed the importance of early childhood educators engaging actively in this struggle. Educator D referred to biological differences in her interview; however there was a difference in perception to that of Educator A. Educator D brought up biological difference to explain physical differences between children such as energy levels and how this affects play. She did not link gender to biological differences beyond these physical differences and explained that she makes all types of play accessible to all children.

The research results suggest that when educators are aware that typical play may be caused by gender roles or stereotypes, they appear to view situations differently and plan each experience in a way that will be inclusive of children of both sexes. This was shown in the way that the educators planned for and presented the dramatic play experiences in Setting Two. Although ‘gender stereotypes appear to have lessened’ over the years (Ewing & Taylor, 2009, p. 93), it is still important for educators to address these in their programme planning to ensure balanced play options are available for all children in their settings. The impact of educators’ beliefs about the causes of typical play is emphasised as these understandings and beliefs have a direct effect on the way that the educators plan for and interact with the children.

There was a gap in the literature, in relation to gender differences being evident from a young age (Edwards, 1993; Maccoby, 2002) and educators’ feelings about countering gender roles in their settings (Lee-Thomas, Sumsion, & Roberts, 2005). Three of the educators interviewed for this research suggested that gender was not an issue in their setting. These three emphasised a strong focus on the individual child, rather than their sex. They stated that they developed a plan and programme that were based on interests that had become evident in the room. Children’s gendered identities develop with or without educator intervention (MacNaughton, 1998) and problematic understandings of gendered expectations are more likely to occur without intervention (Lynch, 2014). This
focus on the individual, without a focus on gender roles, is likely to influence children’s engagement in gendered play.

The educators differed in their views of their roles in children’s play. While some educators had specific ideas about this role, others felt that their role was to observe, rather than get involved, and they allowed the children to decide what to play. The results indicated that Educator B and Educator D both described themselves as facilitators of play. Setting One and Setting Two displayed differing results, with regards to the children’s indoor and outdoor play.

In Setting One, the majority of boys and girls did not play together indoors or outdoors. In Setting Two, group play that occurred indoors consisted of both girls and boys, while outdoors they tended to separate. This difference could potentially be due to varying levels of involvement of the educators, indoors and outdoors. Fagot and Patterson (1969) found that educators were more likely to interact with children when involved in indoor play, as opposed to outdoor play or construction.

While Educator B and Educator D described themselves as facilitators, the results suggest that the educators’ guidance and involvement had a more noticeable impact in Setting Two. Feminist poststructuralist theory suggests that children develop their understanding of gender roles, and thus gendered play roles, by observing, interacting and modelling those around them as well as the society in which they live (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). This highlights the importance of the educators’ influence on children’s play. Regardless of whether educators actively facilitate play or choose not to get involved, they have the potential to shape children’s understanding of their gender roles.

Implications
Research into this topic revealed that gender is a complex area, with a wide range of opinions on how it is formed in individuals and the role it plays in society. The study design and methodology utilised in this research enabled the researcher to gain personal responses that were valuable to developing an understanding of the social environment and interactions within each setting. It became apparent through this study that early childhood educators’ perceptions of gender do influence children’s play. The social environment and the individuals within it are significant to children’s development and understanding of gender roles. Through face-to-face interviews as well as observations of the children at play, the researcher was able to gain insight into the educators’ perceptions and view of the nature of the children’s play.

The lens chosen for this research has allowed the researcher to observe everyday activities and derive a number of patterns about how children and educators in preschools practice gender. There are implications for educators in how they design their schedules and activities as well as how they facilitate and support children’s participation. This suggests that a reflective role might be encouraged for educators and that this needs to be actively theorised. Such an implication is in keeping with the feminist poststructural approach and the need for more critical research in this area.

There were a number of limitations of this research. The study was unable to determine how much of an influence educators’ perceptions have on children’s play. It was important to consider ethical issues and the factors or variables that could influence the research findings. Confidentiality, consistency and the collection of reliable data were considered throughout the research process. Further research in this area could also address the issue through different theoretical approaches as gender is an all-encompassing topic. A different typology could be developed that was able to give a more nuanced view of children’s play and adult understanding. Also, given the significance of the subject, larger studies with more participants could be beneficial.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Notes on contributor

Rachel Chapman is a lecturer in early childhood education at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. She has been a practitioner in a range of preschools and childcare settings. She is currently completing a Ph.D. on gender development in early childhood education.

References


Excerpt from Focus Group 4 transcript – 5-10 years in the field

RC: I was just going to say that I think the strength of the EYLF is how interlinked all of the different outcomes are. So when you're talking about identity, you almost always bring up community too because it's such a strong part of who we are and where we come from. But also, I can easily see the links between the other outcomes as well. Like having a strong sense of identity is so vital to your sense of well-being-- and obviously, how you learn and how you communicate.

[laughter]

RC: You can't separate them. So I think it's hard to talk about identity without--

EF: As a single--

RC: Yes, as a single thing. I think the outcomes-- I think that is the great thing about it, how interlinked they are. But also when someone asks you to focus on identity-- think about identity for a minute, I'm like, "Yeah, but-- uh--" you know? You can't help but makes those jumps between them. But in terms of the actual outcome itself, specifically the identity, I think-- I clearly love the EYLF because I'm just like, "I think it's great."

[laughter]

RC: But I think it really does a good job of making you think about all those different things, and all those different avenues, the ways to look at it. Talking about how you interact with others, or how you view yourself and your self-identity, I think-- like I said, I don't want to sound like I'm just gushing about how great it is but I genuinely believe that it is broad but also prescriptive enough that it gives you-- yes.

Hazel: So it's broad enough without putting anyone specifically in a box?

RC: Yes. Absolutely yes.

Hazel: And I guess it is. Like they said on the last page, it is inclusive of everyone. It's just adaptable that you can-- what might work for one child to help foster their sense of identity, may not work for another. But that doesn't mean that there's no guide within the framework to say what you could do and how it could be shown. It explicitly states you could do this or you could do this, and they're both still supporting the development of their identity.

Interviewer: That's great, that's great. So what do you feel is the early childhood educator's role or job in terms of promoting a strong sense of identity?

RC: I think it's, more than anything, about time and space. I think if we give the children that, that is where their self-identity comes. Like, we don't need to-- I shouldn't say we don't need to do anything, but I don't think they need anything more than the time and space where they feel comfortable and free to be who they are. I think it's just about being aware that not everyone is the same and give them that opportunity to just be. I think that's really important.

Hazel: I guess it goes without saying as well, it's a safe and secure environment and making sure they're comfortable within the environment and catering for that. And I guess it is also the different personality types. So if you were-- I'm thinking of an example. We used to do a shared lunchtime. So you really put consideration into who will be sitting together at lunch
time-- that you don't put one child with a group of children they never play with because that's not being considerate of their sense of identity and supporting them in what they're doing.

And I guess something else we consider at out preschool is the children's relationships with the staff. We are very aware that not every child will get along with all the staff who teach them. Like a house on fire, there are some that they'll take to better than others. And being aware of that, especially in times if they are upset or they're having a bad day. So, yes.

Interviewer: Thanks for that. What do you think EF?

EF: I think it's so heavily underpinned by relationships. And for me, that underpins all of identity in general. And that, I guess, is closely linked to how-- you were touching on before about how they are so linked, and then it enables us to then take identity and have it flow on. An identity though is to me kind of like the heart, and then you can-- everything flows and leads from it.

Not to say that if you maybe weren't getting on with a child as much as the next child, might not necessarily mean that all those other flowing things don't happen. As long as that child is getting it from another educator.

Hazel: And I guess it's about belonging -- especially in term one, that's what our focus is-- settling everyone in. And you are very aware of what the needs are of all the children, and making sure, "Okay, someone's not coming to kinder happy every day. What's the issue? What's stopping them from feeling comfortable in the environment to be who they want to be?"

EF: How could we support them?

Hazel: Yes.

EF: I wonder if that's why it's outcome one-- not that any of them have ever done.

Hazel: Maybe. Yes.

EF: It always makes me think when I always see the outcome. Without a strong sense of identity, how can we become competent, confident learners? Which I guess is the--

Hazel: Without a strong identity, they don't have that strong sense of belonging. And if they don't have the belonging, nothing else seems to flow on well.

EF: Yes, that's right.

Hazel: Never thought of it like that.
Interview Transcript – EF

Interviewer: My first question is how do you believe that children develop their gender identity?

EF: I think that the gender identity is something that probably begins before you have even been born, and depending on what that looks like for your family. I know people who soon as they found out they're expecting a girl, well, that means the bedroom is a pale pink and all the clothes and everything. Or it can be, we're going to be neutral here, even if we know it's a girl or a boy, and that kind of begins immediately. And obviously the same, I know some people with boys who have gone kind of the blue, the red, the green and probably wouldn't dress their child in anything other than that. It's often, I think, not until a child either enters an early learning service or meets a friend or has an influence that maybe challenges that, so it could either be challenged and, "Oh, wow, girls and boys can wear whatever colours they want." Or it could be, "Oh, you're a girl and you're wearing blue. Only boys wear blue." I see it in the classroom both ways, depending on where you come from. I think it's shaped very, very early on and also society shapes it as well. All it takes card shopping for a first birthday on the weekend.

EF: The cards were terrible. It was either pink ponies for girls or like monsters for boys.

Interviewer: Of course. For a first birthday party?

EF: Yes, for a little girl, for her first birthday, so I ended up getting one with an owl, because it was like, "Well, it could be anyone." [laughter]

Interviewer: Yes.

EF: Ugh, for God's sakes, I was like, "Why, why is this all?" It's like, one side here, one side there, you're a boy, this is your card, you're a girl and this is your card. Kind of that society, that home, and then that influence, I think, that can kind of come from outside. I think that would be my--

Interviewer: At what point do you think that they really start to, I guess, own that identity?

EF: Look, I think-- I had a two-year-old walk into my classroom this morning, they'd popped in for a visit with another teacher. He was in his beautiful skirt and his singlet and we were all having a chat and he was showing us, and the pride in his voice, and all his friends looking and engaging with him. I think it can be very young. I think it's about the time that you start really exploring in general. Obviously, babies begin to explore, and then when you're walking and crawling, and then when you're addressing yourself, or when you're being able to express how you're feeling inside. Gosh, that can be as young-- that can be really young, that can be
like 18 months. Even younger at times, you kind of start showing what you would like. And then, once again, it flips back to that society, because it's only society that really says that girls are the ones that wear skirts, and it's only society that then says, "Oh, but then there's a boy in a skirt. What does that mean?"

EF: I think children start to unpack things when they are very young and possibly it's not until those three, four, five-year-old years where it becomes a bit of a discussion and then judgments start to be made. In the two-year-old classroom, there's not a bat of an eyelid around there. My children and children I've taught in the past have made comments, "Oh, that's not what a boy does." And, "My dad says this.", "You're not meant to have painted toenails, you're a boy." Young and depending on how it's nurtured then depends on how much further it goes.

Interviewer: Yes, absolutely. Thank you for that, that was really good. Well explained. What do you believe is the educator's role in the development of a child's gender identity?

EF: I think, for development, it is providing a plethora of experiences, as well as within our physical environment challenging and maybe providing some provocation around. I remember, back in a class, years ago now, I had a boy who loved ballet, so when we found out he loved the New Zealand World Ballet, we put some pictures up on the wall, things like that. That not only obviously challenged some of the stereotypes within the class for the children but it also really lit a beautiful fire for this child and, "That could be me." I think we have a really important role not only to challenge-- so challenge what is often more of a bias or more of a firm stereotype and also to provoke. It doesn't mean that every boy needs to wear a skirt to understand his gender identity, it is about awareness and being on the same page as a team. We have a philosophy that if children have choice and rights, which they do, then the book is open for all of that exploration and we know we need to be advocates, and I guess, champions for whatever that means for each child.

Interviewer: Yes. Absolutely. Great. Thank you. Okay, what type of gender equity program, either a formal or how you in your setting respond to children gender-wise, is present in your setting, if any?

EF: We use a lot of quite specific resources. We also don't shy away from talking about gender and what it might mean. At the moment, for my class, we're doing a heap of, "What do you have? Do you have a vagina or do you have a penis?" Often, I'm popping my head in the bathroom and there's someone else looking at someone else? You can use that as a bit of a platform to talk a little bit about gender. Sometimes, "Yes, I have a vagina. I'm a girl." And, "And then I saw my dad's--" And I'm like, "What? Great. Tell us about it." Not trying to put it
away, if it's on top for children then we talk about it, talk about what it might look like. I know I was part of a family where my dad did all the cooking, made all the lunches. Duh, duh, duh, duh, duh. That was quite different in my group of friends and it's still quite different with a lot of the conversations that I have with children today. Adding in, "What's happened in your life?" And, "It doesn't always need to be 'X,Y,Z';. What about this?" Using topics, and we use books, we use the internet a heap, we got an iPad in the classroom, if they have questions, often there's really cool resources that can just be tapped into that look at gender. Books, for me, are just number one apart from those conversations, but then, obviously, books lead to conversations so it's kind of this awesome double whammy. When you get a good book, amazing. And that, just provides the base for--

**Interviewer:** Do you have favourites?

**EF:** I have so many favourites, In terms of gender we're reading a really cool one at the moment, I don't know if you've heard of it, it's called Princess Max? It's quite an old book. Puts on his mum's dress and he feels like a princess, and his mum and dad have been calling him Princess Max. He feels amazing. When his older cousin turns up he says, "You're looking weird." And Max gets really upset. He cries and lets his mum know that he doesn't want to wear the dress anymore because it's not going to make him feel good and his cousin doesn't like it. His mum talks to him about how it's about how he feels and when he looks in the mirror who does he see. He's got his teary eyes and he can't really see anything and then he wipes his tears and he's like, "I can see Princess Max." She's like, "There you go. You can be that." He comes back out and everyone-- it's all good. You can see the cousin in the background though of the picture, and I always look at that, and he still doesn't look that amused. However, everyone else comes and dances with him and then that's the end. That's kind of proving, but once again it's kind of what I would describe as classic gender where it's boys doing things. I'd love to get some more of the opposite, of kind of probably like how I grew up as a girl. Nothing was ever off limits and I was off doing all sorts of-- well, whatever I wanted and possibly typically male dominated things on the farm. It would be good to have a few more of those. There are, I guess, but they're just in your everyday books, which is funny. That's a good little bit of reflection there actually.

**Interviewer:** It's true. I guess a lot of the female ones are very much oriented at girls not being put into a box.

**EF:** Yes, I know. There we go. I guess books are pretty cool and some online tools. Possibly, if I was faced with any challenges, then I might construct a bit of a social story or something
like that. We seem to find that those work really well in the class, especially if the social stories are really specific.

**Interviewer:** Can you explain that?

**EF:** Pictures of our own classroom. Here's Jimmy doing this and Alice comes and does this too and duh, duh, duh, duh, duh. We could all learn together, etc, etc. It might look something like that just to subtly-- actually puppets are a really good one too. Puppets and the dolls house figures, we find-- and we're finding this year especially with some children with additional needs, it's a really good way of explaining things and unpacking, especially if it's come up as a negative, to then break it down a little bit and talk about it through puppets or through the little dolls. That's another resource that we use.

**Interviewer:** Awesome. That's great. What is your setting’s team approach? Do you have a team approach to gender? Is that something discussed between--?

**EF:** Gender is something that I don't think is discussed enough, however, because of our process of hiring, our philosophy, it underpins it but it doesn't state it, if that makes sense. For example, I've never once talked about it with a two-year-old teacher that I saw this morning. However, I know that because of her teaching philosophy and the reason why she's part of our team is that she knows that gender is an important facet of our early years, obviously of our life, and that she would be supportive of whatever was coming up for her class. It was actually a good thing to think about and maybe something we could look at adding. We're reviewing our philosophy at the moment so adding in something around what support can look like for gender and for at least having those conversations. That's interesting. It does sometimes go unsaid. I think sometimes too, we live in a beautifully multicultural world and I teach in a very multicultural service, and sometimes culture wise I understand how it can actually be very confronting to see all sorts of things that children often replay and they pretend play, etc, etc. Or the way other families are. However, once again it comes back to that, you're part of our team and we live and breathe that philosophy. Although at your home you might do all the cooking and cleaning and everything for your family as the woman and as the woman's role, that's cool, but here we can talk about that being anyone's role. Everyone's role.

**Interviewer:** Great. Have you faced any challenges from peers in relation to gender identity either at this place you're working at now or previously?

**EF:** No. I've been really lucky so I haven't, in terms of colleagues, come up against anything at all. In fact, nothing but absolute support. Sometimes it's more just, "How could we support that?" And then we go off and do a bit of research or anything like that. But no, I've been
very, very lucky and have taught many beautiful families who have had all sorts of wonderful things going on for them and have never once had anything said by another teacher that I would think, oh, wonder what their view on gender is? No, I've been lucky.

**Interviewer:** That's great. Have you had that from families ever?

**EF:** Yes, I've had it from families. I've had it on multiple occasions now, have been asked, no dress ups for certain boys. "No, I don't want him in a dress. I saw a picture of him in a dress, I don't want that to happen. He came home." It's no families of girls, it's always been families of boys. "He came home and he had paint on his fingernails, no, we don't want that." It's usually been about those quite stereotypical women things, so dresses, painted nails, sometimes paint on lips. We used to have face painting out most days and one little boy particularly loved the red. Red on his lips, wanting to look like mom, all those sorts of things, and dad wasn't happy. Funnily enough, it's never come from a mum, and if it has then it's been said, "My husband isn't happy about that." That was quite interesting.

**Interviewer:** How did you respond to them?

**EF:** The response was we provide a varied curriculum where children have choice. If that is something that you would not like your child to do then you will need to talk to your child at home about that. We just basically put the onus back on families and we made it really clear that we weren't going to prohibit that. I said, in the end, if it's not for things of medical or harm then this is a free space for children to express themselves in a variety of ways, and if that's the way they've chosen to do that then we will support them. We most certainly won't be putting a block there.

**Interviewer:** It's a good response.

**EF:** It's funny, that was a response that I learned at uni many years ago because we taught--part of our studies were on gender and what it can look like in the classroom. We were kind of schooled up on it and then here was me thinking, "That's never going to come up because who really cares?" But no, people do care.

**Interviewer:** Did they respond well to that?

**EF:** There was a few, "Yes, we'll talk to him at home." I was like, "Well, good luck. That's what he wants to do." However, we never had a second come up like, "We talked to him and he's still doing it." We never had any of that so it was kind of the initial, "Huh, we've turned up to pick him up and he's wearing and dress and we're not happy about that." But then there was never a, "Oh, we still see him, he's doing that, or he's--" Duh, duh, duh.

**Interviewer:** Did you notice if the child continued to do it?
**EF:** Yes, definitely. They still were exactly the way that they were. Good for them. If it really came down to it, I would be more than happy to just help a child out of their dress up before their parent came but it never had to come to that so that was good.

**Interviewer:** Excellent. What support and guidance do you believe would be helpful to you in providing a gender equity program in your setting?

**EF:** Possibly like a pack. The government puts out heaps in terms of -- or the Department of Education and Training puts out heaps to support kindergartens, for a start, and a raft of things. I'm working with another woman at the moment on some research about collaboration with families and she is looking at putting out a resource. It's funny because at the time I thought, "Who will really use that?" Actually, I realize that I use heaps but I haven't realised that they've been -- because they were over at the service before my time and I use them not knowing that that's where they've come from. It can be as simple as little prompt cards or sometimes an actual resource, like puppets. A really cool indigenous set came out last year from the Department of Education and Training. They're perfect because you know that they've come through the right avenue, that they're specific for children of the age group that I teach, that they can be really helpful. Or it could be online, click here, these are some great books, these are some great websites, this is family friendly. Often I'm directing my families to read things online because that's such a go to place these days.

PD opportunities are wonderful but they're often inaccessible in terms of money and time. Depending on what the needs were -- because some communities, I think, deal with gender issues a lot for many reasons. Those communities might really benefit from the hands-on PD, whereas possibly a community like mine that's quite open and new age, it's just a great learning tool for children to be a part of that environment where they could be reading books or having books read to them about gender and challenging some of those stereotypes that inevitably, no matter how new age your parent is, they will all get birthday cards with dinosaurs for the boys and fairies for the girls. Already that is being thrust into their lives.

**Interviewer:** It's a lot to combat, really.

**EF:** Oh, it is. You can't. There would never ever go a day where a child would not turn up in some Frozen attire. Ever. Every day. No matter how many years on from that movie we get. Every single day someone is wearing an Elsa.

**Interviewer:** I was just going to ask you about your artefact so if you want to describe, show me?

**EF:** Sure. It is very simple and it is simply a photo. I didn't grow up here but it is very similar to where I grew up on my farm back in New Zealand. It is beautiful and I feel like -- when I
was thinking about my own gender identity and the way I feel about who I am and in regards to gender, it really stems back to my very early days of being on the farm. Not only watching my parents have very mixed roles in whatever needed to be done, but as well as, as I grew up-- I don't have any brothers. It was always quite expected of me to just help out and do all those sorts of things, so I've always thought of myself as practical.

I know a lot about farming and what is in New Zealand still very much a man's game. There is still terrible-- women farmers apply for jobs and get turned down solely for the fact that they are female. I think the way that my parents nurtured me, it wasn't so much a woman can do anything. It was you, EF, as a person, can do whatever you want to do. There wasn't that big divide which I think is really cool because I think we've gotten really hung up as a society on women can do everything. It's like, "Well, we all can do everything." There are certain things that maybe I would want to do or not want to do but it's also okay if I want to be a stay-at-home mom, if I want to do all the cooking and cleaning, and if my partner wants to go and make all the money and come home at night to a cooked meal.

I think we've kind of done this big flip about what feminism means. I used to think of myself as a feminist but it's become quite a derogatory term because it's all these kind of crazy things that go on. I think I am a person who's for humans, and for equality, and for equity. I think that my upbringing really shaped that, to know that just because I was a girl or a boy or whoever, that doors were open for me. That was in a nutshell. When I think about that, the farm, I think, really solidified that and made sure that I knew it. So when I went off into the world I knew that anything was possible if I wanted it to be. It's my choice what I would like to do there. I think that's me in a nutshell.

**Interviewer:** Thanks. That was a really good choice in terms of summary. I can imagine that that would have a massive impact on you having grown up in that environment?

**EF:** Definitely. It has a huge impact on my teaching as well in terms of, as a child I was seen as very, very capable and very competent at anything and everything. That's how I see children now no matter who you are. If we're solely going to speak about gender, it doesn't matter if you are a boy or a girl. There are so many opportunities available to you and it is, however, your choice, what you would like to access. I was lucky because I had choices growing up. It is societal and it's kind of where we've got to at the moment. I can understand why the world is in quite unrest which is really not good. We need to be strong definitely as women to promote ourselves and our strengths and skills but not to the effect that boys in any classroom around the world then start to think, "What about me? What's the future look like for me?" It looks bright as well. It's about empowering all children.
**Interviewer:** That's awesome. Thank you. We kind of went into this with your artefact but I was saying, where do you believe your understanding of gender identity has come from? It doesn't necessarily just have to be at home.

**EF:** A large part of it was in the home but I think a large part has also been shaped by experiences throughout my whole lifeline, childhood as well as adulthood. I'm lucky to have friends from all different types of backgrounds. Friends who did have your quite stereotypical stay-at-home mom, or working father, or father they didn't see a lot because of those work commitments, and then the opposite. I had one of my very dear friends growing up, stay-at-home dad, very, very career-driven mom. The only dad out of all of our dads who could French plait hair and all those sorts of things. I guess that already said to me at five years old, "He can do that. That's cool. I wonder if my dad could do that?" I think it's experiences and those experiences right throughout life is what has shaped it. I can study as well as being fortunate enough to have a university education which just meant that part of that looked into gender and what that looked like with a focus on education but gender nonetheless.

**Interviewer:** Would you lay out for me a little bit about what your university experience was in relation to learning about gender because it's not super consistent in education?

**EF:** Yes, absolutely. In fact, I could be wrong, I could look at my transcript, but we had an entire paper, so a whole six months of looking at-- it was kind of like a pronged approach like gender influence, supporting gender, a big subject. I was lucky I went to a good university in New Zealand with some leading people in early childhood education, world renowned, and that definitely meant a great grounding as well as, I think, to a few who identified as quite gender neutral. That already once again goes back to that experience of, if you've never met anyone-- now meet a woman who identifies as man and vice versa, or very, very neutral in the middle kind of it, neither here nor there, now but possibly back when I was an eighteen or nineteen-year-old coming into university, I hadn't really met anyone like that. Coming into uni, had that really strong paper, also gender came throughout lots of different papers. I remember we did a whole year about play and what that looked like. There was a bit in there about gender as well so it came throughout. I was really lucky. I had really, really great lecturers, I had a great mentor when I left university and came into the teaching profession. I'm one of those people who just struck it very lucky. I was very lucky, my university had a college of education within it that had been opened, that's closed down now. That was just so setup and I've got a very good education.

**Interviewer:** Were your classmates receptive to learn about it?
EF: Absolutely. New Zealand childhood is very different from Australian so very receptive, you wouldn't-- I can't say hands down but you probably wouldn't even walk into a kindergarten in New Zealand that would be opposed about any gender because Maori and Pacific Island culture as well and Pacific Island culture there's Fa'afafines who are men who identify as women and they are within almost all families. I can't remember the specific reasons. It's like an actual thing as to the journey of a Fa'afafine and you don't see the same thing in Maori culture.

Interviewer: I'll write that one down too.

EF: Yes do, you kind of, we just all grow up with it and it wouldn't have been that way previously, in my generation, I'm sure it was still very hidden and things but these days everyone is incredibly on board. And once again I’ve still not come up against anything while I’ve been in Australia, and it's regardless of your Cert III or anything like that.

Interviewer: No, that's good. What was I going to say? I was curious if then coming here after being in New Zealand where it sounds like such a different environment at the moment anyway if you were ever surprised by anything?

EF: I was surprised about everything.

Interviewer: Really? [laughs]

EF: Yes, everything.

Interviewer: What were the top things?

EF: Lack of understanding of child development. In fact, I believe it's barely touched on the Certificate III or diploma level. Lack of acknowledgment of first people. In New Zealand, our curriculum is actually bicultural so it's fully written in Te Ao Maori and it's fully written in English and you teach a bicultural curriculum. Te Ao Maori, Te Reo is all throughout and here I couldn't even get anyone to tell me what even hello or welcome-- and now I'm getting in because I'm in a workplace and all sorts of things. But otherwise, there was just very antagonistic things that just really shocked me as-- in New Zealand, depending on where you teach the government is currently at 80% qualified for three and four-year-old kindergarten, so that's another thing with three and four-year-old kindergarten funded by the government between the hours three every week.

Coming over here obviously-- when I came over here the ratio was one to 15, New Zealand is one to 10. There was the twenty hours versus the fifteen and they wanted to try and drop it to ten. Kind of those sorts of things which then immediately impacted on quality. I was close enough out of university, very, very sharply remembered the indicators of quality, and qualification, and ratio, and then I trickle off for another few things but I thought, "Okay, I
really wish I'd done my homework before moving here." By how it went down. It's turned out
good now, it's just about finding the clusters of people and other teachers who have had
similar experiences to you because they are up and the teachers are all over the world who are
just like, me but if it's not the expectation of any providers to rise up then almost why would
you? You know no better, you know no better, that's the thing. I've literally asked teachers
before, "Tell me about your Cert III, tell me about what you had learned?", "I know what
temperature to heat a bottle."

**Interviewer:** I think that's where the EYLF and the national quality framework and standards
is trying to-- It's working--

**EF:** It is. It is just about regulation and I filled it out my first week but not long ago. And if
you are going to be a registered trainer, seriously, what standards should you have to meet?
People are paying money to come and learn how to teach-- and that's the other thing that
really scares me here is that the word teach is dropped all the time care, care, care. Care is a
ginormous part of any job working with people, no matter how old or young. However, at
any age along the education spectrum, when we drop the word teach or teacher and you are
called carer, or care, or whatever, automatically you wear a different hat.

**Interviewer:** Do you hear carer a lot?

**EF:** Not on my service anymore because I don't stand for it, it's absolutely part of their own.
Do you know the word I use now? Love. Love, I said love is a huge part of what we do, love,
because what does love mean? I went to a really good PD from [someone] and he was talking
about his philosophy in love and at the time I was like, "That's classically you, you would be
the one to talk about love." And then the more I thought about it I was like, "Yes actually, it
is love and teaching, teaching is about love." It is. That changed my thoughts on, if we keep
going care, care, carers, educators-- I don't even like that word. Teachers, what do we do? We
teach, we teach.

**Interviewer:** I think it all comes down to-- this is another difference between Australia and
New Zealand is that isn't it true that once you are qualified in New Zealand pretty much you
are all teachers?

**EF:** Yes, you are all teachers. That's the other thing that I really struggled with when I
arrived. I had come from a teaching team with where the five of us had degrees because that's
the investment of the government even though they're trying to take it away all the time. The
investment of the government and my provider, my association 100% qualified.

**Interviewer:** That is fantastic.
EF: I was working with other teachers who not only did they have years of experience but they all had bachelor qualifications that they really knew what this was all about. I think about it now, we taught 40 children a day and to think about that. There it was magic because you had four teachers, 40 children, beautiful, I know, take me home.

Interviewer: What are your earliest memories of being aware of gender roles?

EF: Probably really young. I used to notice it with my grandparents definitely, like as probably a 3-year-old. Used to even say, I remember, things like, "Why don't you ever do the cooking papa?" And, Why is nana always doing the dishes?" Things like that. I think I was quite-- and I know I was aware because it wasn't like that in my home, so I was actually seeing something different. Early for me, probably three I reckon, three or four when I really started to figure that out. And then obviously I met the dad who was the stay-at-home dad and that wasn't-- yes, "Wow, that was awesome." Early, under five.

Interviewer: Did you ever feel forced into certain gender roles and if so by whom or what was it?

EF: I've never really felt forced. I'm quite a feisty person by nature, and my partner often jokes to me, "Get in the kitchen, look at those dishes." And I'll be like, "Whatever, you get in the kitchen." I've never been forced, however, I guess in early childhood I see what would definitely be described as that. If a parent turns up and, "Say thanks to the girls." And I'm like, "Last time I checked, I was nearly as old as you. If you want me to call you a girl, that's fine. But actually, I'm a woman." Or I'm-- "Say thanks to EF." Address me. I've never been forced, but I think I see other women pushed whether forcefully or not, into work with young children, into that may seemingly not be as powerful.

My partner works for [a company], they've got a massive gender policy around gender. In fact, I can't remember it off the top of my head but their equity scheme means that there must be a woman on every single team, and he'd roll so they-- "I've got a great inclusion scheme." Hearing about that, but then that gets me on the flip side of, what if it was actually a man that fitted that criteria better? "We just have a woman just to make a quota." I'm not sure how I sit with that. I think it's great because it's awareness and he's talking about it so that's a good thing and agrees that it's important too, but I see it but I've never experienced it. I'm one of those people who love cooking, I hate doing the dishes. I enjoy a good cleaning fest and therapeuticness [SIC] of it, but those are all, once again, choices that I make. They're part of me, part of my personality that I love so great.

EF: There's already a preconceived idea that often big sorts of corporations have boy clubs or whatever. This is the way I explain it to them, if it means that for however many years a
woman must be appointed in a certain role-- I say, but what it does mean it sets a precedent for no bias and it makes sure that there is that equity throughout and can at least balance some of that because it's still very male dominated, at the end of the day and it just balances out and the fact that men and women are different only can bring different views in.

**Interviewer:** Can you recall any significant scenarios that you feel may have helped to develop your understanding of gender? Potentially think about the thing you might have witnessed not in the home or maybe at school when you were growing up, anything like that?

**EF:** Once again, I went to this tiny country school and everyone, from what I remember, was super equal. However, I do remember we all used to see each other as pretty equal peers and it wasn't much boy-girl stuff apart from the usual boy-girl stuff, which I would describe as like boys wanted to be a little bit more rough playing ball rush than the girls. I still liked being a little bit rough but it was-- everyone had their threshold. When I was 12, into full primary-- when I was 12, we had a new principal. My previous principal had four daughters, he was definitely-- he was a feminist, he just was. He was all about what things can look like for women, and girls, and duh, duh, duh. I had this new principal come in, and at that point in time he had two boys as his sons, and already-- and I will never forget feeling this at 12 years old, I realize what someone who was sexist was like. And because I was made to feel, as a girl, that doors were actually shut for me.

And that locked up things, that was things like the rugby team, there was only boys rugby team. Got heaps of things, got money, got new uniforms got all sorts of trips away, duh, duh, duh. I played hockey for the girls team. We got nothing. I can’t even. And I’ve never-- in fact, I think that was the first time when, I hate to use the word, but I hated someone. I was like, "That is so unfair. This is only because you want the boys, it’s just all about boys and what they get. What about us?" You know, duh, duh, duh, duh. And I remember thinking that he's sexist, and my parents being like, “Oh, what do you know about sexist?” I do know because he favours them over us and he doesn’t give us the opportunities. And like, all right, truly, it’s hilarious; at 29 I still think that about him. I still wholeheartedly believe that doors were shut to myself and my girl mates purely for the fact that we were girls. Even though it’s not specifically like gender. He [the principal] didn’t remove anything. We just never got any top ups that we would have usually got. But in comes this principal mad at rugby, and all of a sudden the boys got all new kit bags, and duh, duh, duh. And then, strangely enough, it happened all the way through my high school, they were rugby mad. But funny enough, that happened to the boys and girls rugby team. So there we go. It was still on rugby, that kind of changed to not necessarily being about sex, but being about sport, and being about what it
was. And then I started realizing what equitable behaviour was and what wasn’t and how that was saying in the littlest of things like sport and funding. Yes, it’s funny, I haven't thought about that stuff for years.

**Interviewer:** Thank you for your time and your responses.
**Examples of educator participants’ practice**

**18+ years in the field**

“The most overt thing I do is to ask children not to make rules to exclude someone based on gender. When they do as they inevitably do every year, say you can't do this you're a girl, you can't come in here you're a boy. I tell them that they're not allowed to do that. I ask the children to make rules. We've been at kinder this year for two weeks and I've already said to them what would you like the rules to be and they've come up with stuff about no hitting, no punching, no one saying nasty words, interpersonal behaviour stuff. Then I'd spontaneously come up with rules around inclusion and I don't invite them to when they do that sort of thing. I just tell them it's not okay.” – Jean

“In relation to gender, we provide all experiences and we encourage all children to try them. Obviously, their woodwork and trucks and the dress ups. We always have little boys in tutus and that's fine. That's just part of what they do. Sometimes you find other children are discriminatory against those children but we always support the child and say, "that's fine for people to wear what they want to wear. It's really irrelevant if they're a boy or a girl." I guess we make sure that all of the activities that we provide and learning experiences and conversations, that it's okay to do what you like regardless of whether you are male or female. Actually, we really don't talk about male and female. I don't. We just treat everyone equally as much as we possibly can.” – Rose

“Looking at the home corner and making sure that they're not just fairy princess dresses in the home corner as dress ups, that they're there but that you would also have other different variety of things as well as neutral pieces of material that can be whatever the children like. Ensuring that the books that we have out and that we read have strong protagonists of either sex. That any posters that we use around the room I'll have...them equally representing boys and girls.” – Bow

**10-18 years in the field**

“I asked the question in my weekly reflection, "Is this the children's ideas of their gender and what's acceptable and what's not or there are other reason why they chose these roles on?" By doing that I am rising awareness to the families. In my staff, I got my new staff and quiet new in the profession, as well. It is very much reflective practice even as you're teaching or as you're asking questions, as well.” – Marie

“I guess I have the approach of for every child, my role is to meet their needs and if that involves dealing with gender equity issues, then I'll deal with them in the moment. I'm not aware of-- without having checked the policy handbook— I don't think we have any formal policies beyond this obvious equity that we would expect all children to be equal. We don't have anything that I'm aware of specifically about gender. I certainly don't have any in my own planning and I know that the staff in the other rooms wouldn't be doing anything about it.” – Margaret

**5-10 years in the field**

“We use a lot of quite specific resources. We also don't shy away from talking about gender and what it might mean. At the moment, for my class, we're doing a heap of, "What do you
have? Do you have a vagina or do you have a penis?" You can use that as a bit of a platform
to talk a little bit about gender. Sometimes, "Yes, I have a vagina. I'm a girl." And, "And then
I saw my dad's--" And I'm like, "What? Great. Tell us about it." Not trying to put it away, if
it's on top for children then we talk about it, talk about what it might look like. I know I was
part of a family where my dad did all the cooking, made all the lunches. Duh, duh, duh, duh,
duh. That was quite different in my group of friends and it's still quite different with a lot of
the conversations that I have with children today. Adding in, "What's happened in your life?"
And, "It doesn't always need to be 'X,Y,Z'. What about this?" Using topics, and we use
books, we use the internet a heap, we got an iPad in the classroom, if they have questions,
often there's really cool resources that can just be tapped into that look at gender. Books, for
me, are just number one apart from those conversations.” – EF

it's kind of what I would describe as classic gender where it's boys doing things. I'd love to
get some more of the opposite, kind of probably like how I grew up as a girl. Nothing was
ever off limits and I was off doing all sorts of-- well, whatever I wanted and possibly
typically male dominated things on the farm. It would be good to have a few more of those.
There are, I guess, but they're just in your everyday books, which is funny. That's a good little
bit of reflection there actually…if I was faced with any challenges, then I might construct a
bit of a social story or something like that. We seem to find that those work really well in the
class, especially if the social stories are really specific. Pictures of our own classroom. Here's
Jimmy doing this and Alice comes and does this too and duh, duh, duh, duh. We could
all learn together, etc. It might look something like that just to subtly-- actually puppets are a
really good one too. Puppets and the dolls house figures, we find-- and we're finding this year
especially with some children with additional needs, it's a really good way of explaining
things and unpacking, especially if it's come up as a negative, to then break it down a little bit
and talk about it through puppets or through the little dolls. That's another resource that we
use. – EF

Yes, I’m very conscious to say, well, in this space, this is what’s okay. I try and explain to the
children what I believe, so I certainly, like I said, would never directly oppose something that
a parent has said. You do hear-- there’s instances of little boys saying only girls dress up, the
dress ups, that only girls can be fairies or things like that or whatever. I’m trying to think of
another example the opposite way but you get the idea. The blocks and the trucks are for
boys, whatever. Obviously, I always say, although I don’t think that’s true, I’m a girl and I
like trucks and I like blocks or whatever it might be and try and give them that language. And
if I do get that pushback saying, "Well, my dad said I can’t wear dress ups because that’s for
girls," or whatever, I certainly wouldn’t go against what the parents have said. But that being
said, I will say, "Well, at my kinder, I encourage everyone to dress up because I don’t think
there’s things for boys or things that are just for girls. I think that’s for everyone. And it does
really bring it back to, well, this is our space, and in this safe space, then we can all be
whatever we want to be, that kind of message. – Tegan

We don't have any formalized programs in place but it is something we have spoken about as
we get different personalities come through the kinder and different needs for the kids. So,
we always have different spaces on offer and just to make very conscious decisions to
intentionally make sure children know that anyone can play in their spaces. We try not to put
any gender stereotypes on them, and to see if there's any kids who are going, "Oh they're
wearing their dress that's not okay." Just talking through that idea about it and using books to
help process one of our project things without our stories. And just having those
conversations or prompting those questions and going -- Because they're only four, not
asking them why do you think that necessarily, but just making them see maybe the bigger picture and go -- I guess that why does come into it. Why can't they play with that? Why do you think? That I think boys are allowed to have dinosaurs or why are the girls allowed to dress up and so on. That they can be fun to play with. Why do boys have to wear capes, but girls can wear dress ups? Yes, it's probably that incident and just breaking, trying to break in those stereotypes that we have. We do have a handy lady who comes in to kinder from council. They keep seeing her using power tools, it's not always men. – Hazel

0-5 years in the field

We try, in anything that we do, make sure that it’s inclusive of gender or not necessarily saying boys will do this session and girls can do this session. We never try and distinguish gender in that way. Besides having those conversations with children through their play and asking them about their ideas on gender role or storytelling and things like that. I don’t think I’ve ever specifically planned a program around gender. I just try to include it. I don’t really think there is one, just equality. In whatever way that means. If it’s where the child has come from, their family structure, what gender we need treat them with fairness and equality. Equality doesn’t mean we treat them the same. It means we treat them with respect so they have the same opportunities. - RC

you have, and the ideas you have about the world around you, more power to you. There's a whole lot of people that if you're really dissatisfied with the way that the society puts pressures on them. Let them be who they want to be. We’ve always been the sector that’s not afraid to push the boundaries. (About this research): It certainly you have, and the ideas you have about the world around you, more power to you. There's a whole lot of people that if you're really dissatisfied with the way that the society puts pressures on them. Let them be who they want to be. We’ve always been the sector that’s not afraid to push the boundaries. - RC

We're a part of her study that she's doing. We're getting some education about the issue around gender identity, that's one thing we're doing at the moment. Another thing is we've started to really focus in on trying to, because we're falling into the track of making a pink nurseries for the little girls to play in and just for anyone to play in but we weren't being mindful of the fact that all the stuff we're buying is pink to put into the nursery. Over the holidays we try to, if we made a baby's corner, try to make that as gender neutral as possible like putting an animal prints, changing out colours and trying to put some painting like the cribs that were pink would be painted them white, and then trying to make things less gender stereotyped. That's what we're really trying to do at the moment because we did notice that we were very gender stereotyped even though we weren't trying to be. It just happened. – Layla

“Last year we had a child who was going through some gender-- What would you say, gender-- A little boy wanted to wear dresses, basically. I don't know, apology over what would you say. He wanted to wear dresses and that would make it pretty apparent that a lot of us didn't know much about gender and its new concept. We were like, "We need to get on top of this and we need to educate ourselves about it... As a whole, we're trying our best to be-- To learn more and be more accepting of fluidity, that things aren't set in stones, and that things are changing.” – Layla
“For me it's having the variety of-- in a program-- in a setting, it's having the variety of dress ups. Just like the girls' toys versus the boys' toys and not segregating. If you've got LEGO, chuck in the dolls and the LEGO instead of having cars and stuff. Just not-- being a bit more open about it and how you set up and things like that as well.” – JP

“This little boy wearing his mum's old-- well I guess t-shirts which are like dresses on him. It wasn't dress up it was her clothe; her old clothes. He took his older son to school and the school children were teasing him. Dad came and dropped the boy off at the centre and was really, clearly visibly upset. Upset that, the little boy was going to be starting school and he wouldn't be allowed to do this. He needs to-- he said he needs to start implementing something now, because next year it's going to be a huge awakening. And so he said-- I said, "Okay well let's put things in place like this. Maybe when he's outside in the stinking heat which was in the middle of summer then, why don't we take it off? Well if he wants to take it off, take it off and just have him run around in a t-shirt and shorts." because he was wearing long pants, also a shirt and another shirt over top and just sweating. Also, it got quite controversial because other educators didn't believe that and other educators knew mum a lot better through the older son and said to me that mum had wouldn't agree with that and it’s not my place to implement that. But now-- that probably wasn't my place but because I'd only seen dad; dad did drop off and pickups. I barely saw mum, it was his opinions coming into play and it was what he wanted coming into play. I followed that lead. I didn't don't know mum, how was I meant to know? It turned really controversial and I probably started off a big fight at their house because my boss went and just grabbed the mum and spoke to her, over the top of us and told her to ?batter-- I think. In hindsight I feel really bad that I did push it upon him not to be able to express himself like that but in an early childhood setting you're theoretically also meant to follow the parent's beliefs and attributes that they want their children to have. It's a catch 22, but what do you do? And I personally feel like mum hindered the child but then again I did the right thing by dad. I feel really bad. I could not-- I had quite an open relationship with him. Like, "Hi? How's it going on, had a good day, yes, yes, yes, great," and after that it was just like, "Oh," I avoided him like the plague. Because I felt so uncomfortable. – JP
### Common themes that emerged in the focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Stance</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of identity</td>
<td>Educators should take a proactive role</td>
<td>Rose, Jean, Layla, RC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“We just got to work our hardest in trying to influence their positive development of sense of identity. But at the end of the day, I don't believe we have a very big impact.” – Layla</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of identity</td>
<td>Educators should not have a role or at least not the lead role</td>
<td>Bow, Jean, Marie, Tegan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I want all the children to be who they really are, find their own sense of identity. We're not actually, and when we do that, we're not letting them find themselves. We’re saying, ‘You will be this person’.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td>EYLF</td>
<td>Positive or really helpful</td>
<td>Rose, Bertha, Margaret, Marie, EF, Hazel, Layla, JP</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I use it a lot, and [it] is always in the back of my mind, especially when you are doing observations.” – Bertha</td>
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<tr>
<td>EYLF</td>
<td>Too broad</td>
<td>Marie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I still think that the curriculum has been written in such a way that we have it rather broad now.” – Marie</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EYLF</strong></td>
<td>Should be broad and not prescriptive</td>
<td><strong>Bow, Jean, Bertha, Margaret, EF, Tegan, Layla, RC, JP</strong></td>
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<td>“It gives you a fair bit of room to move, it’s not a prescriptive document and the ideas tap into some very big ideas but that also means there is a lot of scope for moving around.” – Jean</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EYLF</strong></td>
<td>Doing those things anyway</td>
<td><strong>Rose, Bow, Jean, Margaret</strong></td>
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<td>“I do all of these things and have done them for a long time.” – Rose</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I’m not putting all that planning on top of it because I just respond, and it just works.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>EYLF</strong></td>
<td>Not sure it covers everything, covers the wrong things or doesn’t help me</td>
<td><strong>Rose, Jean, Bow, Margaret, Bertha, Marie, Tegan, Hazel, RC, Layla</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I think it's really helpful. Definitely very helpful. I'm not sure that it covers everything, because everything is cultural… you need to think of it a little more deeply than what's actually recent in the framework.” – Rose</td>
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<td>“I felt for me it was superficial. It really didn't impact all that much on what I was [already] doing.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gender formation</strong></td>
<td>Personally believes or mentions that society believes that children are too young to express gender identity</td>
<td><strong>Margaret, Tegan</strong></td>
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<td>“The child is probably too young to explain. If it is a teenager, they can tell you this is what I want…but a three- or four-year-old child might not be able to explain it in ways that you can understand.” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender formation</td>
<td>Children engage in stereotypically gendered behaviours</td>
<td>Bow, Rose, EF, Margaret, RC</td>
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<td>“I think this is the age where they are starting to become… there’s something external, there's something happening, to make them think that this is a boy, this is a girl. This is how a girl should act, this is how a boy should act.” – RC</td>
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<td>“Mainly boys are the only ones who are allowed to have guns, and girls have to be the … fairies, princesses, etc.” – EF</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender formation</td>
<td>Danger or risk around gender non-conforming behaviours</td>
<td>RC, JP</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I think we have to be empathetic to parents, because if nothing else, in the world that we live in, that child's going to get hurt because of the way [they are].” – RC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“This little boy who comes in this dress every day and he's great, but I find myself wondering like, &quot;What's school going to be like for you, buddy?&quot;” – JP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender formation</td>
<td>Experienced conflict with parents (usually fathers) about a child dressing in gender non-conforming ways</td>
<td>Rose, Bow, Jean, Margaret, Marie, Tegan, Hazel, JP, RC, Layla</td>
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<td>“Mum apparently encourages him, wearing a dress. Encouraging him to wear whatever he wants and to play with fairy princesses and mermaids and all the sort of stuff, but dad's a macho bloke and he's really struggling with it.” – Layla</td>
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<td>“I think that the difficulty here is, you have what the child wants, but you also have the child's relationship with the father and what are the consequences for this child when they get home.” – Marie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difference between parents’ role and educator’s role in gender formation</td>
<td>Must be empathetic and respectful to parents</td>
<td>Bertha, Margaret, Bow, RC, Layla</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“You've got to empathise with those parents who have that knee jerk reaction of &quot;No, this isn't happening. This can't happen. This is what I want for my child.” – RC</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Difference between parents’ role and educator’s role in gender formation</strong></td>
<td>Must do right by the child regardless of the parents’ wishes</td>
<td>RC, Layla, Bow, EF, Hazel</td>
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<td>“Now look, your father doesn’t like this. I’m fine with it. When you are at kinder it is my rules, but when you’re going home you’re going home to dad’s rules. So, let’s just make sure that you change your clothes by this time.” – Bow</td>
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<td><strong>Impact of educator’s role on children’s gender formation</strong></td>
<td>Hard for the educator to have an impact on children’s gender formation/There are many other impacts on children’s gender formation</td>
<td>Bertha, Marie, Layla, Bow</td>
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<td>“…we can do our bit but at the end of the day, they go home, they’ve got all those external pressures, the media and all that, they go home to their mum and dad. Their mum and dad are the biggest influence into their identity, and then family and the community, we are only a small part of that as educators. We just got to work our hardest in trying to influence their positive development of sense of identity. But at the end of the day, I don’t believe we have a very big impact.” – Layla</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Impact of educator’s role on children’s gender formation</strong></td>
<td>Educators play a large role in influencing children’s gender formation. It is their role to subvert the stereotypical play and gender stereotypes in the environment</td>
<td>Tegan, EF, Hazel, JP, Rose, Jean</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understandings of homosexual and transgender identities</td>
<td>Transgender and homosexual identities are taboo/contentious topics in early childhood</td>
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<td>Layla, Bertha, Tegan</td>
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“‘I think that’s a way that we play a very big role, and what our feelings are as teachers, and what we impart on that sort of gender-specific stuff.’ – EF

“It’s something you would need to address and talk about, that boys and girls can do anything, and that no one is restricted by their gender, what they can get involved in, particularly at kinder.” – Tegan

“I think we have to be very careful, very mindful of not projecting or having an agenda… of your own personal values and beliefs, and pushing them on children… like a child walking in every morning and the first thing you say to them is, ‘Aren’t you wearing a beautiful dress today?’; and then you say that every single day, and it’s basically telling every child that, ‘You’re not beautiful unless you have lovely dresses, and that’s what beauty is. It’s the small things that you say and you do. It’s what’s been put on you and then you’re putting it back out there.’” – RC

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understandings of homosexual and transgender identities</th>
<th>Links non-gender conforming behaviours with transgender identities</th>
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<td>Margaret, Bertha, Marie, Layla</td>
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“You see stories on the news, but… it would get a lot of backlash if things were put in there like that because that concept of children having an awareness of gender, and maybe questioning gender is such a taboo subject… we couldn’t possibly do it for four year olds. It seems to be [what] a lot of the society believes.” – Tegan

“If we start supporting transgender, this is just the topic that we mentioned, some people are going to jump, ‘I don’t want my kids to know anything about that’ and some people will be more supportive.” – Bertha

“It’s all very well for me as a Western educated female to say, ‘He won’t become gay if he wears dresses,’ or, ‘Even if he does, who cares… I don’t care if he grows up gay or grows up transgender but really Dad does. Do I respect Dad’s rights?’” – Margaret
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understandings of homosexual and transgender identities</th>
<th>“I just think that we need a little bit more training about how to think about difficult situations like transgender and how we can allow the children to think as well.” – Bertha</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The belief that being transgender is a recent development in society</td>
<td>Margaret, Bertha</td>
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<tr>
<td>“[When she was going up] there were boys and there were girls. There were no transgender people.” – Margaret</td>
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<td>“Now this is changing and very quickly so we all trying to catch up...It’s like what do you do? If you’re supporting that he is learning, he is defining, he doesn’t really know, but then there’s this other idea that it comes in your genes and then it is like, ‘Okay, so I can’t deny who he is’. It’s always like, ‘Should I support it or should I stop it?’ ” It’s the question. The parents don’t know either and when they support it you are like, ‘Oh, no. They should stop it’. Or they should put some boundaries. It’s one of those situations that are very moral like what is right and what is wrong?” – Bertha</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understandings of homosexual and transgender identities</td>
<td>Conflating gender non-conforming behaviours with homosexuality</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I think with the gender stuff it is so difficult to teach. You talk to people...you got a book on gay families and do you break it to your children?” – Marie</td>
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<td>In discussion about a parent who was displeased that their son was wearing dresses: “Okay, get over it. Your son’s gay.” – Jean</td>
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Verbal and nonverbal definitions

In this thesis, the following definitions have been used:

**Verbal: Tone of voice**

*Hesitant tone* – Tentative, pausing, proceeding with caution
*Emphatic tone* – Confident, passionate, strongly or forcefully articulating a point
*Questioning tone* – Curious, sceptical
*Defensive tone* – Justifying actions or words, challenging criticism
*Amused tone* – Entertained, finding humour in something
*Frustrated tone* – Annoyed, disappointed, discouraged
*Concerned tone* – Worried, anxious
*Embarrassed tone* – Self-conscious, feeling shame

**Verbal: Variation of voice**

*Lowers voice* – Significant decrease in volume of voice
*Raises voice* – Significant increase in volume of voice

**Nonverbal: Body language**

*Gesturing while speaking* – Using hands in conjunction with speech
*Emphatic gesturing to emphasise a point* – Using hands to stress an important idea or point
*Shrugging* – Raising one or both shoulders to represent not knowing an answer
*Head nodding* – Lowering and raising the head in agreement
*Change in posture or position* – Moving around, sitting up, slouching, turning away

**Nonverbal: Facial expressions**

*Pointed eye contact* – Making direct eye contact with the researcher or research assistant
*Smiling* – Corners of the mouth turning upward to convey happiness or amusement
*Frowning* – Furrowing brows, downturned mouth to convey displeasure or disagreement
*Surprised* – Widening eyes, opened mouth to convey shock or amazement
*Raised an eyebrow* – Lifting one or both eyebrows to convey bewilderment or disagreement
*Grimace* – Distorting one’s face in an expression that usually suggests distaste or disapproval
*Thoughtful* – Absorbed in thought, contemplative, pensive
Sense of identity outcome discussed in the focus groups (yellow)

18+ years in the field

“I believe that sense of identity entails what they are in the place of their family, in the place in their community, their sense of esteem about how they respect themselves.” – Rose (Focus Group 3)

“How they react in the world and how the world reacts to them and that it’s about their ability to feel good about themselves, to display empathy towards others, also each child obviously, in a social context there's certain, I guess, rules, social rules that they have been taught to abide by their families and the community, so that definitely plays a part in how they relate to the world and how they relate or think about themselves.” – Rose (Focus Group 3)

“Their sense of who they are and how they see themselves fitting into the group. How comfortable they are within themselves and how they function as part of the group. And there's a whole range of normal for a particular individual.” – Bow (Focus Group 3)

“I think the sense of identity with kids in that age [group] is often very much about working out what labels to own for themselves. Working out where they fit in the world and who they belong with and which categories that they observe in the world, apply to them. I also think that in early childhood, identity is not at all fixed.” – Jean (Focus Group 3)

10-18 years in the field

“It’s difficult because a sense of identity sounds like it's being formed but it's a growing sense of identity so it's more fluid. And so the sense of identity is the culture, the language, the gender… whether they are a city kid or a country kid, their family background and the experiences that their family have provided them with and their idea of themselves in terms of whether they see themselves as a good kid or they're the youngest kid, or the oldest. The sense of themselves in the family unit from being in the classroom.” – Marie (Focus Group 1)

“...continually changing, and is shaped as well in relationship with their environment, their beliefs, their values, the people who they relate [to]. And something that I addressed recently is how they start changing that sense of identity according where they're growing, when they’re with their parents, and they move off to their friends. And when they get older they get a better opinion about a bigger understanding of what society is and their role in the
society, and how they're affecting the society, and how it's affecting them as well. So I think it's concept that develops in all of our early years, even myself I'm still developing my sense of identity with my own experience that I'm living.” – Bertha (Focus Group 1)

“I don't think it's something that’s set, it's something that's very fluid and changing, and it's influenced by everything that we encounter. But for children it might be that, how they'd think about themselves perhaps at home is different from how they'd think about themselves when they're in childcare or kinder.” – Margaret (Focus Group 1)

“The other thing that I question in [relation to] identity is the idea of the child having a sense of agency being a part of identity, because not every culture sees that as a positive thing and also interdependence as well. Some cultures prefer that their children are dependent on them. They carry them until quite an older age and then other cultures are sending their children out with machetes to cut things down at two years of age.” – Marie (Focus Group 1)

“It goes back to the idea of whose role is it to create this sense of identity in the first place. So, if we are supporting the family as the lead role in this position, then the family's positions on transgender and those things are going to be part of the things that we might be taking in[to] consideration.” – Marie (Focus Group 1)

“You've got the conflicting roles there. Okay, the child has a role, but the family has a role and we have a role. So, where's the line on allowing the child to have their own role in their identity formation? And that's the difficulty with families as well...I think that the difficulty here is, you have what the child wants, but you also have the child's relationship with the father and what are the consequences for this child when they get home. You have to manage it so that the child can have some sense of agency around his own identity formation, but then, the family themselves feel that they have a sense of agency, they don't feel like they're being talked down to by some childhood professional.” – Marie (Focus Group 1)

**5-10 years in the field**

“…understanding where they come from, too. Whatever their background might be, what their family situation, I think for all of us that really constructs who we are and who we become. Being, belonging, becoming – being who we are. Yes, I think that the child's background is a really important place to start when you are talking about self-identity” – Tegan (Focus Group 4)
0-5 years in the field

“I think a sense of identity is who the child is and where they fit into this world. Personality, culture, family, all of that sort of entwined to make this one child and who they are.” – RC (Focus Group 2)

“I think it's also very important who the child believes they are. Because society may see them as one way but they may believe something different about themselves. So it has a lot to do with their internal beliefs, and their self-esteem and their confidence in who they are.” – Layla (Focus Group 2)

“In regards to Outcome One, I do tend to use this a lot in preparing the children for what’s to come. So when you’re looking at things like school readiness and things like this, these are the core skills that you want them to achieve. You want them to be resilient and you want them to be confident and respond to adversity and all those sorts of things. I think that’s where I’ll probably use Outcome One the most. That I refer to it in that way as preparing children for the next step.” – RC (Focus Group 2)

“I'm a big advocate for respect. Respecting self, respecting others, including -- when you project kindness and a loving, caring and empathy for other people, then you feel good about yourself. I don't think it's an individual thing. I think it's more like building a sense of community and belonging, and security in that way.” – RC (Focus Group 2)

“I think it's really important for everybody, for adults and children to have that connection with their inside self. That inside self of identity. To then be able to be that person that you can be outside, and having most people -- those two people aligned almost.” – Layla (Focus Group 2)

“…we can do our bit but at the end of the day, they go home, they’ve got all those external pressures, the media and all that, they go home to their mum and dad. Their mum and dad are the biggest influence into their identity, and then family and the community, we are only a small part of that as educators. We [have] just got to work our hardest in trying to influence their positive development of sense of identity. But at the end of the day, I don't believe we have [made] a very big impact.” – Layla (Focus Group 2)

“If you have a child that is there, eight, nine hours a day, five times a week, I think in a way you would an influence… That child at day care from three months up to five, that's a huge
amount of time in their life that there were different educators that they are picking up on
different feelings that they are picking up on different ways to handle feelings, or does it
come down to genetics and their personality and their traits? All of that.” – JP (Focus Group 2)

**Educators should take a proactive role in fostering a sense of identity in children** (green)

18+ years in the field

“I believe our role is to provide the children with the experience and modelling to help them
into the community… I think providing an environment that's rich with lots of experiences
and artefacts and cultural practices or just discussions around different cultural practices so
that they are aware of all the different cultures and practices around the world… we try to
make sure that children are aware that there's many other different ways of expressing culture
and celebrating things.” – Rose (Focus Group 3)

“We recognise them as a person… [there are] lots of views around how they should be and
even in terms of gender identity.” – Rose (Focus Group 3)

“I think in relation to their identity that we need to ensure that they're cared for, respected,
their needs are met, they feel secure, they’re attached to a person, an educator, one or more
educators, that they do have those skills to manage themselves in the environment in a
positive way, in a way that's socially acceptable and respectful.” – Rose (Focus Group 3)

“I do a lot of work around giving children real jobs to do in the kindergarten like setting the
table and cleaning up and that kind of stuff. But a lot of my thinking around those is geared
towards how I make this task belong to the kids. And another way that I think I intervene
quite a lot in their sense of identity is intervening in who they play with or who they connect
to.” – Jean (Focus Group 3)

0-5 years in the field

“We have just got to work our hardest in trying to influence their positive development of
sense of identity. But at the end of the day, I don't believe we have a very big impact.” –
Layla (Focus Group 2)
Educators should not have a role or at least the lead role in fostering a sense of identity in children (square)

18+ years in the field

“Providing choices, for me. Accepting each child. That would relate back to that sense of self-esteem. So that they’re comfortable with wherever they happen to be at that moment. And that moment would vary from -- throughout the day as well as from day-to-day as they engage in different plays. I don't see it as my aim or what I should be doing to push them in a particular direction but to provide lots of options.” – Bow (Focus Group 3)

“I want all the children to be who they really are, find their own sense of identity. We’re not actually, and when we do that, we're not letting them find themselves. We’re saying, ‘You will be this person’”. – Bow (Focus Group 3)

“We had [to] sit down and discuss the differences between my values and their values and try and find some common ground; and I think in that scenario you have to be prepared to sit down, you have to be prepared to listen, you have to be prepared to accept that I’m not going to get everything that I want.” – Jean (Focus Group 3)

10-18 years in the field

“…because we have done [that] in our training and we have got this in the curriculum and we have thought about it, we probably are better able to shape a child's identity than their own parents because we have thought through this sort of stuff. But, at the same time, who really should have the role in the identity shaping? How do we empower parents to understand how to shape a child's identity and to take more of a lead role in that because I don't think the educator should have a lead role in identity formation.” – Marie (Focus Group 1)

5-10 years in the field

“I think it’s, more than anything, about time and space. I think if we give the children that, that is where their self-identity comes. Like, we don't need to-- I shouldn't say we don't need to do anything, but I don't think they need anything more than the time and space where they feel comfortable and free to be who they are. I think it's just about being aware that not everyone is the same and give them that opportunity to just be. I think that's really important.” – Tegan (Focus Group 4)
0-5 years in the field

“I definitely agree that family, culture, where the child comes from, are the biggest influences. But in our part, I think we have to be very careful, very mindful of not projecting or having an agenda, or even if you don't know what having that agenda of your own personal values and beliefs, and pushing them onto children. Sometimes if they are great values and beliefs, it’s a great thing to push them onto the children, but even – and I know we’re not going to dive too much to gender – saying something like a child walking in every morning and the first thing you say to them is, "Aren't you wearing a beautiful dress today?", and then you say that every single day, and it's basically telling every child that, "You're not beautiful unless you have lovely dresses, and that’s what beauty is. It’s the small things that you say and you do. It’s what’s been put on you and then you’re putting it back out there.” – RC (Focus Group 2)
Frequency of reactions during focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>F.G. 1</th>
<th>F.G. 2</th>
<th>F.G. 3</th>
<th>F.G. 3 (Skype)</th>
<th>F.G. 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10-18 years</td>
<td>0-5 years</td>
<td>18+ years</td>
<td>18+ years</td>
<td>5-10 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal: Tone of voice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hesitant tone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphatic tone</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning tone</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defensive tone</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amused tone</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrated tone</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Concerned tone</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Embarrassed tone</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal: Variation of voice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lowers voice</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raises voice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonverbal: Body Language</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gesturing while speaking</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphatic gesturing to emphasise a point</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shrugging</td>
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<tr>
<td>Head nodding</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in posture or position</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonverbal: Facial expressions</td>
<td>Pointed eye contact</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smiling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frowning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surprised</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raised an eyebrow</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grimace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
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</table>
## Context of reactions during the focus groups

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Key question topics in the focus groups</th>
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<th>F.G. 3 (Skype)</th>
<th>F.G. 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts on the ‘sense of identity’ outcome in the EYLF</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>The educator’s role in fostering a child’s sense of identity</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any possible changes/additions they would make to the EYLF</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of the artefacts brought in by the participants</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion on identity Scenario 1 – Cultural sensitivity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion on identity Scenario 2 – Religious sensitivity</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion on identity Scenario A – Children’s reactions to gender non-conformance</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion on identity Scenario B – Family reactions to gender non-conformance</td>
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<td>12</td>
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</table>
Themes present in the interviews – Society

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes that emerged</th>
<th>Significant quotes</th>
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</table>
| Gender identity development, and societal shifts in relation to gender | **18+ years in the field**

“There’s a certain component that has to be innate with the belief in the child but that is significantly impacted on by the teaching that comes directly from the adults who care for them and from society in general, the stereotypes that they constantly see put in front of them as to this is how it is to be of this particular gender.” – Bow

“I don’t know if it’s getting worse, a bit of a push-back against more acceptance means that people are feeling threatened are perhaps more likely to say I don’t know what is happening or whether people are just more confident to express themselves.” – Bow

“Gender identities develop through a combination of their experiences in inhabiting their own body and then how people respond to them. Then also a kind of quest to work out where I belong and the tendency to look for a tribe to belong to.” – Jean

| 10-18 years in the field | “The family is really important and then also their friends as well. Once they're looking at their friends, their friends are then saying to them all, ‘Boys don't do that’ or ‘girls don't do that.’” – Marie

“Children can make their own decision about what's going to be perfect for them. Rather than us putting our ideas on them.” – Marie

“In other cultures that dichotomy, that binary of gender is not necessarily there. All the physical manifestations, if you like of it are different.” – Margaret

“I have a little boy at the moment who I suspect may well -- I think I'm using the right word, may be transgender. I don't know and I probably won't find out. Five years ago, I would have just thought, ‘Oh yes, he's going through a phase... but it's only in the fairly recent years I think that we've started even thinking about that being an issue in early childhood. I would say in the last three years.’” – Margaret

“I guess, my generation there was no consideration of anything other than that binary male-female.” – Margaret

| 5-10 years in the field | “I think that the gender identity is something that probably begins before you have even been born, and depending on what that looks like for your family.” – EF

“It wouldn't have been that way, previously, in my generation, I'm sure it was still very hidden and things but these days everyone is incredibly on board.” – EF

“Parents tend to really reinforce those gender stereotypes..."
from birth…reinforced by kinder [sic] and long day care but more than anything it comes from home.” – Tegan

“It’s amazing that systems like that can be so strict on, ‘No, but you have to do it like this because this is the expectation, that you will wear a dress and you will wear a skirt because you are a girl.” – Hazel

“Things like that are so embedded into society that they only have a choice in how they normalise gender and they develop their identities. But, I believe that's slowly changing… Slowly being the key word there…” – Hazel

### 0-5 years in the field

“I definitely think there is an innate thing that we're born with or a certain way we want to be, but we are definitely influenced by the outside as well.” – Layla

“From what they see, what they see in their home environment, what they see out in the community, what they see on TV, social media and YouTube nowadays.” – JP

“It's a growing issue and society has changed so much and it's so -- I wouldn't say accepted but it's very much more evident now in society.” – JP

“You can say that all media is terrible but it has a flip side I guess as well that you do have access to more ideas and information.” – RC

“We’re seeing more and more children come in who, if they don’t fit in the norms, they’re feeling really upset and worried. Maybe that is something that we need to be a little bit more mindful of and actually but into place things that help these children, help all the children, understand that it’s okay to be whoever you are even if you don’t fit in.” – RC

### Womanhood and feminism

**18+ years in the field**

“I have all these sort of competing things that come into what does it mean to be a woman, what does it mean to be a working woman?” – Jean

“It is impossible to escape the impact of the image of all these women fawning over these male experts who on some occasions have been flown in from other realities to tell us how to suck our Australian eggs. It's disturbing and it says if the minute that you created, and the minute you remove the expertise about teaching from the classroom, and it becomes a bit more prestigious, you immediately open up the opportunity for men to be involved.” – Jean

“I've have joined the unions…partly because they see the need to tell the teachers that being organised and effective is a feminist issue.” – Jean

“I was aware of feminism as a political issue but not as a personal one. I always felt powerful enough in my own world.” – Jean

### 5-10 years in the field
“When I realised I'm not one of the boys because they wouldn't let me play on the shirts-off team... I became the surrogate mother...I started to really try and fill the mother role.” – Tegan

“I think we've kind of done this big flip about what feminism means. I used to think of myself as a feminist but it's become quite a derogatory term because it's all these kind of crazy things that go on. I think I am a person who's for humans, and for equality, and for equity.” – EF

0-5 years in the field

“I'm not someone who will go and buy something because society tells me that’s what I need to be a beautiful woman and I just focus more on being a good person.” – RC

“We’ve always been the sector that’s not afraid to push the boundaries.” – RC
Themes present in the interviews – Family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes that emerged</th>
<th>Significant quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender inequities in domestic roles</td>
<td>18+ years in the field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“At mealtimes my brothers would always get the biggest meal… I was expected to serve them.” – Rose</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It’s almost like it’s my responsibility to be there, the [preparation] of meals and food and things like that.” – Rose</td>
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<tr>
<td>“[My daughter] has done lots of gender studies and women’s issues. That has probably opened me up to thinking about it… She was highly critical of me because we have problems perpetuating dad brings the money, mum is just a teacher and doesn’t make any money.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td>“He can’t cook to save himself and he does the hard work sort of thing so that is continuing to be a stereotype.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Certainly, my husband doesn’t take on any of that responsibility… He doesn’t bother remembering any of that. He just constantly checks in with me. Eventually, that ends up setting me up as the nag. That becomes a source of conflict.” – Jean</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-18 years in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>“As a child I felt like why does God like boys better than girls, basically? Boys just seemed to have a better role. They were in charge and they would make the decisions.” – Marie</td>
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<tr>
<td>“[My mum] would just rather work than be home. Maybe that was because she had to be home, she had to do all this housework and cooking and all that sort of stuff, and now she doesn’t have to. She can make her own decisions. She would just rather not be where she had to be in the past.” – Marie</td>
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<tr>
<td>“My parents had very traditional…demarcation of chores.” – Margaret</td>
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<td>“I don’t think we consciously treated [our sons and daughter] differently ourselves.” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<td>“My perception of our childhood was that my brother would be expected to say, mow the lawns but he was never expected to iron his clothes. As teenagers we were expected to iron our clothes…We were annoyed by it but I don’t remember ever complaining or causing a fuss. I don’t know if my mum would even realise that she was like that. She would probably think that she raised us all the same.” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-10 years in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>“As I got older that changed to the expectation that you stay home with mum and I’m taking the boys… I think it was just that more… that fatherly instinct to protect without realising he was really enforcing these ideas.” – Hazel</td>
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<tr>
<td>“My parents have very mixed roles in whatever needed to be done.” – EF</td>
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<td><strong>0-5 years in the field</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“My brother played rugby and I had to go dancing.” – JP</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Dad went out to work and my mum stayed behind and looked after us… although mum worked as well but dad was a trucker so he'd go away… it’s very role orientated. Don't think I've ever seen my dad really clean the house unless he's had to. He does cook very rarely.” – JP</td>
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<td>“My grandparents were that old-fashioned couple. My grandma was practically his servant… At that time I just thought that's how the world is.” – RC</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Everyone’s like, ‘Aww, that’s so sweet. Look at that little four-year-old pretending to make a sandwich for her husband’. I’m training to be a servant. That's what it's like. That’s what I knew. This is my role. This is what it meant to be female in this world. This is what I'm practising for, training for.” – RC</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Conflict between motherhood and having a career</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“I remember when I was about 13 or 14, friends always said what do you want to do and I'll always said I was going to have a little job for a couple years and I'll get married and have kids, and she looked at me and she said, ‘That's not very ambitious, is it?’ It was probably the first time someone has ever said that to me.” – Bow</td>
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| **10-18 years in the field** |
| “[Mum] went back to work when I was young, say five or six. She caught a lot of criticism from her friends for doing that because women should stay at home.” – Margaret |
| “[My brother] never married, never had children because the pursuit of the career was his thing. I suppose that's a masculine thing that would be approved in a man, in a way that it would not be approved of in a woman.” – Margaret |

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<tr>
<th><strong>Parents dictating or influencing children’s appearances in relation to gender</strong></th>
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<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“I also brought a photo of myself, at almost one. I don't think you would ever see a girl these days dressed in little puffy shorts over the nappy. Looking at that, you really wouldn't know whether I was a boy or a girl.” – Bow</td>
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| **10-18 years in the field** |
| “I think probably I'm influenced by both of my parents. Of course I love them but at the same time I have these thoughts…I don't know whether I like jeans or that was a reaction to what I had to wear.” – Marie |
| “My mum used to insist that I had my hair very short. I hated that… I can remember so badly wanting to have long hair to be like all the other girls… I let [my daughter] grow it long. Now she's got it chopped too.” – Margaret |
| “Had a haircut…halfway through the year… it was like, ‘Oh, you had a haircut.’ His dad was dropping him off, he said, ‘Yes, he looks like a boy now.’” – Margaret |
0-5 years in the field

“Mum was trying to challenge gender roles. She didn't want us to be princesses. She didn't want us to play with Barbies and like pink and stuff. Sometimes she looks at me and she's like, ‘What did I do wrong?’ … She's like, ‘I tried so hard.’ I say, ‘Mum, I'm just a princess.’” – Layla
Themes present in the interviews – Gender identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes that emerged</th>
<th>Significant quotes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploration of gender stereotyped toys, colours, clothing and language</td>
<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong>&lt;br&gt;“The predominance that we have these days of the girls who wooshed [sic] in their pretty flirty, inappropriate dresses for kindergarten. It's just something that is becoming more that rather than less. I would put it down to the marketing.” – Bow&lt;br&gt;“Just because I was a girl didn't mean that I had to be the little princess. There was none of that rubbish that seems to be happening so often now. The t-shirts, I'm a princess -- yes.” – Bow&lt;br&gt;“I'm not sure if that's gender roles so much, except I grew up being described as a tomboy rather than as a little girl. I guess that is an assessment of I wasn't a girly girl, and that girls were different, and I wasn't one of them.” – Bow&lt;br&gt;“When it was brought to me by a preschool field officer and she said, we wouldn't say all the blacks stand up and go to the toilet so why are you using sex, gender wherever. You'll have to forgive me because my daughters tell me I'm impossible in terms of getting my correct terms right.” – Bow&lt;br&gt;“The girls that I teach are obsessive about pink and having pink things and being attached to pink things. Some more than others but they clearly identify pink as a gendered colour and that's something that they need to wrap themselves in. Some girls will be almost panic stricken if they don't get the pink one.” – Jean&lt;br&gt;“I don't try to actively engage with those things but I also don't try to exclude them.” – Jean</td>
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<td><strong>10-18 years in the field</strong>&lt;br&gt;“I had a child with long hair...very boyish in other respects. His interests and so forth were very much mainstream but he had long blond hair.” – Margaret&lt;br&gt;“If you equate long hair with being a girl and you know you're a girl, then you want to have long hair. Then you get to an age of maturity where you realise that that's completely superficial and not really a part of it but for a young child, those things matter.” – Margaret</td>
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<td><strong>5-10 years in the field</strong>&lt;br&gt;“Being very careful about the language we're using. Not having a handyman come out, having a handy person.” – Hazel</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>0-5 years in the field</strong>&lt;br&gt;“One little girl who seemed to have come from a very stereotypical home … brought in all these girly princessy kind of, they were like unicorns or something, and then she couldn't exactly explain why they made her happy. That was one that I thought was interesting.” – Layla</td>
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</table>
“[My sister] definitely got different ideas about what it is to be a girl. She has a shaved head for example. I could never do that. My hair is one of my like -- I have long hair because I'm a girl...I sound really unevolved. At least I am very aware that that doesn't have to be the way... I'm very open to that idea, but this is just my personal style.” – Layla

“You can even hear in the music in the background of advertisements that the boys are rough and destructive. Then there’s explosions going on in the background and telling them that this is what you like and this is how you need to behave to be a boy. It’s the complete opposite when they’re trying to promote anything for girls. Soft music and ballet and light, airy singing and sparkles. I think that feeds into it a lot.” – RC

“He was an interesting character… Yes and I'll never forget them… I always feel like saying him all the time is --... That's language I just tried not to use anyway throughout the day. Just him, her, beautiful, strong, like using these typical adjectives to describe male and female to my class.” – RC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding of diverse gender identities and gender non-conforming behaviours</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Ensuring that the books that we have out and that we read have strong protagonists of either sex.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I'm finding that my thinking is very challenged and muddled at the moment by an awareness that's reached me over the last two years about gender dysphoria and transgender children. I'm struggling to get my head around the idea of the role that gender symbolism plays for people who need to identify as a particular gender and need to be able to put on the cloak of gender in order to feel like they're really themselves. I'm conscious that in trying to actually reduce the presence of gender in the classroom you might actually be depriving some children of opportunities that they need in order to explore their feeling that they're in one gender and they belong in it.” – Jean</td>
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<tr>
<td>“He [her son] wears second-hand clothes, a lot of which are women’s clothes, he dyes his hair but he’s not cross-dressing… and he’s straight. He’s playing with the imagery of what it’s okay to look like if you’re a man and he’s doing it actually quite consciously.” – Jean</td>
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<tr>
<th>10-18 years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I really feel I have a lot of ignorance about all the new issues that we're having about -- not issues but awareness I guess of transgender and intersex. I don't have a full understanding of any of that. That's something I need to find out more about.” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<td>“A mum talking about her child being like that…expressing his need to be a woman or her need to be a woman, as a four-year-old, thinking, ‘Really? Oh, I didn't know that children would know that young.' That's something I need to learn more about.” – Margaret</td>
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(Referring to those who do not fit into the male/female
binary) “A subculture I guess of people who were not in that - - that it wasn’t public like it is now. I’m old enough to remember when – I’m sure there was still poofter-bashing going on.” – Margaret

“When talking about gender, it’s not just male or female. We have none in my room yet but there is one family with two mums.” – Margaret

5-10 years in the field

“New Zealand childhood is very different from Australian so very receptive, you wouldn’t -- I can't say hands down but you probably wouldn't even walk into a kindergarten in New Zealand that would be opposed to any gender because Maori and Pacific Island culture as well and Pacific Island culture, there's Fa'afafine who are men who identify as a woman and they are within almost all families. I can't remember the specific reasons. It's like an actual thing as to the journey of a Fa'afafine and you don't see the same thing in Maori culture.” – EF

“They're like, ‘Well we need to stop that, he shouldn’t be doing that. That’s kinder, he needs to be a boy, he’s a boy.’ We just said, ‘Well, he's not showing any signs for being confused in his gender.’” – Hazel

“I started to have friends coming out and, I suppose, that in itself challenged my own perceptions… and I think it made me look at gender inequality more broadly.” – Tegan

0-5 years in the field

“I have this hunger to learn more about gender and different sexualities and all of these different things.” – Layla

“We had three cousins who were boys and they were tougher, 'tougher' in quotation marks. Like stronger and grabbier, smelly… Which is very interesting though because one of them turned out to be gay. Not stereotypically gay, but they were all really, they were boy boys, like stereotypical boys.” – Layla

“Little boy wants to wear a dress or a Princess Elsa dress to a party instead of Spiderman and just let it go. That's great. He will develop his identity through that. Whether it eventually leads to him being a crossdresser when he is older.” – JP

“Who doesn't wear a nice bra and undies -- because it gives me confidence and you know what a transgender is? Yes it is… How do they feel when they put on stuff like that? Does it empower them; does it make them feel good about themselves?” – JP

“There are children out there that identify in a different way. All of this things, all of the movies and advertisements, they must make it worse for them. They must really separate those two genders so much that they feel…” – RC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References to sexualisation of children</th>
<th>18+ years in the field</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Let's not even get on to the inappropriate sexuality that we are pushing on our children.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-10 years in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Let’s not go down the sexualisation road.” – Hazel</td>
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<tr>
<th>0-5 years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“...Where young girls, we have to act a certain way and portray this sexual being to young boys. You look back at it as an adult. You're like, ‘That is gross’.” – RC</td>
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## Themes present in the interviews – Early childhood settings

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<th>Themes that emerged</th>
<th>Significant quotes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Countering gender stereotypes</td>
<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Children need to be experiencing everything regardless of what gender they are.” – Rose</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I find it very disturbing when other teachers or educators come in and say, ‘All the boys do this, and all the girls do that’. I just really despise that. That sort of makes my skin crawl a bit.” – Rose</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I think it’s really important that children are just children and they're individuals and they're valued for who they are, not based on what gender they are.” – Rose</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I think that we have a responsibility to be thoughtful about how we manage gender in the classroom and don't want to abide to clichéd or excessive emphasis on gender.” – Jean</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“The other thing that we do, more or less consciously, is model doing things that are sometimes stereotypically not female. We have women working at the kindergarten who can use tools, who know about science. We don't exclusively do girly stuff. We do girly stuff too but we don't only do that.” – Jean</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I think training people who are much more gendered in their private lives, know not to bring too much of that into work-setting.” – Jean</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Looking at the girls when they walk in and don't you look pretty, you've got a pretty dress on today, that sort of thing. That's something that I attempt to pull myself upon and to make all the staff aware of as well but it’s really not that simple. I feel it’s becoming increasingly difficult.” – Bow</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>10-18 years in the field</strong></td>
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<td>“I've challenged that a bit. For instance, wearing shorts. I actually think shorts are better for childcare than dresses and that because when they do stuff you can't see their undies. When I've encouraged her to put them on she says, ‘No, I want to wear a dress’ and I've said to her, ‘No, these are girl shorts.’ When I say that they're girl shorts then it's okay. While I'm still allowing her to identify very strongly with being a girl, at the same time I've managed to get the shorts on her.” – Marie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Is there an ideal gender identity or is everyone’s idea of gender identity perfect for them in different ways?” – Marie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I have the approach of -- for every child, my role is to meet their needs and if that involves dealing with gender equity issues, then I'll deal with them in the moment.” – Margaret</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>5-10 years in the field</strong></td>
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|  | “We have a really important role not only to challenge -- so challenge what is often more of a bias or more of a firm
stereotype and also to provoke.” – EF

“I think what we offer is an attempt at gender neutrality, for lack of a better word, but kinder is always a safe space where you’re not sorted or classified.” – Tegan

“I like to think that, yes, maybe if children are getting maybe the more traditional values and beliefs at home; kinder is a place where it’s okay to be, a bit more experimental and not be defined by gender.” – Tegan

“Just them sticking to these ideas that a boy does this and especially boys. It’s like we barely have any issues with our girls. It’s just generally the boys.” – Tegan

“Using those intentional teaching moments … you don’t realise how deeply embedded they are from such a young age that you start to not make them question, but start to bring that awareness to their own ideas.” – Hazel

“I’ve been very guilty of saying that to some of my kids sometimes when they see me outside of -- like we’ve got an event on a kinder club, ‘You look different today.’ I’m like, ‘I’m being a girl.”’ – Hazel

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<tr>
<th>0-3 years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“We did notice that we were very gender stereotyped even though we weren’t trying to be. It just happened.” – Layla</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Maybe I’ve just being influenced by everybody and everything in my life to become a very princessy feminine girly-girl-kind of person…I’ve had recent realisation like, ‘No, this stuff brings me joy’…. ’I was starting to think, ‘Oh dear, what am I doing to the little girls?’” – Layla</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It seems to be bit more acceptable for a girl to dress as a cowboy and as Batman than what it is for a boy to dress as Elsa.” – JP</td>
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<tr>
<td>“It certainly made me think just like talking it out, like there is definitely more that we could be doing from the ground level… it’s something that’s got to be kind of embedded throughout.” – RC</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Asking the questions. Honouring what they say back…just opening up that dialogue…we have a male teacher and getting him to come in on dress-up days in a princess dress.” – RC</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referred to kindergarten teaching as a traditional female role</th>
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<tr>
<td>18+ years in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>“…doing the housework and laundry and stuff as a child and growing up as a teenager, but even -- I went to an only-girl school and there, again, even becoming a kindergarten teacher, that was something I really love doing but it's interesting because that was guided.” – Rose</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Yes, I was to be a nursery teacher or kinder teacher, yes, female, female roles, traditional female roles, going to a girl's high school…I still did more female things, that's really embedded in me, I suppose.” – Rose</td>
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</table>
Somebody who goes to be a physiotherapist, for example, or a doctor or anything, a scientist, might -- why do I think they are better? Because they are not, whereas an early childhood teacher is amazing. I still have that, I don’t know that sort of, yes, it’s like not quite good enough to work.” – Rose

“It's an abysmally sexist industry.” – Jean

“I think that one of the ways that teachers construct the job is, as a kind of house work on steroids... There's also a huge amount of hostility around unfeminine ways of interacting with other people.” – Jean

“We get this kind of moralistic sort of view about setting up the room and presenting it nicely for the children, without any recognition of the fact that that involves people working more as than they're paid for.” – Jean

“Traditionally, early childhood teaching is a very girly thing to do and a lot of young women choose it because they like the idea of being part of a very feminised world.” – Jean

“It's hard to say whether I naturally fell into this or whether it was something that I just absorbed.” – Bow

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<tr>
<th>10-18 years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I suppose I've taken a fairly traditional female job as kindergarten teacher but that's been my choice.” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I don’t like the word passion... That is code for people who will work long hours, do stuff at home... and not get paid for it...” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<th>5-10 years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“I've never been forced, but I think I see other women pushed, whether forcefully or not, into work with young children.” – EF</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Still a very female dominated industry and it's very rare to see a male in it, but even when I was studying we had 120 all around that -- in our year level, only two were males.” – Hazel</td>
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<tr>
<th>0-5 years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“The way it was handled was so catty and bitchy and degrading and that's the side of early childhood that I really despise.” – JP</td>
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<tr>
<th>Children policing gender</th>
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<tr>
<td>18+ years in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Sometimes you find other children are discriminatory against those children.” – Rose</td>
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<tr>
<th>10-18 years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“He changed when he went to school, became a more obviously mainstream boy, I guess. I feel like that was in response to -- not pressure but peer influence.” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<th>0-5 years in the field</th>
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| “It’s just getting worse and worse and worse…, now, down in under threes, if you have a little boy walking around in a fairy
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<tr>
<th>Families’ responses to educators based on age and experience</th>
<th>18+ years in the field</th>
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<td>“That doesn’t necessarily mean that they don’t think it and particularly I have been teaching for over thirty years, people do not take me on in a way that they would have in my first year to ten years out now that I have perhaps the advantage of getting older.” – Bow</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-18 years in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I’ve never dealt with [conflict about sons wearing dresses] in real life… maybe I’ve just been lucky. I don’t know. I think where I am now, certainly I’ve been there about eight years and I think I’ve built up quite a lot of goodwill in the community.” – Margaret</td>
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<tr>
<th>Encounters mixed responses from families in relation to gender</th>
<th>18+ years in the field</th>
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<tr>
<td>“Growing up with a mother, and one parent and a family circle who actively embrace feminism and therefore questioned gender constructs is very important and also gave me space to be a less -- to be a person less defined by my gender perhaps still withholds…. I have done plenty of girly things in my life but there is a chunk of my life where gender is not an issue, it's not. It's just, there is a gender part and there is a gender free part.” – Jean</td>
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<td>“The families that I've worked with have obviously had [a] massive range of different views of gender.” – Jean</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I had a little boy who loved dressing up in girl's clothes or traditionally what kids perceive as girl's clothing. It was really interesting because the children thought it was funny, like it was more of a joke, and he was doing it because he thought it was funny. His family, they thought it was funny too, I guess. It really wasn't a positive experience…How do you educate a family? That's the challenge I guess. Managing people's perceived things and saying this is… yes, he did that to have fun but it shouldn't really [be laughed at]. It's not respectful.” – Rose</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-10 years in the field</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I've had it on multiple occasions now, have been asked, no dress ups for certain boys…It's not families of girls, it's always been families of boys… Funnily enough, it's never come from a mum, and if it has then it's been said, ‘My husband isn't happy about that.’” – EF</td>
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<td>“I’m very conscious of not undermining the values of the family. While I might personally disagree with certain elements of that, I certainly can’t teach the children anything that is in direct opposition of things they’ve been taught at home.” – Tegan</td>
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</table>
| “I find it [gender] much more strongly that way than the other. I think that, in my experience, families are much more willing to let girls do more traditionally masculine things…I feel like the parents are usually more willing to allow that girl to explore those interest, whereas, when it's the other way around, I find that it's much less likely to be accepted.
Particularly, dads, I think, really struggle with their son's exploration in identity.” – Tegan

(Discussing boys wearing dresses) “They know to take it off before the end of the day because their dad doesn't let them do it, so they know it's a safe place at kinder [sic].” – Hazel

“We'd just have a conversation about that so we're all on the same page. And speaking to his mum about it and then being aware of what his dad's feelings [are] towards it, and just trying very hard to make sure that we're respecting his wishes within the program, but also aware that there could be consequences.” – Hazel

0-5 years in the field

“Dad was also a little bit stereotypically masculine. He was a builder by trade. It was probably really hard for him to watch that. He didn't know where it was going to go, yes. I felt really sympathetic for the family, especially the dad … [I] didn't feel I had enough knowledge to really support him.” – Layla

(Reflecting on a scenario where she intervened on behalf of Dad to encourage a child not to wear dresses) “I'd only seen dad; dad did drop off and pickups. I barely saw mum, it was his opinions coming into play and it was what he wanted coming into play. I followed that lead. I didn't, don't know mum, how was I meant to know? It turned really controversial and I probably started off a big fight at their house because my boss went and just grabbed the mum and spoke to her, over the top of us and told her I think.” – JP

“In hindsight I feel really bad that I did push it upon him not to be able to express himself like that, but in an early childhood setting you're theoretically also meant to follow the parent’s beliefs and attributes that they want their children to have.” – JP

“We've had parents becoming quite upset because their children are identifying with a different gender. Families have dealt with that in different ways. Some families tell their child that they're wrong and that child gets quite upset and it's a bit of a battle in that way. Other families are like, ‘This is what's happening, we're just going to let it run its course and support that child and I would like you to do that same thing.’” – RC

“It’s usually the dad. It’s usually the dad and the son. That's probably the biggest moments we see with those little things, wearing dresses, playing with dolls. We don't want him to do that. Why have you done a pink picture?” – RC
Themes present in the interviews – Teacher education and working with colleagues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes that emerged</th>
<th>Significant quotes</th>
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<td>Collaborating and communicating different ideas surrounding gender</td>
<td>18+ years in the field</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“We've only had one staff meeting, but the next one that's something that we really should address.” – Rose</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“To support gender identity and equality, we just do it rather than make it a… it's embedded, I suppose.” – Rose</td>
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<td>“...that is something we probably do need to discuss at a staff meeting.” – Rose</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“I tried to open up a dialogue, everyone fell silent. I hang on for a bit and then nothing changes. Nobody engages and eventually, I become more and more isolated until I’m just having conversations with myself. It becomes pointless because they’re not actually prepared to state or defend their ideas.” – Jean</td>
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<td>“…teams could go together...Something like that would allow a number of people from the team to get together and learn about stuff…” – Marie</td>
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<tr>
<td>5-10 years in the field</td>
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<td>“It's just about finding the clusters of people and other teachers who have had similar experiences to you.” – EF</td>
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<td>“Gender is something that I don't think is discussed enough...We’re reviewing our philosophy at the moment, so adding in something around what support can look like for gender and for at least having those conversations… It does sometimes go unsaid.” – EF</td>
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<td>“I think in the teams I’m working in now, I find that it happens more incidentally…” – Tegan</td>
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<tr>
<td>0-5 years in the field</td>
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<td>“I feel we’re all on the same page and that's not necessarily -- we don’t have to have an active plan or strategy for dealing with those situations because we all, let’s say, come from the same place. We have the same values and beliefs.” – Tegan</td>
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<td>“We're a part of [a researcher’s] study that she's doing. We're getting some education about the issue around gender identity.” – Layla</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“That's probably something that could be done with gender, with teachers who aren't quite on board with the idea that this is social justice. Sit down and go, ‘You might not understand this but as a team of professionals, this is what we're promoting.’ That’s probably what should happen.” – RC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expressing empathy for people who feel challenged by social change</td>
<td>18+ years in the field</td>
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|                                                                                  | “I think, perhaps, this is what threatens people is they feel like they're being asked to give up everything that was precious to them, the girls who loved playing with dolls are being told, that was wrong. The boys who loved the trucks are being told,
that was wrong.” – Bow

“It can be incredibly threatening to someone who is just happily gone their whole life acting in a certain way, believing that they have control over their destiny, to be told now your whole life is a sham because you’ve actually had this forced upon you.” – Bow

10-18 years in the field

“You're raising the level of awareness and then you can go deeper when you're ready.” – Marie

3-10 years in the field

“I don’t think her intent was malicious… It's really hard that you challenge people as a professional, or as an educator, or whatever, and their practice, but, really, what you're challenging is their life experience, and their beliefs.” – Tegan

0-5 years in the field

“As a whole, we're trying our best to be -- yo learn more and be more accepting of fluidity; that things aren't set in stone and they are changing. The evolution of life from the times, because we do have a lot of older educators or a lot of educators that aren't from Australia, so that may have different cultural ideas about gender as well…We're all trying to get on the same page and it is changing and we're all learning.” – Layla

Conflict between staff over gender practices – generation based and philosophy based

18+ years in the field

(In response to a highly gendered statement made by an educator) “I was absolutely horrified…I personally, am not very good at being confrontational. I am not someone to say, ‘Look, I was really disappointed with what you said. We need to sit down and talk about it.’ It was more a case of ‘What on earth do you mean saying that?’ in a jocular fashion and hoping you get the message and then perhaps later on coincidentally having various staff meetings about how you can avoid bias.” – Bow

“It's not a situation as you would find in child care roles where people are acting this way out of lack of knowledge. There’s a bit of a conviction on her part that well of course girls like things like that and it doesn’t matter what you say. I know because I have been a mum and I am now a grandmother, with two granddaughters, that little girls like this sort of stuff. To an extent, I can offer an alternative point of view but it is a debate rather than acting out of ignorance. I can say, ‘Well, look, we don’t do that sort of thing’. But I don’t think that I am ever going to change her tightly held beliefs.” – Bow

“With the other educator… If a boy put on a dress then it would be a photo opportunity -- cause isn't it cute that the boys are dressing up like that…’ ‘Look at them aren’t they gorgeous we have to take photos of them.’ All dressed up in their dresses and their jewellery and all that sort of thing so in a way that would not happen with the girls, which to me is just as negative really. They dressed up like that and it should be unremarkable.” – Bow
"I’ve had people who make assumptions about being okay to reinforce stereotypical views which I’ve just said, ‘No. You’re not going to do that’. Just overruled them again. It’s not something I really make a matter of discussion." – Jean

"From my perception, my issues around gender in my workplace are entirely to do with the adults and not with the children. That’s not with the educational program." – Jean

### 10-18 years in the field

"They used to have like a Get to Know You sheet that specified mum's name, dad's name and they decided, the staff in the room decided to just change it to parent and parent. ...but it did cause an issue for one staff member, apparently. She could not get her head around the whole two-mum thing.” – Margaret

### 3-10 years in the field

"Once I developed some confidence in my own ability as an educator and in my own philosophy, I think in my own pedagogy, I thought that I just worked on what I could do in my space and hoped that that would have an impact on the others around me.” – Tegan

"I think you have to be approaching these things in the same way. If the children are getting the message from me that kinder’s [sic] a safe place to explore different identity… but then the other educators are telling them, well, in their behaviour or explicitly with words...that’s not okay, then, obviously, there’s going to be some confusion and some frustration around that.” – Tegan

"We'd respect the individual opinions of the staff as well. Just some of them it was still had that more traditional sense that, "No, boys don’t do that."” – Hazel

### 0-5 years in the field

"I don't know if it was more to do with the gender issue or more to do with the power play…” – Layla

"They think it’s a bit of a joke. It’s just like we’re making the problem by identifying that there’s a concern here. Boys are boys. Girls are girls. Stop worrying about pretending that they’re not. They have that issue of it’s not an issue. You’re making it an issue.” – RC

### Importance and impact of teacher education in gender for educators

### 18+ years in the field

"I believe that everybody should have an open mind and think widely about lots of things… education has certainly made me think more broadly than I might have if I hadn't had that experience.” – Rose

"It's a cycle; a person’s path through life is going to very much influence how open they become to considering this as a topic… I mean, if you didn't go into further education or you went into a particular field that was very rigid, that would be a very different experience.” – Bow

"Some of those ideas have become mainstream now and very much form part of the training that staff get in early
childhood.” – Jean

“I had a wonderful [teacher]…and she really made us very aware of -- I never segregate children and count how many boys and girls there are.” – Rose

**10-18 years in the field**

“Reflection comes into it so much. It's not one of those things where you can just probably have a curriculum of what you need to teach.” – Marie

**5-10 years in the field**

“A whole six months of looking at… it was kind of like a [multi]pronged approach like gender influence, supporting gender, a big subject… coming into uni, had that really strong paper, also gender came throughout lots of different papers.” – EF

“That was a response that I learned at uni many years ago because…part of our studies were on gender and what it can look like in the classroom. We were kind of schooled up on it and then here was me thinking, 'That's never going to come up because who really cares?' But no, people do care.” – EF
## Themes related to Artefact 2 – Gender identity

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Artefact and Participant</th>
<th>Example Quotes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Femininity, including physical symbols of gender (clothing, hair, makeup, bras)</td>
<td>Pierced ears – Rose</td>
<td>18+ years in the field&lt;br&gt;Rose: “I feel it's feminine. That's how I perceive myself to be internally.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Baby doll and photo of herself as a child – Bow</td>
<td>10-18 years in the field&lt;br&gt;Marie: “If she had a choice that's how she'd look every day. I'm completely different. I don't feel comfortable in skirts.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Daughter’s art smock – Marie</td>
<td>5-10 years in the field&lt;br&gt;Hazel: “...if I had red lipstick on I was pretending to be a grownup, or I need to have the lipstick. So, that's how I had started to identify with gender...”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Photo of her as young child with short hair – Margaret</td>
<td>0-5 years in the field&lt;br&gt;JP: “I brought a bra because as a little girl getting a bra was a huge thing for me. I'm sure it is for most girls. It’s quite a stepping stone, it's quite a maturity thing, it's quite an identity thing. It's a big girl growing up thing.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Football jumper from childhood – Tegan</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Red lipstick and a tiara – Hazel</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Green sports bra – JP</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Headband (tiara) and rose quartz – Layla</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Set of balancing scales – RC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of family, background and upbringing</td>
<td>Daughter’s art smock – Marie</td>
<td>10-18 years in the field&lt;br&gt;Marie: “We had a strict religious background so we had to wear really gendered clothes. I had to wear skirts and dresses.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of her as young child with short hair – Margaret</td>
<td>5-10 years in the field&lt;br&gt;EF: “…when I was thinking about my own gender identity and the way I feel about who I am and in regards to gender, it really stems back to my very early days of being on the farm.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of family farm in NZ – EF</td>
<td>Hazel: “[It] would be a tiara … it's that princess idea that I was still daddy's little girl.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Football jumper from childhood – Tegan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childhood play with toys and other children</td>
<td>Baby doll and photo of herself as a child – Bow</td>
<td>18+ years in the field&lt;br&gt;Bow: “My gender journey, I guess, is that on the one hand, yes, there certainly were the dolls. On the other hand, there was common sense.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daughter’s art smock – Marie</td>
<td>10-18 years in the field&lt;br&gt;Margaret: “I always had to be the dad or the baby brother because I had the short hair.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of her as young child with short hair – Margaret</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal identification with gender (feeling like an outcast, feeling judged, feeling in control of gender identity)</td>
<td>Awareness of gender expectations</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Teacher registration card – **Jean**  
Photo of her as young child with short hair – **Margaret**  
Football jumper from childhood – **Tegan**  
Photo of family farm in NZ – **EF**  
Green sports bra – **JP**  
Headband (tiara) and rose quartz – **Layla**  
Set of balancing scales – **RC** | Teacher registration card – **Jean**  
Daughter’s art smock – **Marie**  
Football jumper from childhood – **Tegan**  
Photo of family farm in NZ – **EF**  
Headband (tiara) and rose quartz – **Layla** |

### 5-10 years in the field

**Tegan:** “It’s sort of a defining moment for me when I realised I was a girl and I was different.”

### 18+ years in the field

**Jean:** “my experience of being in this industry and this workplace has… provided a lot of challenges for me in terms of my concept of myself as a woman.”

### 10-18 years in the field

**Margaret:** “I can remember so badly wanting to have long hair to be like all the other girls. I suppose that's just-- that's my earliest memory, I think, of thinking about anything gender-related.”

### 5-10 years in the field

**Tegan:** “I lean towards this sort of identity I’ve created for myself as one of the boys and playing the footy and doing all of those things or do I embrace the fact that I'm not a boy. I can embrace some more traditionally girly aspects of my personality and be the girl in the house rather than just be one of the boys.”

### 0-5 years in the field

**Layla:** “I’ve actually been battling with an internal battle thinking maybe this isn’t really me. I’ve had recent realisations like, ‘No, this stuff brings me joy. This is actually me. I’m just an ultra-feminine person’.”

### 18+ years in the field

**Jean:** “I find the work of being part of a team of women is very difficult for me because of the ways in which I feel like I don’t conform well enough to their ideas of what I should be.”

### 10-18 years in the field

**Marie:** “My mum expected me to help her with the housework which I hated.”

### 5-10 years in the field

**Tegan:** “it really stems back to my very early days of being on the farm. Not only watching my parents have very mixed roles in whatever needed to be done, but as well as, as I grew up, I don't have any brothers. It was always expected of me to just help out and do all those sorts of things…”

### 0-5 years in the field

**Layla:** “We all start up as rocks in my little metaphor but some of us, especially...”
females, are polished and all that rough edges kind of curved off us and we're primed and become very proper. Then we become a beautiful little gemstone that looks perfect and that's what society does to little girls and does to women.”
### Artefacts selected by participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Artefact #1</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Artefact #2</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>18+ years of experience in the field</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Rose</td>
<td>Cow ear tag on keychain</td>
<td>Given by dad. Represents background, upbringing and the influence that her dad had on her life</td>
<td>Her pierced ears</td>
<td>They are feminine, which is how she perceives herself. Also represents her upbringing in a family with strong ideas about gender roles</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Bow</td>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>Representing two parents enfolding three children. Her identity is bound up in the nuclear family</td>
<td>Baby doll and photo of herself as a child</td>
<td>Represents the way she was dressed as a child, about sensible clothing rather than femininity. She did have dolls but would be dressed in overalls and shorts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Jean</td>
<td>Necklace</td>
<td>Containing three swirls, from France. Represents travel and learning languages</td>
<td>Teacher registration card</td>
<td>Represents her struggles in the early childhood industry, working in a highly female-based industry, as she is made to feel that she does not conform to other’s ideas of what she should be</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>10-18 years of experience in the field</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Marie</td>
<td>Driver’s license</td>
<td>Identity card – the government’s perspective on identity</td>
<td>Daughter’s art smock</td>
<td>Represents her daughter’s desire to dress in a ‘girly’ fashion and wear dresses all the time, where Marie was raised in an environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bertha*</td>
<td>Photo of family in Columbia</td>
<td>Represents how they helped her succeed and a reminder of where she came from</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Mirror</td>
<td>Represents how identity is influenced by so many different things. Reflects identity, face and things around you</td>
<td>Photo of her as a young child with short hair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5-10 years of experience in the field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>7</th>
<th>EF</th>
<th>Tiki pendant</th>
<th>Given by grandfather for her 21st birthday. Represents home, Maori culture and family</th>
<th>Photo of family farm in NZ</th>
<th>Represents her early years on the farm, watching her parents take on ‘mixed roles’ and being expected to help in all roles. Raised to believe that as a person she can do anything</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tegan</td>
<td>Photo of family on holiday</td>
<td>Represents a strong link between identity and family through past experiences, in particular her role as a caretaker and her love of travel</td>
<td>Football jumper from childhood</td>
<td>Represents a defining moment in her early childhood when she realised she was ‘different’ during a game of football when she was not allowed to play on the ‘shirt’s off’ team because she was</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>Phone cover with tree picture</td>
<td>Relates to the tree with the swing and the lighting as she loves being out in nature, in and around trees</td>
<td>Red lipstick and a tiara</td>
<td>Represents her exploration of traditional girl gender roles, borrowing her mum’s lipstick. As an adult she still enjoys red lipstick to make her feel grown up and feminine. Tiara is a symbol of being her daddy’s girl</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Layla</td>
<td>Photo of cat</td>
<td>Cat represents the feelings of when she got her first home, makes her feel independent but she also cares for someone else</td>
<td>Headband (tiara) and rose quartz</td>
<td>Represents internal battle of her enjoyment of ‘girly’ things and whether it is genuine or culturally formed. The stone represents how some females are polished, rough edges removed and made to be perfect gemstones in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>JP</td>
<td>Photo of family</td>
<td>Represents being a mum, daughter, sister, sister-in-law and friend. Different roles that define identity</td>
<td>Green sports bra</td>
<td>Representing the milestone of getting her first bra as it was an important time for her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Matryoshka stacking doll</td>
<td>Represents how you can see everyone from the outside but not from the inside</td>
<td>Set of balancing scales</td>
<td>Represents when she was younger and believed that she needed to follow the styles in the magazines. As she has gotten older she has realised that it doesn’t fulfil</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>her as a person and she needs to find a balance</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Participant who participated in the focus group but declined to be interviewed due to job turnover*
### Themes related to Artefact 1 – Sense of identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Artefact and Participant</th>
<th>Example Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influence of family, background and upbringing</td>
<td>Necklace 2 – Jean</td>
<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong> Rose: “...It was for cows and [Dad] gave it to me and he passed away about 8 months ago, so, I just saw it and it reminds me of my background and my upbringing and the influence he had on my life...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cow tag – Rose</td>
<td><strong>10-18 years in the field</strong> Bertha: “I was watching my mum on how she raised me... I am so grateful because it's who I am and I think they did a good job.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of family one – Bertha</td>
<td><strong>5-10 years in the field</strong> Tegan: “So for me, I think my sense of identity is really strongly linked to family.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of family on holiday – Tegan</td>
<td><strong>0-5 years in the field</strong> JP: “I'm a daughter, I'm a sister, I'm a sister in law, and I am also a friend. That's my sense of identity.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tiki pendant – EF</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of family two – JP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a parent, caretaker, having pets</td>
<td>Necklace one – Bow</td>
<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong> Bow: “my identity is very bound up in the nucleus of the family that we have created”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Necklace two – Jean</td>
<td><strong>5-10 years in the field</strong> Tegan: “So when I think about myself, I think that's strongly what I identify with. The caretaker of my family, that sort of idea.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of family on holiday – Tegan</td>
<td><strong>0-5 years in the field</strong> RC: “She makes me feel independent, but I'm also caring for someone else and have somebody else in my life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of pet cat – RC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of family two – JP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel and learning languages</td>
<td>Necklace two – Jean</td>
<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong> Jean: “…that ties me back to that time of travelling and also a period of my life when I was very focused on learning languages...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Photo of family on holiday – Tegan</td>
<td><strong>5-10 years in the field</strong> Tegan: “Travel is really a big part of my life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place of origin, culture, the natural world,</td>
<td>Cow tag – Rose</td>
<td><strong>18+ years in the field</strong> Rose: “That's where, I guess, I came from...”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Internal and external influences | Mirror – Margaret | 10-18 years in the field  
Margaret: “...you can see the reflection of all the things around you in the mirror just as a sort of a symbolic thing...”  
Marie: “...what the government sees as my identity...”  
5-10 years in the field  
EF: “And it's always a lovely talking point with children, which I think is a strong part of who I am as well.”  
0-5 years in the field  
Layla: “We can see everyone on the outside, but there's always more to a person on the inside...” | Tiki pendant – EF  
Matryoshka doll – Layla | Phone cover – Hazel | 10-18 years in the field  
Bertha: “Now that I'm away, it's just a reminder of where I come from.”  
5-10 years in the field  
EF: “So every time I wear it, I always feel like home, and it reminds me of where I'm from.”  
Hazel: “I spend a lot of time out in nature — I love being in and around trees. I have always wood, or the tree of life, or something integrated into my outfit for the day. And that's how I can be me and feel grounded.” | Tiki pendant – EF |
## Themes present in EYLF developer participants’ interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes that emerged</th>
<th>Significant Quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitive nature of the work</td>
<td>“You write briefings about what the issues are, what might be controversial…” – Jamie</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“My involvement was actually asking a lot of hard questions.” – Jamie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It's not so difficult for government employees because you can explain why but it's very difficult for policy makers, the politicians who do something which flies in the face of public opinion, even if that public opinion might be from a minority. Make enough noise, it can be very controversial and difficult.” – Jamie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“We have to be mindful of confidentiality.” – Lisa</td>
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<tr>
<td>(In response to critical perspectives, gender diversity, or other sorts of diversity) “That was a huge issue and that prompted us receiving 6:00 AM phone calls, from people asking for a briefing for the relevant minister… That was the time and it was really, really pretty awful, the way those shock jocks can just cut and just zoom on just a tiny, tiny part of something much bigger. Then there were all these horrible posts to blogs and letters, especially to the Murdoch Press, asserting all sorts of things in much the same way. You know the whole thing about the Safe Schools program and how the press has got into a tizzy about that, an uproar about that from the work that's been done at La Trobe… That's reminded me really of… what it was like although in our case we were able to shut it down or the bureaucrats were able to find a way to shut it down so that it didn't go on and on and on like the Safe Schools program has.” – Lisa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Considerations over when to 'push' for content to be included</td>
<td>“We had an agreement that we meant it very broadly but we knew that once we started to define it we would run the risk of leaving somebody out and that was a real risk. If we defined it too specifically, we would also run the risk of not getting it through ministers.” – Jamie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“You have to make a decision about whether we're going to get this through, or whether it is going to collapse in the heat and we'll have nothing.” – Jamie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“If you start to get a little bit too explicit or you hang onto something which is probably almost like an ideology in a way, politicians do have to make final decisions about this, get very worried if it's seen as being exclusive or leaning in one particular direction that the general public might not understand or accept.” – Jamie</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“Our brief was also to write an educator's guide. We put so much work into that and it was a really substantial document, well over 100 pages. We worked on that for weeks and weeks over so many drafts and in the end they just ditched that completely and had somebody else write it so that was a shame…We were able to weave in a lot more cutting edge things into that… that was an example of something we just couldn't break through.” – Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The whole thing was … the result of huge negotiation…” – Lisa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|                                                 | “We tried to scatter words throughout, and literally that example I've just given about the…word for example having really strong meaning. That would be an example of code I suppose, the term in the sense we were using it… There are quite a few examples throughout, where we
just scale things back but try to use where we could slip them in. I was literally trying to slip things in, under the radar where we thought they wouldn’t fit in the ministries concerned. They would still speak in some way to people who were looking for signs or probably a more critical approach… at first what we were very pleased about that we were still able to include some stuff about critically reflective factors, and we were able to get those questions in on page 13, more released in the way that we wanted. An example of code is just towards the bottom of page 13, there is mention of a lively culture of professional inquiry. Well, lively was a bureaucrat word, a policy maker’s word. We wanted critical culture of critical professional inquiry, or words to that effect. Lively is a very sort of watered down softer version.” – Lisa

“We felt that bringing a feminist post-structural perspective to that was very important but at the same time we knew that they would have to be, we wouldn't be up to run with a full on feminist post-structural perspective because they've been in our consortium of thirty people. Not everybody felt really comfortable with that. We knew we'd have to, I don't want to use the term, watered down. We knew that there'd be lots and lots of negotiations and that we wouldn't end up with a purely feminist post-structural perspective by any means…” – Lisa

“It meant really extraordinary compromise but as it turned out I think it's basically done what we had hoped it would do. That was people to find enough of what was important to them to really be able to run with it in ways that they felt was important for them. The whole feminist post-structuralist thing got watered down ultimately, I suppose, to just a very few words across the whole document. We hope that people – and especially if they became aware of the story behind its development – we hope that that would give them enough license to continue to run with, say, the feminist post-structuralist and critical ideas for that gender role or whatever they were passionate enough about.” – Lisa

“We’ve tried as far as we can, because we did feel silenced in so many ways, so many things that we would have loved to have seen in there weren’t able to be in there. That whole thing of, well, is it better to get 80% of something or 100% of nothing? ... I wouldn’t say that we’ve got 80% of what we would have liked in there; I think it’s a lower percentage than that but it doesn’t take away from the fact that people suddenly seemed to have engaged with it, and the people who are engaging deeply seem to be finding enough space to run with pretty interesting ideas.” – Lisa

“Each of the groups each of those working groups had to backpedal a bit. It was the gender and diversity group who had to give up the most, around the most of what they hold dear.” – Lisa

“We had to come up with something that none of those people would find threatening in any way, like politically threatening and even before it got to the ministers we had to come up with something that the key advisers, the key bureaucrats would be happy to take to the minister. There were all these filters that it had to go through.” – Lisa

| Brevity of the framework | “…they felt very reassured and they also felt very reassured in having a brief framework, and not something that was far more detailed.” – Jamie |
| “We did of a consortium pretty much to a couple of consultations around the whole, the design of the document? Was it big enough? Was it small enough? Did it cover everything that the early childhood sector felt needed to be covered?” – Jamie |
“We didn't want people to resort to checklists; that was important... how do you keep it short, and how do you keep it as exemplars rather than prescriptive, so trying to come up with a list that wasn't like a list, if you like.” – Jamie

“The draft that we were working on really did start to blow out in length. It got to be -- I don’t know I think over 100 pages. Then we were asked to cut it back to no more than 20 pages, even though the actual document is about 47 pages. The request that we cut it back to 70 pages I guess was in a way a wakeup call or a short tactic by the government people, to make us realise that we couldn’t possibly say all that we wanted to say, because we’d just get too lengthy.” – Lisa

| Terminology used in the framework | "...how do you get a balance between bringing the professional knowledge forward by using terms that are professionally legitimate, in terms of education, for example, curriculum but helping people to begin where they’re at, in terms of the language that they used. Bearing in mind, that we were -- there was a big debate about is this for qualified educators or is it for all educators?” – Jamie

(About the word ‘critical’) “I just think that it’s a step forward, and I was fairly experienced relating to documents firstly towards that. A lot of educators might have to be a bit turned off by that thinking that maybe we were pushing a particular barrow, and I think I was concerned that ministers might think that we were encouraging people to critique and criticise. It’s just so often seen as a word that people wouldn’t be comfortable with.” – Lisa |

| Strategies used in the development of the framework | “I think that it was a combination of the expert knowledge in the consortium group, the research papers that informed the policy knowledge of the government group, and making compromises, I think, and having debates in order to get to those compromises.” – Jamie

“As part of putting together the tender, we knew that we wanted to have a big group of people and that we deliberately wanted to have people from a range of different sectors. That is practitioners, academic people from the union, a couple of employer organisations and we also wanted to have people that came from very different philosophical and theoretical perspectives. We felt that if we had a huge diversity in our team … that would reflect the diversity in the field or go some way towards reflecting the diversity in the field.” – Lisa |

| Focus on outcomes in the framework | “...we talked within the government group very, very early on about learning outcome because as you would know, and it's still the case, in government the field of education is very much focused around outcomes. Firstly, it was about what sort of outcomes. There was a lot of tentative feeling about outcomes, even from a number of the consortium members because of some of the ways in which outcomes had become very narrow, so we had to really sort out what we meant by an outcome.” – Jamie

“I think we got to a point where we could agree there would be a small number of outcomes, so people could actually remember them because you don't always sit around and look at the book when you're trying to set up a program or observe children, and think about outcomes in their multiplicity and their interrelatedness rather than as isolated entities.” – Jamie

“We had to think very carefully about whether or not they were to do with traditional cognitive areas or academic learning or much more holistic… We thought that these five interrelated outcomes should bring together a holistic view of children. I think also knowing particularly
what families’ aspirations for their children might be. A number of us had done a bit of work on this over the years, working with parents and felt we had a good idea about what parents wanted.” – Jamie

(On sense of identity) “I think a lot of us pushed this notion. We did say, ‘Oh, well that’s not an outcome. How can identity be an outcome?’ You had to have, what did we actually want to either achieve or to change? I think we had words like, positive sense of identity. A lot of debate over the words because there was that debate around, is identity a culmination or an overarching outcome of having all of the other things, the other outcomes? That was one question I think.” – Jamie

“There was a lot of debate about, ‘Well, what do we know from the research? What do we know from the work that we've done in practice? What helps children have a strong sense of identity?’ In some ways it was a bit of a practical thing and we had that as an overarching thing and we think what contributes to, what are the key ideas we could pick as focus sub-outcomes that would contribute to that, rather than having five outcomes say identity.” – Jamie

“It became a matter of just trying to get in some really key examples and some key strategies, but just stating them as examples only. We didn’t want people to feel that anything in there in terms of strategies they must do, though just truly listed as examples… I’m just looking at page 24 which is outcome on children having strong sense of identity. There are a couple of boxes on the top half of the page, and in each of those boxes, for example, is just really clear. That was something that we pushed hard to having there, just, for example, all the way through. Then when the two government people we worked closely for, they actually suggested that in the blank part underneath where it says -- they suggested we add your own examples from your context.” – Lisa

“…as we narrowed down with policy makers always, they suggested that a large part of it be structured around outcomes. We just felt collectively that it was probably better to reduce it to five outcomes rather than six, so we collected one group…They kept chipping away at the document, and each group worked on contents related to a particular outcome, but even through the reiterations it just became opened enormously. For example, in relation to the diversity and equity outcome at one stage, there was quite a lot of writing about gender being fluid and so forth and socially constructed. Then there were some examples throughout the document I suppose in relation to groups that can be marginalised. Mainly there was writing about children that means it can be marginalised because of gender. Ultimately, we were asked, but by then we could see that it was a good idea not to actually include any specific examples. I could say of marginalisation or discrimination because as policy makers we’re a pretty fluid bunch, particularly the two who work closely with us. They said one should stop putting in examples that can be read as excluding in itself, because you can’t -- we can’t realistically hope to have an example that relates to every type of discrimination or marginalisation. I’m sure that at one stage we probably had as an example, something to do with say children who are experimenting with a range of gender identities. We’re probably heading down towards transgender, but I don’t think we actually use the term transgender, but that’s certainly where we were heading and the importance.” – Lisa

| Implementing the framework | “There was quite a lot of time where centres, particularly centres and family day care could start to get used to the framework before they had to implement the national quality standards… It was good in that there wasn't a lot of pressure, even though they knew what was coming, but |
also it firmly placed the emphasis on children’s learning rather than the old system of accreditation and minimum of standards, and much more around the health and safety and things like that. It was flagging a new emphasis, and teachers really liked that.” – Jamie

“We had to go out, reassure people, say in some ways it's not as different as what you've been doing. That was particularly people who might have been your untrained or your cert three staff or perhaps hadn't had as much as experience as diploma and degree trained people.” – Jamie

“The other thing that we did that my team lead was some practitioner research projects whereby we offered some funding... One thing we did was offer people some project money if they wanted to apply and within a broader framework of implementing the EYLF, they developed, each centre or service developed its own research question, worked through an action research model... We brought them back in probably about four or five times during the year. They shared their stories, they feed back to each other, and then we actually published their final reports on our department's website. We had the project evaluated by an external evaluator.... We decided that implementation was so important that people in the team that I was leading wrote the educator guide, that national document.” – Jamie

“There's three documents. Some of the stories came out of some of that practitioner research in there and then there are the resources. I’m not so sure, two documents, sorry. We did that and then we thought that cultural competence was pretty important so in addition to the chapter on cultural competent in the educator guide, two of our Aboriginal staff wrote a professional development package on cultural competence.” – Jamie

“I guess the main thing is that it serves as a springboard for people to do the more -- for this critical post-structural work if they would like to do that... It doesn’t hold them back anyway. One of the really strong principles of the brief that we had was from policy makers, was that they really, really wanted it to be something that educators would be engaged with, not stuck up on the shelf somewhere, and knowing that there is such a huge diversity amongst educators. Well, again we couldn’t go out on a limb in a very particular way.” – Lisa

“That’s why it’s so good to be able to talk with a range of people, so that the words spread I supposed, and people in a way feel reassured and encouraged that they can really take it far beyond what the words on paper say.” – Lisa

| Discussions around children’s identity | "An old argument … [is] that our young children don't notice these things. They don't notice diversity, they don't notice difference, everyone’s the same. We know that's not true but if there's a perception in the community, then the government will take notice of that and go, ‘Oh, how do I deal with this?’” – Jamie |
| The inclusion of gender under the ‘sense of identity’ outcome | "...my assumption would be it fits best there because it is about, who am I? That's kind of, I think we thought was the basic premise for then, who am I in finding out more about how I can communicate with others, how I find out about the world. I went back and had a look at places where we possibly could have strengthened it and …under the second outcome is connected to and contribute to the world. We looked at diversity and when I look at how it's written, it's written very much in terms of cultural diversity.” – Jamie |

“We may have put it there and emphasised it in other areas because of
the potential controversial nature of it in getting it through, I don't know. I can't remember if we did that. That's a possibility, but also, in any of this writing, we tended to try and be inclusive. It wasn't just about gender but it was about any particular group including age groups. A lot of debate about when you start to be specific, who do you exclude? …the opposite point was if you get so general you're actually excluding those specificities that people need to think about.” – Jamie

“It's a real tension. I'm thinking you made me think about if I was doing this now and there's a whole lot of issues around gender that we really haven't examined…” – Jamie

“If we're talking about the binaries of gender specificity, that's become much more prevalent in things like advertising, toys, a whole lot of things, but then there's all the cross-gender stuff, intersex stuff that we would, I don't know, how we'd deal with it. If we think about the governments we've got now, we might not get anywhere. It's really tricky. Sounds like an excuse and it's not. It's what I recall. We've put it in identity because it -- Well, gender and how it played out and how it's perceived by other people is such a powerful thing in terms of who you are, who you've come to be, and how you actually decide what you're going to reveal to other people.” – Jamie

“If you don't have a strong sense of identity and you're not surrounded by people who also do and there's a sense of openness, then you're actually not necessarily going to feel very comfortable with your gender and breaking some of the stereotypical moulds that might be around.” – Jamie

Changes they would make now

“I would argue, I'd be much bolder and lay the issues on the table. If I was working for the government, I would be much more assertive in briefings. However, I would also be quite cautious still because still in my mind there would be the issue of getting it through, getting something through that. Also now, the controversy that surrounded the revision of the Australian Curriculum and Safe Schools projects. We are still so conservative. In fact, it's possible that Australia has become more conservative in lots of ways so it might be even harder to deal with it now, I don't know. There are so many pressing issues around diversity and equity that it's just so important because if you do nothing, you're really reinforcing the views that you don't want to reinforce. Then the hypothetical question because I will never be involved in this again.” – Jamie

“I guess we’d want to have a sense of what the processes for approval were going to be and whose scrutiny it would have to pass to get up. I think we've learned that sometimes you have to be circumspect in trying to get through what you want to get through. While we’d start out with what we saw as the ideal, I think we would know that we would have to probably water it down, turn it down. I'm not quite sure what the right phrase is. Again, I think we would want to start with the ideas that are important with feminist post-structural perspective or a critical perspective. We would want in terms of diversity and equity, I guess we would just want to be upfront about the importance of diversity, respect for diversity, appreciation of diversity in all its many forms. We’ve been wanting to move away from there being any norm and the importance of critically examining perspectives.” – Lisa

References to Indigenous content

“...there was that flash in the press about promoting indigenous perspectives, which really surprised me and it was very negative… Now I'm showing my colours here but [it was] the kind of right wing perspectives of this is about everybody, not just about indigenous people. Of course it's about everybody, that's why we put indigenous
“What we'd really like to do is go back to what we tried to do in the EYLF that that was cut out to. A preamble really that honoured the Indigenous people of Australia. We want to make that quite a politically upfront statement, ironically, in the same way that the framework that came out a year or so before, this one, the British Columbia framework... I think we would want to try and have that gently political statement. We would want to have -- try to weave in the importance of - - we'd really have some statement about a curriculum for a country that we would like to see as welcoming of refugees, that whole thing, committed to upholding United Nations declarations of various kinds. We did have a preamble about -- I forget exactly but it was very much modelled on the British Columbia framework on the sentiments in that and obviously, changed to the Australian context, and the diversity about society and the importance of really valuing that diversity as a foundation for a strong nation and a strong early childhood education, and education sector more broadly. That very much framed what we wanted to do and that's not really reflected at all.” – Lisa

“Something else I didn't mention too was at one stage fairly early on in the development of the EYLF, the government people decided that it would be better if there was indigenous specific equivalent to the EYLF. They felt that was more respectful than trying to bring everything in under the EYLF itself. I guess we didn't think that was the best way to go but there was already quite a nice document that had been produced in Queensland. I think the Queensland bureaucrats in particular felt that would be a better document as the basis of an Indigenous specific document.” – Lisa
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestions from participants to assist them in gender equity practice</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Professional Development</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Professional development (PD) presenters need to take into the account the context and experience of the people in the room</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Team based PD, otherwise the individual returns and finds it hard to implement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Affordable PD</td>
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<tr>
<td>• PD and workshops should include talking not just information</td>
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<tr>
<td>• VIT training criteria should include gender PD</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Professional resources about “the correct way to do it”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Relevant or updated books since many settings hold on to older resources that contain stereotypes</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Learn how to censor books so that you can keep the joy of the story but “strip away all the crap” (Bow)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Information on how to use old resources in a new way rather than having to gain entirely new resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>• No formal structured lesson plans</td>
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<tr>
<td>• A resource pack on gender with prompt cards and resources like puppets</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Online resource links, family friendly websites that explain gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Resources for educators to understand why we promote this approach</td>
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<td>• Resources for families as many don’t understand the value in this play and this kind of exploration</td>
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<td>• Resources for the children that represent their families</td>
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<td>• Compelling and engaging information and articles</td>
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to ensure people read it
- Resource to say these are the things you can do

Curriculum
- Easy to follow curriculum with FAQs on potential problems you may encounter

Information
- Needs information on gender identity that shouldn’t be particularly wordy or no one would read it. It almost needs to be a checklist with examples

Self-reflection
- Need to unpack own experiences and engage in reflective practice

Guidance
- Guidance on particular areas, including clothing, colours, and roles
- How-to booklet with suggested activities
- Gender needs to be discussed more
- Conversations about how we can improve practice through professional development
- Support and wider scope of knowledge across all employees
- Learn from scratch about gender as it has only recently become a large and contentious topic
- Professional dialogue about gender
- Something like Safe Schools that is geared towards differences
- Something that all educators are using, it must be consistent throughout the setting

Policy
- Specific policy on gender rather than diversity in general
- Gender should be listed in policies and philosophies
Focus group scenarios

Scenario One:

A child joins your class who has recently immigrated from India. He and his family follow the Sikh religion and so he eats a vegetarian diet and wears a turban on his head. The children have never encountered turbans before and are very intrigued by it, making comments and on the occasion, even laugh about it. The little boy does not like this attention and insists on wearing a hoodie inside so that he can cover his turban. At meal times he is very picky and often displeased with his ‘different’ meal.

Scenario Two:

You work at a setting where Christmas and Easter have always been celebrated in a big way. All children make Easter baskets, Santa masks and other festive crafts as well as the grand Christmas concert each year. The parents of a child in your class approach you and explain that they are Jewish and do not celebrate Christian holidays and that they do not like their child engaging in Christmas and Easter crafts. In fact, the mother adds that when the children do these, the father often gets angry and throws them away.

Scenario Three:

A child in your setting has a strong interest in Ben-10. She attends each day in clothing with Ben-10 pictures all over it, and whenever possible, will choose to create and wear Ben-10 costumes. Some of the other children in the setting comment on this during their play. When the child would try to initiate play with some of the girls in the group they tell the child daily that green is not a girl colour and that Ben-10 is for boys, not girls. One child tells her that she can’t come to her birthday party because she likes Ben-10 not fairies. In addition, you overhear some of the boys turning her away as Ben-10 is a boy, not a girl, and so she can’t be Ben-10, just the mother or sister.

Scenario Four:

A father approaches angrily you at pick up time as he arrived to find his son dressed in a princess dress and heels. He tells you sternly that he does not want his child dressed in ‘girl’ clothes and that you are not to allow him to wear them. The child, however, spends most of his time trying on these dress ups and loves pretending to be a princess. You provide a variety of dress up clothing options but he always chooses these the dresses.