Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play: Pedagogical challenges and opportunities

Louise Elizabeth Lazell

University of East London

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Abstract

Background: Weapon and conflict play (WCP) is a contentious area of play in early years education that has been debated in previous literature. However, there is a paucity of research that directly explores the views of early years practitioners (EYPs) on WCP in England.

Current research: This qualitative study aimed to explore the perspectives of EYPs on WCP in one local authority. Data was gathered from nine EYPs using semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The researcher adopted a critical realist ontological and epistemological position.

Key findings and implications: Two overarching themes were developed: (1) 'Making sense of WCP' and (2) 'The role of EYPs in WCP.' Subthemes included: (1) The appeal of WCP, (2) The threat of WCP, (3) Learning through WCP, (4) It's just another type of play!, (5) Uncertainty, (6) The need to protect children, and (7) If you can't beat them, join them. The findings broadly align with existing research; WCP is perceived as presenting both challenges and opportunities in early years education. Uncertainty and cognitive dissonance around how to manage WCP was a key finding. Perspectives on WCP in this specific local authority appear generally more permissive when compared to existing research. The general consensus was that WCP is permitted, but within certain limits.

Distinctive findings included how EYPs perceive WCP to function as catharsis, how WCP can be a way for children to explore morality, how girls' WCP varies in type and content to boys', and finally, how EYPs judge acceptable WCP not just by the risk of physical harm but also by the language children use.

A key implication was the development of a framework to support EYPs to conceptualise and respond to WCP in their settings. Implications for how educational psychologists can support EYPs with WCP at the systemic level are discussed.

Key words: gun play, war, weapon and superhero play, early years, pre-school

Declaration

University of East London
School of Psychology
Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology

Declaration:
I declare that while registered as a degree student at UEL, I have not been a registered or enrolled student for another award of this university or of any other academic or professional institution.

I declare that no material contained within the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.

I declare that my research required ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee (SREC) and that confirmation of approval is embedded within the thesis.

Signed
Louise Elizabeth Lazell
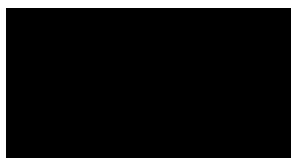
Dated
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Tables and Figures

List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full term
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
C&L	Communication and Language
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools, and Families
DfE	Department for Education
ELG(s)	Early Learning Goal(s)
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
EY	Early Years
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYP	Early Years Practitioner
IPA	Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
LA	Local Authority
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PD	Physical Development
PSED	Personal, Social and Emotional Development
R&T	Rough and Tumble (play)
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
TV	Television
UEL	University of East London
UK	United Kingdom
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USA	United States of America
WCP	Weapon and Conflict Play
WoE	Weight of Evidence
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

This chapter provides the background and context of the research. It describes early years (EY) education in England and provides theoretical background on the nature of children's play and early development. It introduces and defines weapon and conflict play (WCP) and discusses the existing debate in relation to its place in educational settings. The national and local context of the research are explained, and a section details reflexivity and the researcher's position. Finally, the rationale for the research is justified and the research question is presented.

1.2 Introduction to the research

Is it only boys who indulge in weapon play? Should children be given weapon replicas to play with? If not, is it acceptable to let children make their own weapons and to use them in the play scenarios they create? Should all weapon play be banished, or is this one of the ways in which young children begin to think and deal with violence, injustice, power, despotism, aggression, peace, war and the world we live in? (Bruce, 2003, p. x)

This research explores the perspectives of EYPs on WCP within EY settings in Southern England. The purpose of the research was to gain an up-to-date understanding of how EYPs conceptualise and respond to WCP. The research aimed to explore how understanding of these perspectives could help inform practice.

1.3 Terminology

The researcher's definition for WCP is as follows: WCP refers to any such play where objects, or imagined objects, are used as weapons towards

another person or object (real or imagined). For example, a child building a 'gun' out of Lego and pretending to fire at a target, or a child using an imaginary, magical bow and arrow to shoot at peers who are the 'bad guys.' WCP may occur in different contexts e.g. war games, fantasy play or superhero battles etc., and with different weapons e.g. sword, gun, lightsaber, magic wand and so on.

For the purposes of this research, WCP is classified separately to rough and tumble (R&T) play, and risky play, which are two similar areas also debated in the education sphere. Popper (2013) observed that superhero play is often contained within the weapon play term, yet they can occur separately and "each is likely to have its own characteristics, and putting them together as if they were automatically part of the same phenomenon might lead to some aspects of them being missed" (p. 46). The researcher's definition of WCP considers play within different conflict scenarios (of which a superhero context is wholly valid), but is concerned primarily with the use of 'weapons' within that play, as opposed to the superhero characters themselves.

1.4 National context

In order to set the context for this thesis, it is important to understand the EY education system, but also the cultural landscape regarding weapons in the United Kingdom (UK).

1.4.1 UK legislation and weapon-related crime

Though this research is focused on the use of pretend or imaginary weapons, it is important to acknowledge the national culture around *real*

weapons. In England, firearms control is among the toughest in the world. Those who wish to own a firearm must apply for a license; applicants must be able to demonstrate to police legitimate reasons for possession of such weapons such as work, sport, or leisure (Home Office, 2022). This license must be renewed every five years. The culture around weapons (particularly firearms) in England is different from that in other countries such as the United States of America (USA), where citizens have the right to bear arms, and gun violence poses a significant political and human safety issue (BBC News, 2023).

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (2022) estimate a rate of 4.12 firearm-related homicides per 100,000 population in the USA, compared to just 0.04 per 100,000 in the UK. According to data analysed by BBC News (2023), 79% of homicides in the USA in 2020 were gun-related, compared to just 4% in the UK. However, the use of a knife or other sharp instrument accounted for 40% of UK homicides in the year ending March 2022 (Office for National Statistics, 2023a). Thus, despite the relatively low violent use of firearms specifically, the use of weapons in violent crime is still a critical issue in the UK.

The context of weapons in the UK accounts for part of the necessary background information for this thesis. It is now important to discuss EY education and the associated legislation.

1.4.2 The early years foundation stage

This research is concerned with WCP within EY settings. In England, children may attend a pre-primary school education setting (e.g. pre-school,

nursery, childminder etc.) until the age of five. These settings must follow the statutory guidance known as the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The EYFS was launched in 2007 and revised in 2021. It is a statutory framework that sets the standards for the care, learning and development of children aged up to five years old (Department for Education [DfE], 2021a). The EYFS comprises seven areas of learning.

There are three 'prime areas' of learning:

- Communication and Language (Listening, Attention and understanding, Speaking)
- Physical Development (Gross motor skills, Fine motor skills)
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development (Self-regulation, Managing self, Building relationships)

There are four 'specific areas' of learning:

- Literacy (Comprehension, Writing, Word reading)
- Mathematics (Number, Numerical patterns)
- Understanding the World (Past and present, People, culture and communities, The natural world)
- Expressive Arts and Design (Creating with materials, Being imaginative and expressive)

Children are expected to achieve early learning goals (ELGs) in each one of these areas by the end of their Reception/Foundation year (the first year of compulsory education once the child turns five years old). According to statistics from the DfE (2022a), girls continue to perform better than boys, with 70.6% of girls achieving the expected level of 'good development' across all ELGs compared to just 56.5% of boys.

The EYFS also identifies good practice standards. It states that "practitioners need to be alert to the general diversity of children's interests, needs and backgrounds" and that "provision should enable each child to demonstrate their learning and development fully" (DfE, 2021b, p. 7). EYPs must also promote the British Values of democracy, rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths or beliefs (DfE, 2014).

1.5 Play

1.5.1 Play in early years settings

Article 31 of The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child states that children have a *right* to play (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2011) and play is described as "essential" to children's development in the EYFS (DfE, 2021a, p. 16). In the early years, children are supported to learn through varied play opportunities, along with adult-directed activities which typically increase in quantity and duration by the Reception/Foundation year. The three main headings for the 'Characteristics of Effective Learning' in the EYFS are: playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically (DfE, 2021a, p. 16).

1.5.2 What is play?

Before proceeding, it is important to understand what the term 'play' refers to. There are numerous definitions of play, and not one single definition can cover the various perceptions of what play might be (Kernan, 2007). According to Pellegrini (2011), although play may be challenging to define, most

people can recognise it when they see it. There are many similarities between different researchers' conceptualisations of play (Treasure, 2018). For instance, children are perceived as curious and active in their play; the process of playing is natural and meaningful and enables children to acquire and assimilate information about the world and to explore their ideas (Shree & Shukla, 2016). Through play, children develop their social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Elkind, 2007). Play is purposeful but enjoyable; it is the *process* of playing which is more important than the outcome (Smith & Pellegrini, 2023). Play is also influenced by the social and cultural contexts of the child's life (Treasure, 2018).

The definition of play most appealing to the researcher is by Fröbel (1903) who wrote, "play is the highest development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul…children's play is not mere sport, it is full of meaning" (p. 22).

1.5.3 Theoretical underpinnings of play

Vygotsky (1978) viewed play as the main method of development in the pre-school years. He theorised that pretend play allows children to liberate themselves from the constraints of reality and move into the world of what 'might be', where objects can be used symbolically to represent other objects e.g. a stick becomes a horse. Vygotsky (1978) framed imaginative play as a vessel to support children's progression towards higher level thinking. He believed that play strengthens self-regulation and impulse control and that engaging in imaginative, symbolic play allows children to learn that ideas, objects, and language can be flexible. Famously he said that, "in play a child is

always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 16).

Vygotsky also emphasised the importance of adults' role in supporting children with their learning. He conceptualised the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the gap between what a child can do independently and what they can do with the support of a more knowledgeable 'other' who is more skilled or experienced (Vygotsky, 1978). Commonly associated with the ZPD is 'scaffolding', the concept that the more knowledgeable other can support the learner through the ZPD, and gradually reduce the support provided, much like how scaffolding is removed as a building is constructed, until the learner is able to successfully complete the task independently (Wood et al., 1976).

Bruner (1972) viewed play as a process and a mode of learning; he emphasised the problem-solving nature of play. New knowledge is constructed based on what children already know. Like Vygotsky, he believed that children actively construct meaning through their play, drawing on their past experiences. Children therefore use play to make sense of their experiences and feelings. Play also gives children the opportunity to be creative and to take risks without the fear of failure (Bruner, 1972).

Overall, play constructs the foundation for young children's development, and provides them with confidence and a sense of 'mastery' (Piaget, 1951). During play, children improve their physical, social, and cognitive skills in addition to their creativity, language and emotional development (Hart & Nagel,

2017). According to Smilansky and Shefatya (1990), there are five forms of play:

1. functional (exploratory e.g. filling, stacking, pouring)
2. constructive (e.g. building with blocks)
3. dramatic (pretend play; pretending to take on the role of someone else)
4. socio-dramatic (dramatic play involving more than one player, centred around a theme)
5. games with rules (co-operative, usually from 6 years onwards)

Although WCP could be present across all of these forms, socio-dramatic play is most typical of 3-5 year old children, who are the focus for this research. It is therefore important to explore this in further depth.

1.5.3.1 Socio-dramatic play. Children typically begin to engage in pretend play during their second year of life (Fein, 1981). Pretend play initially consists of imitative actions of what children see in their lives e.g. what they see their parents doing at home, or what they see and hear in stories (Smith, 2010). Children use imaginative play to process their experiences (Paley, 2004). From approximately the age of three, pretend play tends to evolve into more sophisticated, social role-playing with peers, known as socio-dramatic play (Smith, 2010). Smilansky (1968) suggested that socio-dramatic play is important for children's developing language skills, their creativity and cognitive development, and taking on different roles/perspectives. Furthermore, socio-dramatic play links to early literacy development as play narratives provide opportunities to introduce storylines and to practise spoken language (Roskos & Christie, 2007). Engel (2005) argues that such play involves the '*what is'* and the '*what if.'* Children are pretending about the sort of things that in exist in their

lives (*what is*), and also go beyond this into realms of fantasy and imagination to explore things beyond their experience and everyday life (*what if*). This is similar to Vygotsky's ideas on play, where children are able to use objects symbolically to represent other objects.

1.5.4 Weapon and conflict play (WCP)

The themes observed in children's play are often directly related to phenomena they have experienced (Frost et al., 2005). Cheng and Johnson (2010) suggested that play that naturally arises from children's interests or experiences is "sometimes unruly, messy and aggressive" and does not conform to the educational expectations of school (p. 249). WCP arguably falls into this category.

As per the researcher's definition, WCP refers to a range of play scenarios that include the use of pretend weapons. WCP may incorporate the use of 'traditional' objects as weapons e.g. swords, bows and arrows, with figures such as pirates, 'fantastic' objects e.g. lightsabers and magic wands, with figures such as superheroes, or 'realistic' objects such as imitation guns and bombs with soldiers (Beresin, 1989). WCP has persisted for generations (Mechling, 2008). The general consensus is that boys are more likely to regularly engage in WCP compared to girls (Goldstein, 1995).

1.5.4.1 Debating WCP. WCP is arguably a contentious area of play. Much grey literature exists in the form of books, chapters and magazine articles commenting and debating on the perceived advantages and disadvantages to such play, and whether it should be permitted (i.e. allowed) in EY settings and

schools (e.g. Grimmer, 2020; Holland, 2003; Kinard, 2014; Knuth, 2006; Levin, 2003; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006; Popper, 2013). Much of this literature argues for adults to more closely examine WCP narratives in order to better understand the underlying functions that it can serve for children.

WCP can be seen as noisy and disruptive, boisterous, and aggressive (e.g. Dunn & Hughes, 2001; Holland, 2003). Some EYPs or teachers feel that WCP may have harmful consequences. Some are concerned that children's exposure to media violence, e.g. in television (TV) programmes or video games, causes them to imitate this violence in their play (e.g. Fortis-Diaz, 1997). This belief is in line with social learning theory which outlines that children learn through observing and imitating the behaviour of others (Bandura, 1977). Children who observed an adult physically and verbally assault an inflatable Bobo doll frequently imitated this behaviour when given access to a similar doll (Bandura et al., 1961). If adults were praised for their actions, children were more likely to imitate this behaviour (vicarious reinforcement). Bandura (1973) theorised that children imitate behaviour not only from acts they see in 'real life' but also those they see in the media. He therefore suggested that exposure to media violence can increase aggressive behaviour.

Furthermore, there are assumptions that allowing children to engage in *pretend* violence is in danger of promoting *real* violence (Smith, 1994). "It can teach them that violence and hurting others is exciting and fun and is the way to settle disputes" (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006, p. 32). From this standpoint, WCP is seen as morally questionable, and harmful to children's development.

It could be argued that EYPs should protect young children from things such as war and weapons that are intended to hurt or kill, in favour of promoting values of love and kindness, and ways to solve conflicts peacefully (Grimmer, 2020). On this basis, some schools and EY settings have established zero tolerance approaches or policies. Zero tolerance means that children are not permitted to bring toy weapons in from home, construct them from resources, or use them (imaginary or real) to enact play conflict scenarios (Holland, 2003). Despite zero tolerance policies, practitioners often report that children engage in this type of play regardless (Rich, 2003).

Some believe that there are benefits and learning opportunities associated with WCP and therefore argue for more permissive (as opposed to zero tolerance) approaches in EY settings (e.g. Grimmer, 2020; Holland, 2003; Popper, 2013). They contend that it provides children the opportunity to take on a new role and to work through themes that they have experienced, or are worried or concerned about; this is how children make sense of events and the world around them (Smidt, 2010). Smith (1994, p. 68) contends that WCP "does no more than reflect aspects of the adult world and help the child come to terms with it." It also affords them the opportunity to explore and make sense of complex concepts such as moral dilemmas, power, control and death (Popper, 2013; Rich, 2003). Similarly, Bauer and Dettore (1997) argued that this type of play offers children the chance to build on the dichotomies of right and wrong, and good and bad. Furthermore, it has been reasoned that WCP can promote social, emotional and communication skills (e.g. Broadhead, 1992; Grimmer, 2020; Holland, 2003; Logue & Shelton, 2008; Popper; 2013; Rich, 2003).

Popper (2013) argued that, in practice, zero tolerance means that the *style* of children's play e.g. pretending to use a weapon, is focused on, instead of the *content* or *substance* of the play. Grimmer (2020) summarised this succinctly- "the weapon is not the whole story" (p. 28). Heikkilä (2021) proposed that WCP offers children the same opportunities for communication and co-operation as other imaginary play sequences but is more likely to be rejected (and therefore prohibited) by adults because it threatens the ideals of appropriate play. She argued that WCP is positioned low in the hierarchy of play, despite the learning opportunities it can offer.

1.5.4.2 A systemic understanding of WCP: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. WCP is a phenomenon that exists in a social, political and cultural context. Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), proposes that children's development is influenced by the systems they exist in and the interactions between those systems. Children's interest, motivation, and engagement with WCP are likely to be affected by the different systems, as are the perspectives of EYPs on such play. Bronfenbrenner proposed the existence of five systems (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory
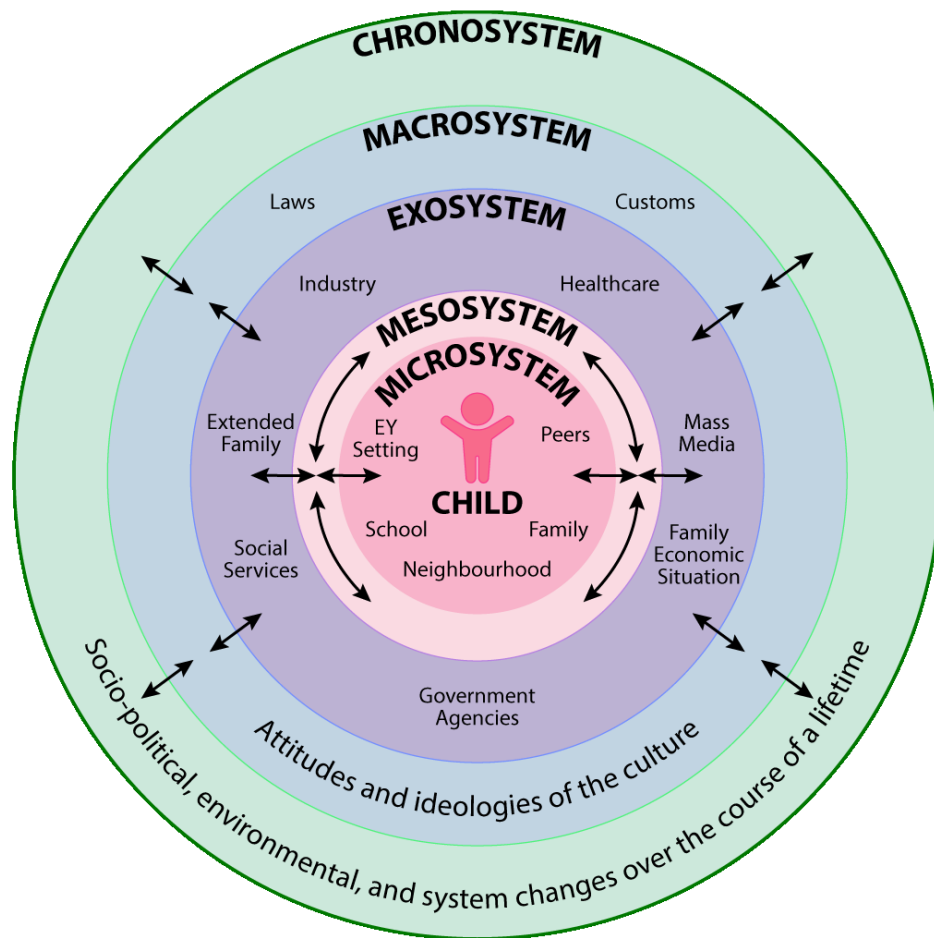
The microsystem is the most influential system, and consists of the things the child has direct contact within in their immediate lives (e.g. parents, siblings, school). Children are not only influenced by the microsystem, but also exert influence on the system themselves through their relationships with the people in it. The mesosystem includes the interactions between the different elements in the microsystem, such as between a child's parents and teachers. The exosystem refers to less direct influences on the child's life such as their extended family, mass media and government policies. The macrosystem includes the broadest influences on the child's life such as the ideologies and attitudes of the culture. The chronosystem, added in a later revision, refers to

the changes and events that occur during a person's life that influence their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Pedagogical approaches to children's learning are influenced by the dominant values and beliefs at different times, and across different cultures (Hayes et al., 2017).

A systemic understanding of WCP considers how the microsystem, including the child's family values and lifestyle, may affect their level of interest or engagement in WCP. The values of their EY setting, and the perspectives of the EYPs on such play are also likely to affect how WCP is received. Children's interest in WCP may be affected by what they see in the media (in the exosystem). The current attitudes and ideologies towards weapons (in the macrosystem) are also likely to affect how WCP is perceived by both children and adults. Ecological systems theory therefore provides a useful framework to situate WCP within, while considering the perspectives of EYPs.

1.6 Local context

The current research was conducted in a local authority (LA) in Southern England, where the researcher is currently on placement. The area has a significant military population as it is home to training barracks. The LA has large areas of poverty and deprivation. It was ranked in the 30% most deprived LAs nationally in 2019, with 14 neighbourhoods in the 10% most deprived (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). The county's rate of knife crime increased by 20% in the last year (Office for National Statistics, 2023b).

At the time of writing, the LA has 242 EY education providers, including day nurseries, pre-schools and school-based settings, and 115 registered childminders. In 2022, 73.2% of girls in this LA achieved a 'good level of development' in the EYFS compared to just 59% of boys (DfE, 2022a).

1.7 Reflexivity and researcher's position

Owing to the reflexive nature of this section, it is written in the first person. I am a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) on placement within a LA in Southern England. I believe that educational psychologists (EPs) have a valuable role to play as research-practitioners.

I am a 26 year old white woman. Prior to the doctorate, I worked for several years as an EYP, including working 1:1 with children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and then eventually moving into the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo) role. I am therefore experienced in working within the EYFS and teaching young children. I am an advocate for child-initiated play in EY settings, where practitioners are able to follow the lead of the child and build on their interests, linking them to the wider curriculum.

During my EY career, I worked at two different EY settings. Though different in many ways, both held a zero tolerance stance towards WCP. I understood this from a moral perspective; "guns are used to hurt others and we should not encourage this." Yet, I found myself repeatedly telling children different versions of, "we don't have guns at pre-school; guns hurt people; I hope that's not a gun." Usually, regardless of the team's efforts, the children

would continue to try and play in this style secretly, or they would be inventive, pretending they had anything other than weapons when challenged. I felt we were directing a lot of negative energy, typically focused on a small group of boys, telling them to stop and attempting, mostly unsuccessfully, to engage them in other activities that we deemed more appropriate. I wondered about the effects of our discouragement on their self-esteem.

However, I also experienced the noisy and disruptive running and shouting that often accompanies WCP, as well as the children who became upset by the perceived threat or became caught in the metaphorical crossfire and accidentally hurt. I was compelled by the moral argument to prohibit the play, but felt torn by my pedagogical view that children should be able to explore their own interests. I became interested in how we could better understand and manage this play. I later read Holland's (2003) book, which eventually led to the pursuit of the current research.

As a TEP at the University of East London (UEL), I embrace their core values of social justice and autonomy, and I believe in advocating for the voice of the child. This corresponds with my pedagogical view that learning in the early years should be child-led and, importantly, play-based. I espouse a critical realist position, meaning that I believe a single reality exists but it is interpreted differently by individuals based on their experiences. Therefore, I believe that the reality of WCP will be experienced in different ways, by different EYPs at different settings. Further detail concerning the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher can be found in Chapter 3, section 3.2.3.

1.8 Rationale for research

Non-statutory guidance in England more than a decade ago further encouraged practitioners to actively facilitate play based on children's interests, including that involving weapons and superheroes (Department for Children, Schools, & Families [DCSF], 2007). With the recent introduction of the new statutory framework, there has been greater emphasis on EYPs engaging with the children's learning through high quality interactions, and less on the need to keep lengthy notes or 'tick-lists' on children's development. Now, more than ever, is an opportune time for EYPs to reflect on the importance of play. WCP, and in particular the perspectives of EYPs on this area of play, has been explored directly by few UK researchers in the last twenty years. This research is important to gain an insight into EYPs' current perspectives on WCP. The rationale for this research is explained further in Chapter 2, section 2.6.

1.9 Research question

The current study aimed to explore the perspectives of EYPs on WCP within EY settings in a LA in Southern England. The purpose of the research was to gain an up-to-date understanding of how EYPs view and respond to WCP, and their reasons for this. The research aimed to explore how understanding of these perspectives could inform practice.

The following research question was formulated:

What are the perspectives of early years practitioners on weapon and conflict play within their settings?

The word 'perspective' here is defined as a person's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes towards a given topic. The term 'EYP' also includes those with qualified teacher status working in EY education.

1.10 Chapter summary

This chapter has introduced the research topic of WCP in the early years and the associated terminology. It has explained the broad national context regarding both weapons and EY education in England, as well as the more specific local context. Detail on the theoretical understandings of play, including its importance within the EYFS were provided. An overview of WCP and the debates that surround it was offered. The research was also situated within the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the researcher provided a reflexive account of her positioning. The rationale for the current research has been outlined, and the research question was provided. The following chapter examines the existing literature on the perspectives of EYPs/EY teachers on WCP.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter overview

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature on WCP. The details of the search terms and inclusion/exclusion criteria are presented as well as a critical appraisal of the studies identified. The selected studies and their findings are discussed in detail and gaps in the literature are highlighted.

2.2 The systematic search process

An initial scoping review was conducted in November 2021 to explore the current depth and breadth of research in the area of war, weapon and superhero play and identify potential gaps for future study. Much of the literature found was 'grey literature' in the form of books, chapters or articles in EY magazines, and offered commentary, anecdotal reflections or advice for practitioners. The scoping review revealed a lack of recent, peer-reviewed research studies specifically examining the *perspectives* of EYPs, especially on the topic of WCP (as opposed to R&T play or superhero play exclusively), hence WCP becoming the focus of this research.

In July 2022 a systematic literature review was conducted to examine the current research base with greater rigour and provide a comprehensive synthesis of the research on WCP. The aim of the literature review was to critically evaluate the current research base in relation to the following question:

What is known about the views of EY practitioners/teachers on WCP?

2.3 Literature search strategy

On 30th and 31st July, and 12th August 2022, search engines EBSCO, Scopus and Google Scholar were used to conduct the systematic literature search. Within EBSCO the following databases were searched: *APA PsychInfo, Education Research Complete, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, British Education Index, ERIC.* See Table 2.1 for search terms and results. The articles were screened by title and abstract first. Shortlisted articles were then read and evaluated against the researcher's inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.1

Systematic review search terms

Search Engine	Search Terms	Results	Shortlisted articles by title	Relevant papers after criteria applied
EBSCO	Weapon OR gun OR superhero AND play AND "early years" OR education OR preschool OR kindergarten OR child*	366	32	5
Scopus	Weapon OR gun OR superhero AND play AND "early years" OR education OR preschool OR kindergarten OR child*	122	7 (Not including duplicates already found on EBSCO)	1
Google Scholar	Preschool superhero weapon gun play	12,800	25 (First 10 pages of results searched set to 'most relevant' results first)	1

Although superhero play specifically was not the focus of this research, 'superhero' was included in the search terms as the scoping review revealed that some (but not all) researchers classify superhero play separately to war or weapon play. The definition of WCP employed for this research recognises that the use of weapons, and occurrence of conflict are likely to appear within the context of superhero play, and therefore to exclude such research would be of detriment to fully understanding the topic.

Table 2.2

Systematic review inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Justification
Mention of war, weapon, or superhero play	Focus on toy guns with projectiles e.g. Airsoft guns Focus on real weapons/ gun safety Focus on school violence or school shootings Focus *only* on risky play Focus *only* on rough and tumble play/ physical exertion e.g. play fighting	The focus of this research is on how children play with pretend weapons and engage in conflict scenarios in an early years educational environment. It is recognised that this may be defined in several ways, including within the categories of superhero or rough and tumble play, therefore studies with significant overlap were screened and included on an individual basis
Mention of young children- pre-school or kindergarten age (there is some crossover with American age range and UK EYFS)	Does not focus on children Focuses on older age group e.g adolescents	The focus of this research is on children in an early years educational environment. There are significant differences between pre-school and statutory school

		age (formal) educational provision
Data (whole or part) is qualitative and EYP/ teacher views are gathered	Data is only quantitative and/or offers correlational findings e.g. examines correlation between weapon play and later-life aggression No views directly gathered from teachers or practitioners regarding this type of play Gathers views from other professionals e.g. play therapists Offers only commentary or synthesis of theory Offers personal reflections on experience with lack of structured methodology/ academic rigour e.g. critical reflection essay or anecdotal article	The focus of this research is on the perspectives of early years staff. The current research is of qualitative design
Empirical research paper published in a peer-reviewed journal	Magazine article or book chapter University dissertation/ thesis manuscript Not published in a peer-reviewed journal	This literature review is seeking to find empirical peer-reviewed studies on which to base the current research
Written in English	Written in languages other than English	English is the researcher's first language

Published since 1990	Published pre-1990	Context pre-1990 may be significantly different due to popular culture, media, and internet access

It became apparent that a limited number of studies focused purely on WCP, rather they included a range of types of socio-dramatic play or focused just on superhero play. Some also used the definition of 'active play' or R&T play and placed WCP as a subset within this. Very few studies looked at the views or perspectives of staff directly, and many provided only a commentary or a history.

In total, seven research studies were judged to be relevant after applying the above criteria. The reference lists of the selected studies were skimmed and checked for further suitable articles but none that met the inclusion criteria were found. The studies are arranged below in chronological publication order (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.3

Studies included in systematic review

Researchers	Title
Doliopoulou (1998)	Preschool children's war play: How do Greek teachers and parents cope with it?
Logue and Harvey (2009)	Preschool teachers' views of active play
Bauman (2015)	Examining how and why children in my transitional kindergarten classroom engage in pretend gunplay
Rosen (2015)	Children's violently themed play and adult imaginaries of childhood: A Bakhtinian analysis
Delaney (2017)	Playing at violence: lock-down drills, 'bad guys' and the construction of 'acceptable' play in early childhood
Peterson et al. (2018)	Children's rough and tumble play: perspectives of teachers in Northern Canadian Indigenous communities

Appendix A presents a table summarising the key findings and critique of these papers.

2.4 Approach to the critical appraisal of research papers

The studies selected for the literature review were all qualitative, except for one which was mixed-methods. Due to the diversity in approach and methodologies of the studies, Gough's (2007) weight of evidence (WoE) framework was used to review their quality and relevance. Gough offers a flexible approach with criteria that can be applied to a range of different research designs.

Gough (2007) suggests the TAPUPAS framework (Pawson et al., 2003), to structure the WoE approach. This allows for judgements in the areas of transparency, accuracy, specificity, purposivity, utility and propriety. Gough's (2007) WoE framework is structured as:

1. WoE A: A generic judgement about the coherence and integrity of the study. This includes the transparency, accuracy, accessibility and specificity of the paper.
2. WoE B: A specific judgement regarding how well the study meets the purpose of the research (purposivity). For example, it considers the suitability of the research design.
3. WoE C: A specific judgement about the relevance of the study to the literature review question and current research. This includes utility and propriety.
4. WoE D: The overall judgement of the WoE for the study. This is the result of combining WoE A, B and C judgements.

Appendix B includes a table with the WoE judgements for the seven papers included in this literature review. The process of appraising the studies ensured that the researcher had a comprehensive understanding of the research. It also provides a transparent measure of the assessed quality of the papers chosen for inclusion in this review.

2.5 Findings from the systematic literature review

The question posed for the literature review was:

What is known about the views of EY practitioners/teachers on WCP?

The seven papers identified as relevant to answering this question were read and critically analysed. The studies were grouped by research design rather than theme as there were many overlapping themes across them.

2.5.1 Research employing an exploratory interview or questionnaire design

Four of the seven studies used questionnaires or interviews to gather data on EYPs' views on types of play that fall under the WCP umbrella. Due to their methodology, these may be judged as perhaps the most relevant to the current research.

Doliopoulou (1998) replicated work by Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1987) in the USA. Two questionnaires were given to 82 pre-school teachers and 77 parents in Greece- one on 'war play' and one on 'Power Rangers' and their influence on children's play. Doliopoulou states that "most" participants were

also interviewed though no precise number or sampling strategy for this were provided. Relevant to the current research are the views reported by the teachers.

98% of pre-school teachers answered that the children in their class engaged in war play. 75% reported that boys engaged in this play 'very often' but that girls 'rarely' did. 22% said that girls *never* engage in war play. 3% commented on how the boys usually took on more powerful and strong character roles than the girls and 7% of teachers said that war play tends to become more aggressive when there is a higher ratio of boys to girls in the class. 78% of teachers reported that they permitted war play within limits set for safety. 3% reported allowing it completely, 4% banned it and 15% said they *tried* to prevent it.

The teachers who reported banning war play were asked how they felt about this. 84% said they felt it was a good thing because they thought that was best for the children. 10% reported that they felt obliged to ban the play, possibly due to external factors such as policy or concerns over how others might perceive their practice (though this is speculation and was not clarified or explored in the paper). 6% expressed some confusion over whether they were doing 'the right thing.' The teachers were also asked what they said to the children when forbidding the play. 73% referred to notions of safety, telling children that they may get hurt if they continue. 14% spoke about how war and violence are bad, and make people unhappy. 13% mentioned directing the children towards other games instead.

When teachers who reported permitting war play were asked how they felt about allowing it, 76% said they felt as if they were doing the right thing because the children were happy and enjoying themselves. 12% reported that they were satisfied and thought children accepted the rules more willingly. 4% mentioned feeling good about their choice but still had concern for children's safety. 8% of teachers commented that they felt as if they had no other choice. This is interesting to compare with the similar percentage of teachers who banned war play because they felt obliged to. The article does not explore potential reasons for this feeling of 'lack of choice' on either position. Because the article does not provide information on the sampling method, settings in which the teachers worked, or their level of experience, it is difficult to hypothesise whether socio-political or contextual factors may have had an impact on this 'lack of choice' feeling or indeed their attitudes towards war play in general.

The participants were also given a questionnaire on Power Rangers (popular TV superheroes at the time). 88% of the teachers reported that superheroes had an effect on children's play at school, commenting that whenever there was a change in TV heroes there was a noticeable change in children's play too. 64% of teachers felt that the superhero play caused squabbles when the children wanted to 'play as' the same Power Ranger as somebody else. 14% of teachers felt that the children's play became more violent when the heroes were included.

Doliopoulou concluded that most teachers in Greece sought to limit war play, in comparison to teachers in the USA who mostly banned it outright

(studied a decade previously) by Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1987). Doliopoulou suggested that war play seems to be appealing to children across cultures, and is particularly popular with boys. They theorised war play to be a method through which children can meet some of their need for power and control.

This study adds knowledge to the research base and is relevant to the current study as it directly seeks to understand the views of EY staff on WCP. The large sample size and clear research questions are strengths of this paper. However, it should be considered that this study is over 20 years old and the views gathered then may not be representative of the views held now. In addition, the research was conducted in Greece which may limit the transferability of the findings to the UK given potential cultural differences. It is not clear exactly which method of data analysis was used and findings were reported in terms of percentages with responses explored only in minor detail, unsupported by any direct quotes. It is stated that "most" of the participants were interviewed in addition to completing the questionnaires, but it is unclear how many and what these interviews entailed. These limitations in transparency make it difficult to assess the credibility of the findings.

Over a decade later in the USA, Logue and Harvey (2009) investigated the attitudes of 48 pre-kindergarten teachers towards R&T play. They defined this as "superhero play, play fighting (including wrestling), chase games, and protect/rescue games" (p. 34). As their definition included superhero play, the study was deemed suitable for inclusion in this review. They used a mixed-methods design. Participants completed a questionnaire developed by the researchers- the Preschool Teachers Beliefs and Practices Questionnaire, the

validity of which was tested through the use of a pilot study and factor analysis. Participants who expressed interest were invited to a follow-up interview which provided the qualitative data.

The quantitative data indicated that 46% of the teachers had a zero-tolerance policy towards R&T play and 54% did not. There was no significant relationship between the type of EY setting and their policy. A t-test suggested that, across settings, boys engaged in superhero play significantly more than girls. Superhero play was the second-most prohibited subset of R&T play, after pretend fighting.

The qualitative findings indicated that the common co-occurrence of superhero play and play fighting can be confusing to many teachers and there was overall uncertainty towards all R&T play. Some teachers perceived there to be value in this play, including the development of physical and social skills, and the ability to cope with feelings. One teacher spoke about how, if they were to restrict the play, it would limit the children's creative abilities. However, some felt that R&T play is not an acceptable form of social interaction, giving reasons such as: it is too dangerous, children get hurt, it disrupts the whole class and it is not a positive form of dramatic play. Some teachers appeared to anticipate children's desire for R&T play and prepare for it, while others anticipated danger and banned or immediately stopped the play.

Teachers' comments suggested that school policy and the opinions of parents had an impact on their response. They mentioned how R&T play was not permitted in a school environment, therefore they were preparing children

for this. 78% of teachers reported that the most influential element in their decision to permit or ban R&T play was their EY training. 41% reported that the second most influential element was their own childhood experience, and 32% reported that the attitudes of their co-workers was the third most influential element.

Logue and Harvey (2009) concluded that teachers felt ambivalent towards both the function that R&T play serves for children, and their role in allowing or prohibiting it. Teacher-planned play themes, such as firefighting, were deemed as valuable, compared to child-initiated R&T themes, such as superheroes, which were often viewed as problematic. The researchers posed the question that if boys are discouraged from dramatic play due to their choice of play themes, how might this affect their language and literacy development, and ultimately their engagement in school? Given the statistics from the DfE (2022a) suggesting boys' level of development continues to fall behind girls', this seems a critical point of reflection for practitioners in the UK too.

This study had a large sample size with staff from a range of different EY settings. The recruitment strategy was explained transparently. However, all teachers were from one North East state of America which may limit transferability to other areas of the world. Nevertheless, detailed information on the participants and context is provided so that readers may compare to their own context in order to assess the transferability of the findings. It is unknown exactly how many teachers participated in the qualitative interviews, and how this data was analysed. This limits the transparency and credibility of the findings. The researchers provided their own, clear definition of R&T play which

was useful in determining exactly which subsets of play they were referring to. This may have helped to ensure that participants were clear on their interpretation of the questions, thereby increasing the credibility of the findings.

Another decade later, Peterson et al. (2018) explored the perspectives of teachers towards R&T and superhero play, in northern Canadian Indigenous communities. Their definition of R&T play was not clearly provided but upon reading the paper it appeared that weapon play was also included within this umbrella term. Providing an operationalised definition of R&T play would have improved the clarity of the intended purpose of the study and its strength of relevance to the current research.

10 kindergarten and grade one teachers participated in focus group discussions about the value of R&T and superhero play at school. The discussions involved answering two main questions and reflecting on videos that depicted various forms of R&T play. All teachers said they felt that R&T play was "natural", and that boys were more likely to engage in it compared to girls. They shared anecdotes of children making guns from resources found in the classroom as part of this play. However, some teachers expressed concerns about the play turning into real aggression and leading to injuries, which conflicted with their duty to keep children safe. They were also concerned about the perceptions of others, for example, that they may be seen as incompetent teachers by allowing R&T play in their classrooms. All teachers perceived popular culture (e.g. movies and video games) to have a potential negative impact on children's dramatic play.

Within R&T play, gun play was particularly contentious. A theme of particular relevance in the context of this study was cultural conflict regarding gun play. Some teachers who were from more urban areas of Canada tended to perceive weapons as an issue of violence, and found this perception negatively affecting their attitudes towards weapon play. For example, one teacher found it challenging to reconcile Indigenous values with her own: "I need to check my bias at the door because I'm from down south where gun play is wrong" (Peterson et al., 2018, p. 62). Another teacher commented:

> Here, guns are used for hunting. I see it in the game my students play. I'm torn because they're not saying, 'I'm going to hurt you'… that's not how they're taught to use guns… but in my heart of hearts, gun play is wrong. (Peterson et al., 2018, p. 61)

Those who had grown up in Indigenous or more rural communities seemed less conflicted. These teachers explained how children are exposed to hunting culture and practices from a young age and they were therefore more open to it being displayed in children's play themes. The concept of cross-cultural conflict in how the purpose, and potential threat, of guns is perceived may be somewhat unique to this study due to the specific Indigenous population chosen to focus on, however it does raise ethical, moral, and cultural questions that still apply to other populations.

Some teachers were concerned that the traditional view of guns as hunting implements was being eroded by children's exposure to popular media where guns are weapons used towards people. This is explained within the context of the traditional views of the land; "humans have harmonious relationships with other living things and honour the Seven Grandfather

teachings" (Peterson et al., 2018, p. 64). These are wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth. Children's play and learning in this culture is expected to align with these teachings and all teachers felt it was necessary to guide narratives of weapon play away from plots of violent video games and media. Some teachers developed rules around the play such as: no guns pointed towards people, only animals. One teacher talked about co-constructing these boundaries with the children in the class so that they could understand the reasoning for such rules.

This study specifically focused on the attitudes of teachers in northern Canadian Indigenous communities as this cultural context had not been represented in previous R&T play research. This representation is important, but the specificity does mean that the findings may not be transferable to other contexts. Having said this, some of the themes do align with those found in other studies, such as teachers being concerned about aggression, safety and the perceptions of other people. This study has a good level of credibility as transcribed data was member-checked and verbatim quotes were used to illustrate themes. It is transparent in its explanation of recruitment, context of the research and inclusion of the focus group questions. A limitation of the study was that R&T play, playful aggression, gun play and superhero play were presented together and the terms were used seemingly interchangeably throughout. Researchers differ in how they classify these play themes so it is to be expected that definitions may vary across the literature, but in the case of this study it was sometimes difficult to identify exactly which type of play they were discussing. Arguably though, WCP play exists on a continuum and having

distinct categories may limit understanding of the fluidity and dynamic nature of such play.

Wiwatowski et al. (2020) interviewed eight EY teachers from six different kindergartens in Australia to explore their perspectives towards superhero play. They used Boyd's (1997) definition: "Superhero play refers to the active, physical play of children pretending to be media characters imbued with extraordinary abilities, including superhuman strength or the ability to transform themselves into superhuman entities" (p. 23). Combined inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to map their responses onto a framework by Cupit (2013) where possible, or suggest new categories if not. This framework outlines five approaches that EY teachers employ when responding to superhero play: prevention, replacement, laissez faire, engagement and curriculum application (Cupit, 2013).

Responses to superhero play varied. None of the eight participants reported preventing or banning superhero play, but none took a laissez faire approach either. Some teachers spoke of intervening to stop children hurting each other or becoming too aggressive, or intervening in a more permissive way to extend their learning by helping them create their own storylines- the engagement approach. Some spoke of employing a replacement approach, redirecting the children onto a different type of play or using cooling off periods when the play was becoming too physical, or children were becoming too dominant over others.

Two 'new' approaches to complement Cupit's (2013) framework were identified in this study: 'social support' and 'provoking thought.' Social support refers to using the context of superhero play as a way to support children's conflict resolution and social skills, without changing or diverting the children's storylines. Provoking thought refers to teachers engaging with the children in discussions and open-ended questioning about their superhero play to encourage them to "create, express and act on their own ideas" (Wiwatowski et al., 2020 p. 177), without the teacher imposing their own ideas. Some teachers mentioned refraining from getting involved in the superhero play because they perceived that the children did not want them to, "we can go over and ask the kids what they're doing and try to get involved but it often kills the play" (p. 177). Their knowledge of superheroes also affected the degree to which they felt comfortable to get involved with the play.

Teachers reported using more than one type of response to superhero play, suggesting that they are flexible in their approach and it is context-dependent. Their responses seemed to be influenced by their professional beliefs and what they understood the potential value of the play to be. The researchers highlighted the need for practitioners to critically reflect on their responses to superhero play to ensure they are informed by theory and research.

This study sheds light on the phenomenon of superhero play in the current decade. The results section seemed to mainly focus on the teacher's responses to the play, rather than the beliefs and attitudes underpinning these responses, despite this being one of the research questions. It is understood

that truncation bias- the tendency of qualitative studies to be limited by word limits for journal articles, (Campbell et al., 2011), may have affected the richness of the findings reported. Nonetheless, this study has a high level of transparency. The purpose of the research was clear, participant recruitment was explained, the development of the interview questions was described and the full interview schedule was provided as an appendix. Teachers were given a clear definition of superhero play at the start of the interview which is beneficial given that many classifications of this play exist in the literature, and similar to Logue and Harvey's (2009) study, it supports participants to interpret questions in the way the researchers intended. Although Wiwatowski et al. (2020) focus specifically on superhero play, the purpose and methodology are aligned with the current research.

The four studies discussed so far all used similar methodologies to gather the views of EYPs/teachers on a mixture of superhero and weapon play themes between the years 1998-2020. The studies were conducted in the USA, Greece, Canada and Australia. Overall findings suggest that EYPs have mixed views on the value of WCP in EY settings. Some are more permissive than others but this seems to depend on a variety of features including external features such as policy, and internal factors such as personal beliefs. There does appear to be evidence that boys tend to engage in WCP more than girls. In addition, there is concern over the negative impact of violent media, and apprehension with regard to the risk of physical harm posed by WCP.

2.5.2 Research employing an ethnographic or case study design

The other three studies selected for inclusion in this literature review used a case study or ethnographic approach to explore attitudes towards WCP in the early years.

Delaney (2017) critically examined how young children's acceptable play is framed and defined by outside forces rather than through pedagogical experience and knowledge. They conducted a year-long qualitative, interpretive case study of a class of 15 American pre-kindergartners and their teacher. Thematic analysis was applied to interviews and observations to explore how the teacher responded to children 'playing at violence' (including 'bad guy play' and pretend gun play).

The school district had a zero tolerance policy on pretend violence and the teacher expressed feeling afraid that, if children should play in this way, it would put them at risk of punishment. The teacher's personal values and beliefs also underpinned her response to the play. She reported feeling that playing at violence represented real violence and aggression. The teacher also viewed the play as a 'Pandora's box' for conversations that she was not prepared for, and did not feel equipped to have about weapons and violence. Delaney suggested that the teacher's discomfort placed limits on the children; rather than have those conversations, the teacher placed restrictions on what sorts of play were acceptable. Delaney's observations indicated that the teacher sought ways to 'bend' the rules of zero tolerance, allowing Spiderman and web shooting play, but drew the line at pretend guns. However, the children pushed these boundaries by turning webs into bullets.

The class were required to regularly practice active shooter lockdown drills, yet playing at violence was banned. Delaney discussed how this incongruity denied children the opportunity to make sense of violent events. Children seemed to 'push back' on the policy, often playing out the lockdown scenarios secretly but with themselves positioned as the powerful defenders of the classroom, coming to save their classmates and teacher. Their expression of agency in the face of helplessness corresponds with knowledge about how children use imaginative play to process experiences (Paley, 2004).

This study has a reasonable level of transparency and purposivity, with triangulation across data sources and evidence of researcher reflexivity. The case study approach allowed for rich exploration of one particular kindergarten teacher's views and responses to playing at violence. It is particularly valuable in the context of the USA, where guns represent a critical socio-political issue and gun violence is on the increase (BBC News, 2023). However, views may not necessarily be representative of EYPs in the UK. It is also not clear exactly what interview questions were asked which limits the credibility of the findings.

Rosen (2015) also used an ethnographic case study methodology to examine EYPs' views towards 'violently-themed' play, in a LA nursery in England. The setting had recently moved towards a more permissive approach towards this kind of play following the DSCF (2007) guidance. The study took place over 18 months with observations of the children and individual and group interviews held with staff. EYPs were asked about their perspectives on children's imaginative play with themes of death and violence. EYPs' practice

and comments made about violently-themed play were grouped thematically across data sources. Responses were analysed using Bakhtinian analysis which examines 'double voiced' narratives. As explained by Rosen, double voiced in this sense refers to the contradictory 'imaginaries' (notions i.e. values and meanings) of childhood and child-adult power relations.

Practitioners spoke about the paradoxes of violently-themed play, in trying to keep children safe, but also letting them take risks. Rosen discussed the long-standing identity of childhood being a time of innocent vulnerability, now compounded by health and safety protocols. This was summarised by one respondent: "It's a health and safety thing. We have to protect them" (Rosen, 2015, p. 243). EYPs also expressed conflict about wanting to encourage children's interests but finding it difficult to map these onto the ELGs when they included violent themes. They expressed concern about children 'getting stuck' in violently-themed play; practitioners were finding it hard to build on and extend the learning. Within this, they spoke about their responsibility to ensure children reach 'school readiness'; there was a common concern raised about needing to 'move children on' to different activities to achieve this. To do this, staff would interject with a different narrative or stop the play. This conflict between allowing children to follow their interest in an emancipatory sense, and pressure to meet ELGs set out by the EYFS, meant that often adults resumed the powerful role of monitoring and setting limits on this play. In addition, the 'imaginary' or notion of children being innocent and vulnerable meant that some staff found it uncomfortable when play included themes such as death and violence. Some responses indicated tensions between allowing violently-themed play and

personal, moral views. Not all practitioners were therefore fully comfortable allowing such play.

Rosen's research identified double voiced narratives with regard to violently-themed play including paradoxes to do with following the children's lead but still working towards pre-determined ELGs, protecting children from harm but allowing them to take risks, and thoughts about the play being 'natural' (particularly for boys), but having concerns about encouraging aggressive masculinity. Rosen concluded that violently-themed play is permitted in policy, but taboo in practice.

The themes are identified in this study are evident across the literature discussed so far. This particular study offers a unique perspective by using Bakhtinian interpretive analysis, however it lacks transparency as it does not clearly explain the analysis process in detail, nor does it provide much detail on the participants. It states that six EYPs were interviewed at the start and 10 at the end but it is unclear why there was a difference in quantity or whether there was overlap in these participants. Furthermore, the study lacks evidence of reflexivity which leaves some question over the potential for researcher bias, particularly as the researcher was a semi-participant observer. Further detail on the process of analysis and reflection on the epistemological and ontological position of the researcher would increase the confirmability of the findings and trustworthiness of the paper.

Bauman (2015), a teacher in the USA, used a self-study method to explore how and when the children in her transitional kindergarten class

(equivalent to preschool) engaged in pretend gun play. The study included the 17 children in the class but focused on eight pupils who had a particular interest in gun play. Data was collected through brief child interviews, videos of the children playing, observations, photographs, classroom discussions and researcher reflections.

Bauman used reflective journaling to keep a record of how the play developed. She explained how, in the past, she had turned a blind eye, but wanted to use this research opportunity to improve her understanding of gun play and consider how she could support potential learning happening during it. Bauman reflected on her feelings towards gun play throughout the paper. Overall, she felt it was an injustice that some children are shamed and discouraged from this play as she deemed it a natural part of childhood that has value to learning, especially if supported by an experienced teacher.

While allowing the play, Bauman collaborated with the children to agree on three rules: no pointing weapons at people, no physical contact, and only engaging in this play with willing participants. Bauman documented positive effects of gun play including increased social awareness and self-regulation and the development of co-operative play with complex storylines. It also opened up valuable discussion about violence as well as social/emotional topics such as being aware of each other's feelings. One vignette highlighted how the nature of gun play scenarios (often action-packed with repetitive language) allowed a child with developing English skills the chance to be involved and practice his conversation skills in a predictable context.

Through interviews with the children, Bauman noticed a stark difference in the way they spoke about pretend guns versus real guns. When talking about pretend guns, the children showed excitement and joy, using words such as happy, fun, toy, play. However, when talking about real guns, the children became more serious and used words such as: bad, dangerous, and 'not allowed.' This suggests that children were well aware of the differences and did not equate their play with real violence.

Bauman concluded that gun play had been a recurring dilemma in her practice but having the opportunity to study it in depth within her own classroom, she could better understand the children's motivations for engaging in it, and recognised potential opportunities for learning and development within it too.

This paper has a high level of transparency with detailed information provided on the context of the study and direct quotes from the children included in vignettes. Bauman used a reflective journal to reflect on her biases as a researcher. She acknowledged her privileged position as a white woman working in an area with high socioeconomic status with children who have very little exposure to substantial violence. She reflected on how this contributed to her permissive attitude towards gun play in the classroom. She recognised that children living in communities where trauma and violence are a part of their everyday lives may benefit from a very different set of rules regarding gun play. A strength of this paper was therefore reflexivity. A limitation of this paper in regards to the wider literature is that it provides only the perspective of one

teacher in one particular setting which may not necessarily represent the views of others, even at the same setting.

These three studies have each added further depth to exploring the views of WCP through a case study approach. Their findings highlight similar themes to the four studies in the previous section and add more insight through personal reflections. Some teachers expressed that WCP can offer learning opportunities, such as the development of communication and co-operation, and can lead to important conversations about violence. The co-construction of rules can help children to understand the boundaries of this play. However, WCP is still described as a "recurring dilemma" (Bauman 2015, p. 208). Rosen's (2015) study in particular highlighted the paradoxes that exist for practitioners when they consider WCP, as well as the concern that children get 'stuck' in play that is judged to be less valuable. Delaney (2017) argued the need for teachers to be supported to carefully observe how they allow or deny opportunities for children to make sense of the world around them, even when this world includes weapons and violence.

2.6 Rationale for the current research

The aim of this chapter was to provide a record of the literature review process and the research identified from it. A total of seven research articles were critically reviewed using Gough's WoE (2007) framework. Four of these used interview, questionnaire or focus groups to gather views from EYPs and EY teachers. The other three used case study or self-study approaches.

The main findings suggest that there is still ambivalence towards WCP despite much grey literature (books and EY publications) being available in the last decade that argue against zero tolerance policy and encourage adults to examine the underlying processes beyond the surface-level 'bang, bang, you're dead' narratives. An overarching theme in the literature review appears to be the conflict between personal belief and professional knowledge, with some practitioners being aware that there are potential benefits to WCP in theory, but finding it harder to reconcile this in practice.

2.6.1 Gaps in the literature

This literature review highlighted a lack of published, peer-reviewed research on EYPs' perspectives on WCP, with only seven papers judged suitable for inclusion. Three of the studies were conducted in the USA, where guns represent a serious issue of social justice and human safety and security, therefore the findings may not represent the views of EYPs in the UK. Only one study included in this review was carried out in the UK, and this used a case study methodology with a very specific method of Bakhtinian analysis. Little research appears to have interviewed UK-based EYPs directly, across multiple settings, to seek their views on this area of play. Furthermore, very few studies have focused on WCP specifically. Some used the broad terms of R&T play or active play, including some reference to the subset of weapon or superhero play within this (e.g Logue & Harvey, 2009; Peterson et al., 2018). Conversely, some focused purely on one subset of conflict play e.g. superhero play (Wiwatowski et al., 2020). Overall, the current literature does not provide sufficient insight into the perspectives of EYPs in the UK on WCP.

2.7 Aims of the current research

Holland (2003) argued that EYPs work in a low-status part of education and often underestimate their ability to research and develop their own practice. This study was intended to give practitioners a voice, and promote thought and discussion around WCP in the crucial area of EY education.

The current study aimed to explore the perspectives of EYPs on WCP within EY settings in the UK. The purpose of the research was to gain an up-to-date understanding of how EYPs view and respond to WCP, and their reasons for this. The researcher aimed to explore how understanding EYPs' perspectives could help inform practice.

The research question was:

What are the perspectives of early years practitioners on weapon and conflict play within their settings?

WCP refers to any such play where objects, or imagined objects, are used as weapons towards another person or object (real or imagined). WCP may occur in different contexts e.g. war games, fantasy play or superhero battles etc. For the purposes of this research, WCP is classified separately to R&T play, and risky play. The word 'perspective' here is defined as a person's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and attitudes towards a given topic. The term 'EYP' includes all qualified EY staff including those with EY teacher status.

2.8 Chapter summary

This chapter detailed the systematic literature review process, including the strategy used, the inclusion and exclusion criteria applied, and the approach taken to critically analysing the existing literature. The gaps in the research base were highlighted and informed the rationale for the current research. The aims and research question were provided. The following chapter details the methodology for the current research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Chapter overview

This chapter outlines the methodology for the current research. It includes detailed information on the researcher's epistemological and ontological position, as well as an overview of the research design and the procedures for data collection and analysis, including the rationale for selecting such methods. Attention is also drawn to ethical considerations, and the trustworthiness of the research.

3.2 Ontological and epistemological positioning

This section describes the researcher's ontological and epistemological position. Research cannot be conducted in a vacuum. Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that 'good' qualitative analysis must make explicit its theoretical assumptions. This is important as these assumptions affect how researchers collect and interpret data (Willig, 2013).

3.2.1 Ontology

Ontology refers to the nature of the reality of the world, theories of what exists or what is 'real' (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It considers whether a single reality exists, or whether reality is, in fact, constructed by individuals' perspectives (Cohen et al., 2007). Ontologies exist on a continuum. At one end is realism, the view that there is one single reality that exists and can be uncovered (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). On the opposing end is relativism, the view that there are multiple realities in the world, socially constructed by individuals and there is no 'one true' reality that can be objectively observed (Burr, 2003).

Critical realism sits between the two ends of the continuum. The critical realist position assumes that there is a single reality independent of a person's ideas or perception, but that there are multiple perspectives or interpretations of this reality (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Maxwell, 2012).

3.2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to what knowledge is possible to gain, and how it can be obtained (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Epistemology can also be likened to a continuum with positivism at one end and interpretivism at the other. Positivism is aligned with a realist ontology, where reality is thought to exist independently of human efforts to understand it (Burr, 1998). Researchers adopting this paradigm are striving for objective knowledge, and therefore quantitative methods are commonly used (Sale et al., 2002). Interpretivism is more aligned with a relativist ontology, the belief that multiple realities exist and are constructed by individuals (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interpretivist researchers deem all knowledge to be subjective, (Cohen et al., 2007), and acknowledge that their own values are likely to affect the findings (Firdaus, 2005). Qualitative methods are usually adopted in interpretivist paradigms.

3.2.3 Ontological and epistemological position of the researcher

The researcher takes the position of critical realism. Critical realism can be understood as combining ontological realism (there is a single reality) with epistemological relativism (it is impossible to directly 'get to' this reality/the 'truth'). It provides a position that preserves a concept of a 'truth' or 'reality' but acknowledges that human practice (i.e. language, culture) shapes how people experience and know this (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Critical realism, therefore,

assumes that 'real' events happen but that individuals give meaning to these events in relation to their own experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

The aim of this research was to understand the perspectives of EYPs on WCP. The researcher acknowledges the reality that weapons do exist, and do cause real fear, harm and death. Children are exposed to these weapons and violence through different media formats, and children do engage in WCP of various sorts. However, how practitioners interpret this reality may vary based on their experiences and values. For example, some practitioners may view WCP as harmless, whereas some may view it as inappropriate. WCP has a 'real' historical pervasiveness but the understanding of this phenomenon and the meaning attributed to it may be seen as socially constructed. Taking a critical realist approach enabled exploration into the reality of WCP while also accepting that the perspective of this reality is likely to be different for each individual.

3.3 Research design

The literature review indicated a lack of research directly investigating the views of EYPs on WCP in the UK. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative research design was employed. Qualitative research is compatible with a critical realist paradigm and is well suited to answer the research question of this study. It emphasises the importance of gathering rich information through exploring the subjective ideas of participants (Willig, 2013).

3.4 Research aims and purpose

The current study aimed to explore the perspectives of EYPs on weapon and conflict play within EY settings in the UK. The purpose of the research was to gain an up-to-date understanding of how EYPs view and respond to WCP, and their reasons for this. The research aimed to explore how understanding of these perspectives could help inform EY practice.

3.5 Research procedure

The following section details the procedure of the study, including context and participant information.

3.5.1 Location and context

This research took place in EY settings within a LA in Southern England, where the researcher was on placement. This area was chosen due to the researcher's interest in developing an understanding of perspectives at a local level. The LA has a diverse, multi-cultural population as well as a military population due to its training barracks. Some of the settings were located in areas of deprivation and poverty.

The researcher recruited EYPs from pre-schools and nurseries of various sorts e.g. pack-away (a setting which shares a space in the community so must be packed away at the end of each session), all-year-round day nursery, pre-school linked to a school etc., in an attempt to seek a wide variety of perspectives.

3.5.2 Recruitment

The recruitment process started with an initial discussion within the EP service (EPS). EPs recommended speaking with the EY Service within the LA. They provided a list of the settings in the LA (a total of 242 EY education providers, including day nurseries, pre-schools and school-based settings) who were then *all* emailed the advertisement for the study on 5th May 2022 by the EY Service. This resulted in three settings showing interest and interviews were conducted in June and July 2022. The advert, with a more detailed explanation, was then emailed by the researcher herself to 21 settings from the list at random to re-iterate the opportunity over the months of July to September 2022. Of these, five showed interest and were recruited. These interviews were conducted in September and October 2022. A total of nine interviews at eight settings were completed.

3.5.3 Participants

The following criteria were applied when recruiting participants:

- qualified EYP or EY teacher
- currently based in an early years setting (pre-school/nursery, not Reception/Foundation class) in the LA
- a minimum of one year's experience working at their current setting

The reason for specifying that the EYPs be qualified was to ensure a baseline knowledge of the EYFS statutory framework and child development. The decision *not* to further specify the role and responsibilities of the EYP (e.g. SENCo, manager etc.) was made to allow a wider range of voices to be heard. The criterion that the participant must have worked at their current setting for one year was intended to ensure that EYPs had a sound knowledge of the policies and ethos of their setting. Although the EYFS statutory framework

extends to school-age children (Reception/Foundation) year groups, the researcher's interest was focused on WCP in pre-school education, as opposed to within a school environment.

A total of nine participants across eight different EY settings participated. All participants were women and had differing levels of experience, from nine to 22 years. All were qualified to at least Level 3 in EY Education/Childcare, with two holding Qualified Teacher Status. One practitioner was also a SENCo, one was a 'Room Leader' and one was a deputy manager. See Table 3.1 for a summary of participant information and Table 3.2 for setting information.

Table 3.1

Participant characteristics

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Current role in the setting	Years' experience working in EY/Childcare
Holly	Female	Level 3 EYP	20
Abi	Female	Level 3 EYP, SENCo	9
Natalie	Female	Level 3 EYP	18
Julie	Female	Level 3 EYP, Deputy Manager	11
Leanne	Female	Qualified Teacher Status	16
Samantha	Female	Level 3 EYP, Room Leader	13
Emily	Female	Level 3 EYP, Level 4 Management	11
Catherine	Female	Level 5 EYP	22
Kerry	Female	Qualified Teacher Status	12

Table 3.2

Early years setting characteristics

No.	Type	Open to families	Age of children	Ofsted rating	Total no. participants
1	Pack-away pre-school	Term time only	2-4 years	Good	1
2	Pack-away pre-school	Term time only	2-4 years	Good	2

3	Day nursery	All year round	3 months -5 years	Not yet inspected	1
4	Nursery linked with primary school (onsite)	Term time only	3-4 years	Good	1
5	Pre-school	Term time only	2-4 years	Good	1
6	Day nursery	All year round	8 weeks- 5 years	Outstanding	1
7	Pre-school	Term time only	2-4 years	Good	1
8	Nursery linked with primary school (off-site)	Term time only	2-4 years	Good	1

3.5.4 Data gathering

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because it allows flexible exploration of participants' views about a particular experience (Willig, 2013). Through her questioning, the researcher was able to gather rich information from each participant using a set of structured questions, alongside the use of flexible follow-up questions and prompts in response to the participants' answers. Semi-structured interview techniques mean that a deep understanding can be gained whilst ensuring the researcher gathers information that is relevant to their research question(s) (Kajornboon, 2005; Willig, 2013). Semi-structured interviews align well with the critical realist position because they reflect an understanding that participants will experience reality differently and therefore the exact questions needed to elicit their perspective may be different too.

Another way to encourage participants to produce rich accounts of their experience is to use a stimulus (Willig, 2013). In this case, vignettes were used at the end of the interview to deepen the discussion and allow further

exploration of particular features. Vignettes can be described as "short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situation the interviewee is invited to respond" (Finch, 1987, p. 1).

An example of a vignette used was:

In the outdoor area, a child approaches another with a large stick held in such a way that it looks like a gun, "I'm going to shoot your brains out!" they threaten, "and then you're going to die."

Prompts for the vignettes included:

- What would your response be in this situation? Why?
- How would you feel being in this situation?
- What would you do next?

3.5.5 Pilot study

A pilot was conducted in June 2022 with an EYP at a pre-school local to the researcher, but not within the LA where the final interviews took place. An initial interview schedule was prepared for this, with the aim that the pilot would highlight potential areas for development. Willig (2013) suggests that better formulations of questions may arise following reflection, especially when the interviewer is a novice, which the researcher considered herself to be. The pilot study was important in that it allowed the researcher to get a 'feel' for how the questions might be interpreted and how they 'flowed' in relation to the participant's responses. Feedback was positive overall but some suggestions were made as to how to improve the interview schedule.

Following the pilot study, these suggestions were discussed with the researcher's supervisor and the researcher's colleagues. A paper included as

part of the literature review, Wiwatowski et al. (2020), had included their research schedule in the appendix. This was useful to help the researcher consider different questions and ways to ask them to avoid inviting bias or socially desirable answers.

The following changes were made to the pilot interview schedule:

- Some questions were made less directive e.g. "Do you notice a *gender difference* in the children who tend to engage in this play?" became "Do you notice *any difference* in the types of children who tend to engage in this play?" And "*What* do you think are the challenges presented by this kind of play?" became "*Are there* any challenges or risks presented by this kind of play?"
- The order of the questions was adapted so that the question regarding a WCP policy was moved from the first question in the interview schedule, to nearer the end as it was deemed to feel potentially too forward for the beginning where rapport was still being built
- An extra vignette was added which included a child engaging in WCP but with a 'magical weapon' to probe practitioners to consider their responses to WCP in the context of magic/fantasy play
- Additional probes were added to the interview schedule as prompts for the researcher e.g. "do you think it's any different to any other kind of play?"

3.5.6 Final interview schedule

The final interview schedule was designed with a mixture of different questions, based on guidance from Kvale (2007). A combination of the following were included:

- Direct questions e.g. does weapon and conflict play happen in your setting?
- Probing questions e.g. could you tell me a bit about that?

- Follow-up questions e.g. how do the children tend to respond to that [relating to the participant's previous statement]?
- Structuring questions e.g. what sense do you, as an adult, make of weapon and conflict play?
- Silence – allowing pauses in the conversation to encourage participants to take thinking time before responding. This often had the effect that participants would add more detail to their previous statement or think of a new point to make and therefore deepen the discussion

The final interview schedule can be found in Appendix C.

3.5.7 Interview procedure

Interviews were carried out face-to-face or online, according to participant preference. Five interviews were conducted face-to-face at the EY settings and four were conducted via secure video call on Microsoft Teams. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in separate, quiet areas of the setting for confidentiality reasons. Interviews lasted 40-60 minutes, and arranged for a time that was convenient for participants.

Prior to the interview, participants were given the information sheet and consent form to read and sign. Setting managers also signed a consent form and gave permission for their practitioner(s) to participate. Interviews began with the researcher introducing themselves as a doctoral student, explaining the purpose of the interview, recapping confidentiality and the right to withdraw, and checking participant consent to continue. The researcher asked questions about the participants' experience in EY education, and details about their setting such as the age range of children on roll. Participants were also given the

opportunity to ask questions at this point. The researcher made it clear that they were not representing Ofsted or the LA in any form, and that they should feel free to express their opinion without judgment. It was emphasised that the researcher was interested in their thoughts, feelings, and experiences and they should answer as fully as possible.

To ensure all participants had the same understanding of WCP, they were first asked what the term meant to them, and then provided with a definition written by the researcher. This definition was as follows:

WCP refers to any such play where objects, or imagined objects, are used as weapons towards another person or object (real or imagined). WCP may occur in different contexts e.g. war games, fantasy play or superhero battles etc. For the purposes of this research WCP is classified separately to rough and tumble play, and risky play.

During the interview, participant comments were re-stated and incorporated into further questions. This allowed the researcher to demonstrate their active listening skills and check they had understood correctly. After the interview, participants were again given the chance to ask questions. It was explained to them that they would receive a debrief sheet later that day or the following day, as well as a summary of the finished research in the summer of 2023, if they would like. Participants and setting managers were thanked for their time.

Please see Appendix D for copies of the information sheets, consent, and debrief forms.

3.5.8 Transcription

Interviews were transcribed manually. This can allow for the researcher to immerse themselves deeply into the data and greatly aids the familarisation process (Byrne, 2021). The researcher was interested in *what* participants said, as opposed to *how* it was said, therefore, 'orthographic' style transcription was used (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Utterances such as "umm" and "erm" were included to aid ease of reading. 'Paralinguistic' features of the data (e.g. noting a laugh or hesitation) were also included to provide context. Once completed, all audio files were listened to again in reverse order (interview 9 through to interview 1) and transcriptions were read alongside to check for accuracy. Examples of transcription can be found in Appendix E.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was gained from UEL. See Appendix F for a copy of the ethics review decision. Written consent from the LA was also obtained (see Appendix G). Informed consent was gained verbally and in written format from the manager of the EY setting and all participants, prior to their participation. Copies of the information sheet and consent forms can be found in Appendix D.

Confidentiality and security of the data was ensured by:

- Storing all files on the encrypted UEL One Drive
- Using an encrypted Dictaphone. Audio recordings were deleted from the device as soon as transferred to the secure UEL One Drive
- Audio recordings and transcripts were stored with an anonymised random code, given to participants in the debrief letter in case they wished to withdraw

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- Recordings and transcripts were stored separately to signed consent forms and contact details
- Audio recordings were deleted from all devices once transcribed and checked for accuracy
- Printed materials such as signed consent forms were kept in locked storage
- Pseudonyms were used for participants and any inadvertently mentioned names of adults, children, settings, locations or services were replaced with pseudonyms

Participants were assured of the safety and security of their data, as well as the understanding that all names would be carefully replaced with pseudonyms and therefore they would not be identifiable as individuals in any way. Please refer to Appendix H for the Data Management Plan which details the security of participant information.

3.7 Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022), was chosen as the method to analyse the interview data. RTA is a qualitative approach to data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns within a dataset (Byrne, 2021). RTA emphasises the active role of the researcher in knowledge production and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

3.7.1 Rationale for RTA

RTA was chosen because it offers a theoretically flexible way to develop, analyse and interpret patterns of meaning across a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It can be used to gain a rich understanding of the experiences of

participants. It therefore aligns well with the exploratory nature of this research, which was focused on understanding the perspectives of EYPs.

RTA was also chosen because it emphasises the role of an active, reflexive researcher, and embraces subjectivity (Trainor & Bundon, 2020). Braun and Clarke (2022) state that "subjectivity is essential to processes of reflexive thematic analysis; it is the fuel that drives the engine" (p. 12). RTA is therefore well suited to a critical realist position, which acknowledges that there are likely to be a diverse range of potential interpretations of the data, with no single interpretation being the 'correct' one.

Other qualitative methods were considered, such as interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA seeks to explore how people make sense of their personal and social reality (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA was deemed unsuitable due to the focus of the research being on practitioners' direct experiences and perspectives, rather than seeking to understand how they *make sense* of their lived experiences.

3.7.2 Process of RTA

Although Braun and Clarke (2022) offer a six-phase approach to RTA, they emphasise that data analysis is recursive and not a series of linear steps. The guidance in Braun and Clarke's (2022) book was followed.

3.7.2.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation of the data. The first phase of RTA involves immersion in the data in order for the researcher to become intimately familiar with its content. This phase involved reading and re-reading the

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transcripts, first while listening back to the audio files, and then without. Notes were made of any initial casual observations of trends in the data, or potentially interesting excerpts. Notes were also made about the researcher's thoughts and feelings regarding the dataset and the analysis itself in a research diary (see Appendix I). This helped to aid the researcher's memory as the analysis developed.

      3.7.2.2 Phase 2: Coding. Codes are heuristic devices used to help understanding and engagement with the dataset. They are the building blocks of what will eventually become themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Coding is an organic and evolving process used to produce short, descriptive labels for extracts of data that may hold some relevance to the research question(s). The dataset was worked through in a systematic way, interview by interview, with codes attributed to each excerpt that was deemed relevant. Codes were aimed at capturing single meanings or concepts. The dataset and codes were then reviewed in reverse to disrupt the familiar 'flow' of the dataset and to try to ensure 'even' levels of insight and depth of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

      In RTA, coding can be completed inductively, deductively, or a mixture of the two (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Because the researcher was concerned with exploring the perspectives of her participants, rather than applying a pre-existing theory to the dataset, inductive RTA was used. This meant that data did not have to be coded to fit any pre-existing categories, but could instead be coded openly. It must be noted that the inherently subjective nature of qualitative analysis means that 'pure' induction is impossible. The social and theoretical positioning of the researcher shapes what is noticed about the data

and the stories that are told about them (Fine, 1992). This is why reflexivity is so important in RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher used her research diary to reflect on her thoughts throughout this process.

Coding can take place at a range of levels, from semantic (looking at explicit, surface meaning) to latent (looking at the more conceptual, implicit meaning) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher used semantic coding to provide a descriptive analysis of the data, and represent the content of the data as communicated by the participant (Byrne, 2021).

The 'comment' function on Microsoft Word was used to code the digital transcripts. Another document was created with a table to keep track of all the codes and the extracts of data they were attached to. The initial number of codes was 243. The researcher took a break from RTA at this point, as advised by Braun and Clarke (2022), in order to reflect before returning to review the codes with a 'fresh' perspective.

A process of reviewing the codes involved printing them out and physically arranging and re-arranging them to highlight any overlapping or very similar codes (see Appendix J for photographic evidence). The extracts of data for these codes were then compared with one another to examine whether the codes could be collapsed into each other. For example, the codes 'WCP is easy to join in with', and 'WCP requires no verbal language' were combined to become 'WCP is an accessible form of play.' The 243 initial codes were collapsed down to 138, in an iterative process. A sample of initial coding can be found in Appendix E and the final list of codes in Appendix K.

3.7.2.3 Phase 3: Generating initial themes. Next, the researcher began

to study the codes and group those that appeared to share a core idea together

to form initial themes. Themes can be defined as patterns of meaning

underpinned by a central idea (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Themes are actively

generated from codes and therefore represent a second level of data analysis.

The codes were written or printed onto small slips of paper to aid the

arrangement and re-arrangement of initial, 'candidate' themes. See Appendix L

for photographs of this process.

3.7.2.4 Phase 4: Developing and reviewing themes. Braun and Clarke

(2022) offer some key questions for researchers to reflect upon at this stage.

The following questions were used to help the researcher review the candidate

themes:

- How well do these patterns capture key meaning?
- Does this pattern communicate something important and interesting in
  relation to the research question?
- Is there a clear central organising concept for this theme? Does the
  theme lack coherence?
- How internally consistent and yet distinct from other themes are they?
  Can the boundaries of this theme be identified?
- What story does the overall analysis tell?

As part of the review process, some of the candidate themes were

collapsed or combined. The revised themes were discussed with the

researcher's supervisor and research colleagues. The researcher then read

through the transcripts again to ensure that the overall patterns and meaning

were captured by the themes. A thematic map was created to depict the themes

and subthemes, and their relationships to one another. See Appendix M for a list of how the codes corresponded to the final themes.

3.7.2.5 Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes. This phase consisted of finalising the themes, giving them appropriate names and definitions to illustrate their central organising concept. This was also the point at which the researcher began to plan how the themes might be discussed in the findings chapter. A final thematic map was produced (see Appendix N).

3.7.2.6 Phase 6: Write-up. The final phase of RTA was the reporting of the findings. Extracts across the dataset were used to illustrate themes and demonstrate their relevance to the research question. Findings are detailed in Chapter 4.

3.8 Quality of the research

The epistemological assumptions of qualitative and quantitative research are different from one another, therefore different criteria are required to evaluate their quality (Yardley, 2017). For quantitative research, the criteria of reliability, validity and generalisability are generally used, but there are no absolute criteria for assessing qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Yardley (2000, 2008) proposed a set of open-ended and flexible principles that can be applied to qualitative research to assess its quality: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, coherence and transparency, and impact and importance. The researcher used these principles to evaluate the quality and 'trustworthiness' of the current study.

3.8.1 Sensitivity to context

Yardley (2000, 2008) argued that good quality qualitative studies should be sensitive to the social-cultural context, the existing literature on the topic area and the data gathered from participants. The researcher demonstrated sensitivity to context by thoroughly researching the literature surrounding WCP, and carefully using this to inform the current research design. The researcher made sure to contextualise the findings in relation to the existing literature. A reflexive research diary was also kept which allowed a record of the researcher's reflections to be referred back to throughout the whole research process. While analysing the data, the researcher was careful to ensure that themes were supported with direct quotations from participants and their perspectives were clearly communicated in the findings.

3.8.2 Commitment and rigour

Yardley (2000, 2008) recommends that commitment and rigour can be demonstrated through the researcher's engagement with the topic and the research process, including the data collection, depth/breadth of analysis and methodological competence. The researcher immersed herself in reading widely around the topic of WCP, both empirical papers and published articles in EY magazines and websites. She also read extensively and listened to webinars and podcasts on RTA so that she felt confident in the method. Analysis took place systematically and over a period of time so that it was not rushed, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) guidance. The researcher used the support of her colleagues who were also using RTA, to reflect on the process together. To ensure rigour, the interview schedule was prepared carefully in conjunction with the researcher's supervising tutor, and with reference to

interview schedules used in previous WCP literature. Furthermore, a pilot study facilitated reflection and improvements to the interview questions and process. Interpersonal skills fostered throughout the doctoral training programme were drawn upon during the data collection stage.

3.8.3 Coherence and transparency

Transparency and coherence can be demonstrated through detailed and accurate reporting of all stages of the research to allow the reader to pass judgement on the fit between the research question(s), theoretical framework, and methods used to collect and analyse the data. The researcher provided a detailed description of the methodology and data analysis process, including photographic evidence and excerpts from her research dairy. The diary ensured that the researcher's developing thoughts were captured and justifications for decisions were detailed. The researcher critically reflected on her positioning, both personally/professionally and from an ontological and epistemological perspective within this research study (see sections 1.7 and 3.2.3).

3.8.4 Impact and importance

The impact and importance of the research "can only be assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the application it was intended for, and the community for whom the results were deemed relevant" (Yardley, 2000, p. 223). A good piece of research might therefore have a practical impact for a particular community, provide a new/greater understanding of a particular issue, or contribute towards positive social change. The current research aimed to explore and offer an enhanced understanding of EYPs' perspectives on WCP. The findings provide an important contribution to the current literature. Upon

completion of the thesis, the researcher hopes to initially disseminate her findings in a summary format to EY settings in the LA, and then go on to publish the research in EY or psychology academic journals and/or magazines so that a greater understanding of perspectives on WCP can be shared more widely.

3.9 Chapter summary

This chapter has given an overview of the research methodology and procedure, including the ethical considerations. The ontological and epistemological position taken by the researcher has been described, and the trustworthiness of the research has been evaluated. The next chapter describes the findings in relation to the research question.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter presents the research findings from the reflexive thematic analysis of nine EYPs' semi-structured interview responses. The aim of the research was to explore EYPs' perspectives on WCP. The research question was:

What are the perspectives of early years practitioners on weapon and conflict play within their settings?

Overall, two overarching themes, seven themes and 17 subthemes were generated during the RTA. Each theme will be described in turn, accompanied with extracts from the data to support the researcher's interpretation. Please note that the names of participants have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

A thematic map was created to illustrate the relationships between each of the themes and subthemes (see Figure 4.1; a larger version can be found in Appendix N). The two overarching themes were (1) Making sense of WCP, and (2) The role of EYPs in WCP. Overarching themes demonstrate broader conceptual ideas that anchor several themes together (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The themes themselves capture "multi-faceted manifestations of a single, central concept from the dataset" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 87). Subthemes sit 'beneath' these, focusing on a particular aspect of that central organising theme.

Figure 4.1 Thematic map
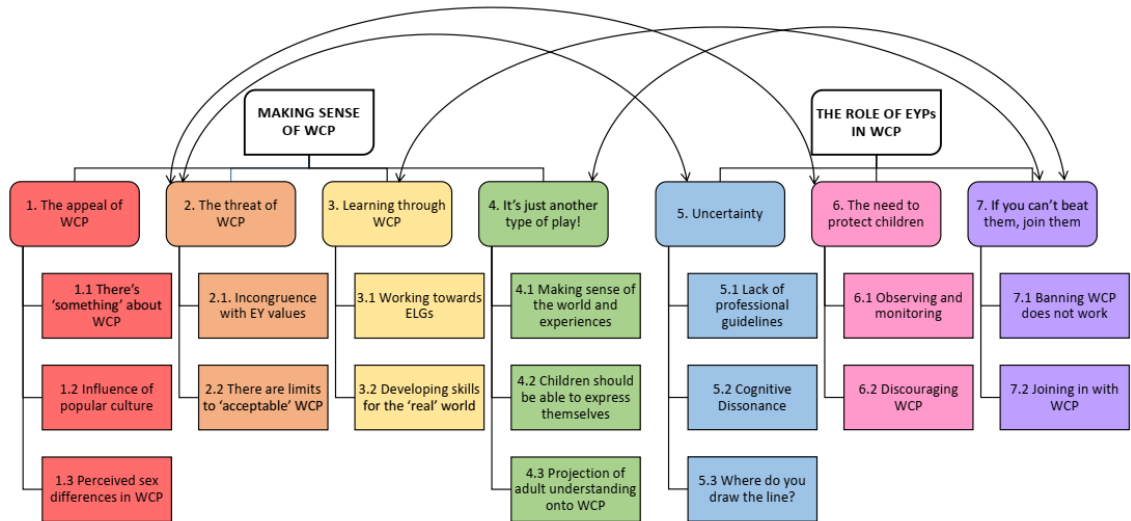
4.2 Overarching theme 1: Making sense of WCP

This overarching theme explores how EYPs attribute meaning to WCP, why they think children engage in it and if there any potential risks or benefits associated with it.

Figure 4.2 Making sense of WCP
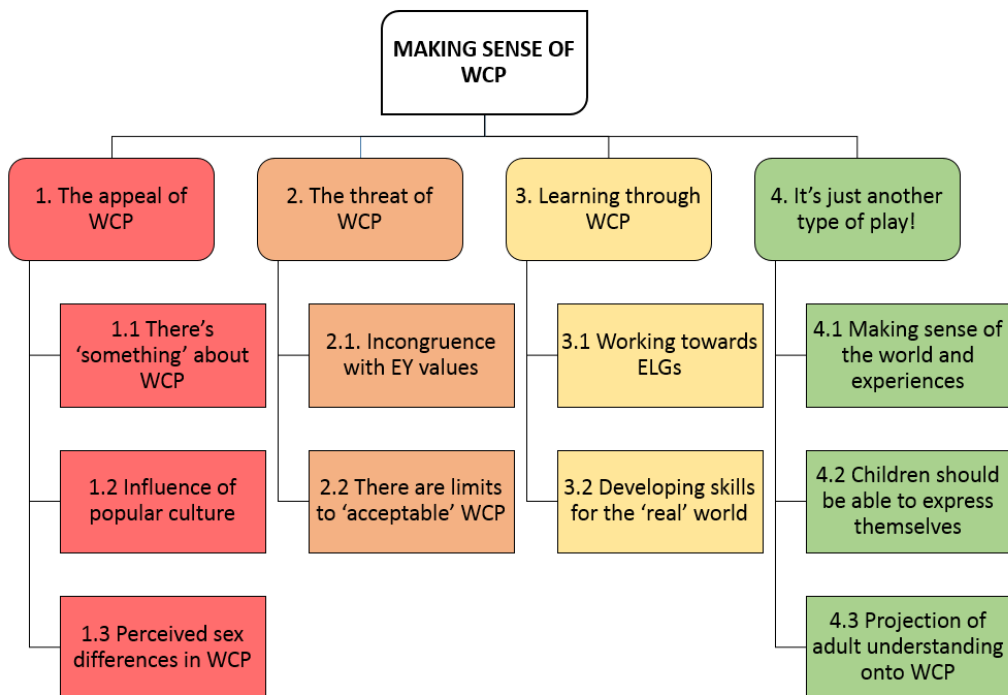
4.2.1 Theme 1: The appeal of WCP

This theme explores the reasons why WCP happens, including children's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. EYPs gave a variety of reasons for why children engage in WCP including imitating action they have seen in popular media, wanting to engage in physical play that allows them to take risks, and being drawn towards WCP due to innate biological traits.

Figure 4.3 The appeal of WCP
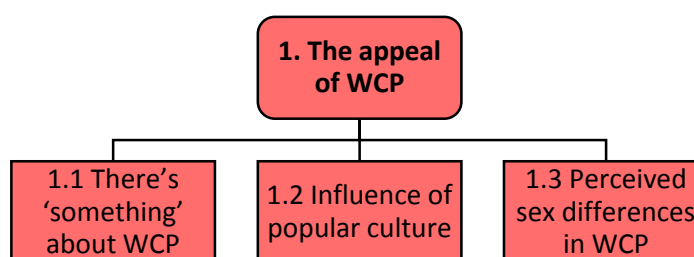
4.2.1.1 Subtheme 1.1 There is 'something' about WCP. Practitioners identified that WCP is appealing to some children because of its interactive, exhilarating, and often physical nature. The excitement and risk of WCP is enticing. Practitioners commented that they found this concept hard to explain, referring to WCP as having 'something' about it that makes it different to other kinds of role play.

There is something, I think there is something else to it […] I don't know what it is, but there is something different about [WCP]. Julie
Some children just don't wanna play in the home corner. They want something a little bit more exciting than a home corner. They want a bit of a battle. […] I think it's more just that kind of fun and excitement and just kind of playing a role […] they get enjoyment out of it. They, they have fun with it. Leanne
It's much more they're in, they're out, they're up, they're down, they're all about. It's a very whole body experience of playing. Natalie
And he was, he'd be darting around. He'd be big, he'd be strong, he'd be powerful. Holly

The physicality of WCP in particular was seen as a way for children to expel feelings of frustration, stress or aggression "out of their system."

…a lot of it, I would say, is trying to get some kind of aggression out. Samantha
…they obviously want to get that out of their system for a bit. Catherine
They might wanna hit that 'cos they've actually got lots of stress going on inside them. Emily

Furthermore, some EYPs expressed the idea that WCP is an accessible form of play because it does not require verbal language. Children can get involved in WCP without necessarily needing to be able to speak to convey the sense of the game. Children can simply 'follow' their peers and enjoy playing by watching and copying others.

Yeah, it's kind of like engaging with other children, so by, they might not be, necessarily, have the words to be able to do it, but by able to sort of waving something around to get another child's attention. "Oh, that works", and yeah, they can kind of maybe draw that child towards them. Abi
So for the value for them is that they've got someone to play with and they're being almost told what to do and you haven't got to think, and "I can just follow this child and they're my friend and I'm having fun." Samantha

4.2.1.2 Subtheme 1.2 Influence of popular culture. Some practitioners viewed the occurrence of WCP as largely the result of children consuming media such as video games, TV and YouTube which they then re-enact at the setting. Children's easy access to inappropriate violent media was raised as a concern.

We had some very boisterous boys in the afternoon and they were very into guns. And I know, unfortunately, they watched, like, you know, had access to watching things on YouTube […] I think it's 'cos it's what they see. They see it in the media, they see it on Youtube […] I think I blame today's society and the technical everything.

Umm, and it also, it's influenced by what they see on, say, TV, more what they see on the computer screens- games. They might have older siblings. They might have dads, and they tend to watch quite violent games. Your Grand Theft Autos and all those games are all for over 18's.

Holly

So, even so when we come back [after Covid-19 lockdown], we found that, kind of, that was when the gunplay was getting kind of more 'cos probably they'd been at home watching their brother on the computer.

Samantha

4.2.1.3 Subtheme 1.3 Perceived sex differences in WCP. Several practitioners spoke about how they had noticed differences in the types of children who engage in WCP. Their experience was that boys tend to choose WCP more than girls do.

Yeah, [WCP] happens all the time and we have years where it's really apparent- generally when it's boy heavy. If we have a boy heavy intake, we get it more. You do get it from some of the girls, but not as much they, um, but definitely when we have the boys […] I think in my experience, and I've been here a long time, I've never seen a girl make a gun.

Holly

It does lean towards more boys. Erm, I know that sounds so stereotypical, but I, it, it does lean more towards boys.

Natalie

Some participants attributed this difference to biological or evolutionary development, perceiving that boys are inherently different to girls in that they have a masculine tendency towards aggression which is "built in" to them.

And even now our boys particularly will play and involve themselves in weaponry play. And it's not even something we're teaching. It's just. You know, it's like built in their blood somehow. To me, it's like it's in, it's just part of them. Being like, it's like the man will always fend for, do you know what I mean that like, themselves […] I don't know. It just it's sort of, you know, I think it's built as I say, I just think it's built into that, those children.

Catherine

Some felt that boys learn in intrinsically different ways to girls. Their strong interest in physical role play, compared to girls, means they are 'naturally' more drawn to activities such as WCP.

> *And I think boys, boys, from my research of how boys learn, they're more active, so they like movement, they like moving and the weapon play allows them to move around because they've got to fight each other and you know, fight the baddie and be the goodie and do all the flying round, whereas girls like, you know, being at a table, being calm and drawing.*
>
> Julie

They also shared that girls' versions of WCP, if they do engage in it, tend to feature magical themes, such as Disney characters, rather than guns.

> *Actually girls, you get using more magic than boys. Girls always wanting to turn you into frogs as well. You, I suppose you don't think of that as weapon play, but actually, it's still, they're using a weapon to do something to you, in a different way.*
>
> Leanne
>
> *The girls would do their freezing with their Elsa. So we make the sounds like "tttssshhh" and like "pow pow" with our hands or they'll make like fists.*
>
> Julie

4.2.2 Theme 2: The threat of WCP

EYPs have a duty of care to keep children safe and protected from harm, while also supporting their learning and development. This theme explores how WCP can be seen as dangerous or risky, posing a threat to children and their EY education, and the values promoted by EY settings.

Figure 4.4 The threat of WCP
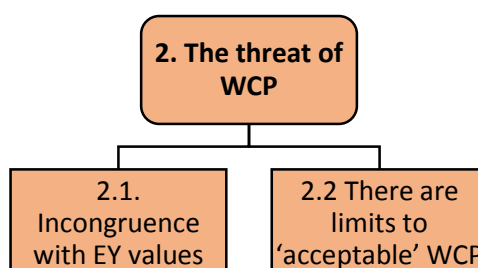
4.2.2.1 Subtheme 2.1 Incongruence with EY values. Participants raised concerns that WCP poses a physical risk to children and can promote aggressive play tendencies. Practitioners were concerned about children becoming injured, including children who are not involved in the play. Practitioners spoke about how they try to reinforce values such as "kind hands" but that WCP can violate these. One practitioner, who worked in a nursery linked to a Church of England school, explained that WCP was not permitted because it explicitly conflicted with the Christian values.

The problem that I really see is when, especially, we have one little guy at the moment who can become quite absorbed in being Spiderman. And that can cause him to become quite aggressive with how he challenges what he perceives as the baddie [...] and we can have some quite, um, I say violent outbursts, you know.   Natalie
Like when they're holding it they'll run and then they'll bang into people and they'll knock you over, knock them over and things like that as well. So the, the risk, it's just the fact that we had accidents and incidents where they would, they would think they was playing, but another child maybe got hurt. So then it's like, right, OK, we really need to calm this down 'cos something could really hurt someone.   Samantha
It can be quite a risk to, especially other children that are not participating in the games. I think that's the, the highest risk when they're just sort of milling around playing and you've got someone bowling across, charging around with a, a gun that they've made.   Natalie
Guns and that sort of play does not fit into our values of the school. And obviously, we're a Christian School as well [...] I don't feel comfortable with it.   Kerry

EYPs expressed that even if not physically injured, WCP can seem scary or intimidating to other children who are not involved in the play. Often this may be younger or 'quieter' children.

> *Some of the children can become quite distressed when others get a bit too boisterous. And if they're charging around and they're shooting and the little ones are sitting and trying to be a bit quiet, it can be quite upsetting for them.*
>
> Natalie

> *..they don't want to be any part of that, which is fine. And, and some of them are so little and they're just settling. And then the last thing they need is someone coming up, going "do, do, do" to them. And it's a bit overwhelming, yeah […] I think some of the girls, the little ones, are scared of the play, so they may go stand with an adult.*
>
> Samantha

4.2.2.2 Subtheme 2.2 There are limits to 'acceptable' WCP. This theme explores the view that WCP is permitted but only to a certain extent. Practitioners again highlighted the physical aspect of WCP, and felt this was a clear boundary between acceptable and non-acceptable play. They shared that as long as the child is not hurting another, the play would usually be allowed.

> *…If they're just like pretending it's a gun, then no, because it it's, they've just made a stickle brick [gun], and they're really proud of what they've made, and they're not actually hurting anyone. But if they're actually hurting and hitting with the stick, then yeah, then we do, we do stop it.*
>
> Abi

> *…as long as there's no, no one getting hurt and no one's upset.*
>
> Emily

Practitioners also raised the issue of concerning language- language that is considered to be "too dark" or adult for the children to be using, such as "kill." Such language was considered a reason to stop the play.

> *I have no problem with them pretending to make guns. Erm, as long as they don't use the wording of, "I'm going to kill you" and "I'm going to…" those, they're the kind of things for me that make it a little bit different.*
>
> Catherine

> *…saying things like "I'm going to kill you", we don't allow them to say that either because that would upset whoever's playing with them […] Yes, so that's the language that I look out for. So, um, my ears would prick at that […] It is OK for war play, but it's not OK for that sort of language.*
>
> Julie

Some practitioners expressed that WCP themes related to superheroes or magic can seem less threatening because of their fictional nature, and they are therefore more acceptable.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Learning through WCP

This theme refers to the different learning opportunities that practitioners believe can be offered by WCP, including those that fit within the EYFS and help children work towards achieving their ELGs and more general skills for the 'real' world.

Figure 4.5 Learning though WCP
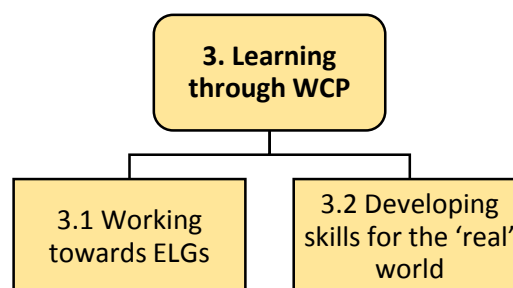
4.2.3.1 Subtheme 3.1 Working towards the ELGs. Practitioners conveyed that by engaging in WCP, children are developing skills across the EYFS framework. Practitioners noted aspects of personal, social and emotional

development (PSED; a prime area of learning in the EYFS) that can be developed through WCP. This included the notion that children are exploring their own identity, learning about themselves and others, and building social relationships. Practitioners thought that, for some children, taking on the identity of another person or character, such as through role playing as a superhero, could give them confidence.

[They're] learning how to express themselves, learning to be who they want to be. Emily
That kind of play is all about communic-, intention, communication and social behaviour as well… Holly
…their group play as I said, they're policeman and they're putting in you in jail, you got maybe two or three of them all working together and discussing how to get you into jail and what to do and they're working together in that way so you've got that kind of real camaraderie there. Leanne
…that child could have problems at home, and that all of a sudden they become a superhero and that superhero is giving them the power to be somebody else and to get that confidence. Catherine

Practitioners also spoke about the potential opportunities for development in communication and language (CL; a prime area of learning in the EYFS), and literacy, including increased vocabulary and the development of storylines.

…you know they're making sounds like pre- I suppose like for pre phonics as well, which is good and I try and build upon the vocabulary as well whenever I'm in the room, so just learning new words I suppose. Julie
…you're including your friends, you're, you know, you're making a story, that's all your early literacy really. Samantha
And the communication actually. This kind of, you can get quite good storylines, so actually they're really developing that communication there between them and, and that teamwork as well in some ways. Leanne

77

Children were also described as developing their imagination through this role play. WCP was seen to be immersive.

> *…they're sort of chasing each other around and they're swapping their weapons and they're all having a little bit of a go, I would see that as a creative extension of their role play. Creating boundaries of what they're going to do, sharing, sharing resources, actually using their imagination to create a little world and game.*
>
> Natalie
>
> *…in their head they're dressed up, they're in their armour, they're in their suit, they're in their whatever, they're soldier wear, you know, they've got that mindset. I'm a soldier, I'm in Star Wars. I've got to, you know cross the enemy thresholds or whatever. You know, they're, you know, they're crawling along the mud. You know, they're getting shot at or, you know, the villain's coming after them like they're really engrossed in what they can see in their mind.*
>
> Julie

The physical aspects of WCP, such as constructing a weapon, or running and jumping around, were highlighted as improving fine and gross motor skills within physical development (PD; a prime area of learning in the EYFS).

> *…the physical skills and, like, fine [motor] skills are going to be being used by making those constructions, swords, whatever it may be at the time.*
>
> Catherine
>
> *…like physical development where they're running around and learning to be safe and knowing to stop, to stop themselves.*
>
> Abi

4.2.3.2 Subtheme 3.2 Developing skills for the 'real' world.

Practitioners also identified that children can develop and practise life skills for the 'wider world' such as resilience, negotiation, and problem solving. WCP allows children to experience conflict situations in a safe environment and learn to solve problems as a group. These skills are fundamental beyond the EYFS.

> *It's building up resilience, that type of thing […] You know, dealing with conflict. It's so, it's problem solving.*
>
> Holly
>
> *They're actually, they're learning their own conflict management and their own emotion management through that.*
>
> Leanne

4.2.4 Theme 4: It's just another type of play!

This theme highlights the view of practitioners who feel WCP is simply another form of role play that allows children to make sense of the world around them. It includes the view that children's understanding of WCP is innocent and adults perceive it to be more concerning than it is. Ultimately, this theme captures the opinion that children should be able to express themselves and play in ways of their choosing.

Figure 4.6 It's just another type of play!
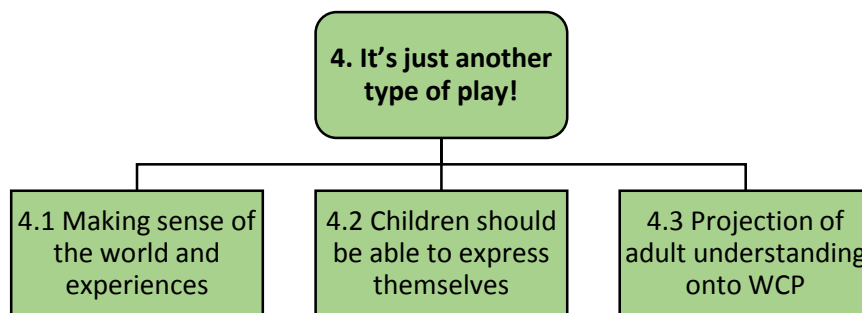
4.2.4.1 Subtheme 4.1 Making sense of the world and experiences. Some participants perceived children to be making sense of 'adult' concepts such as morality and justice (good and bad, right and wrong), and death through WCP.

> *Umm, I think that they're trying to figure out right and wrong because a lot of the talk around it is goodies versus baddies. "Now I'm a goodie and they're a baddie. We've got to catch the baddie."*
>
> Julie
>
> *I think a lot of it is like that good and bad, and that good and evil. And it's like because, they rarely play the evil part. They wanna play the kiddies fighting the baddies really. So it's that …they want to be able to kind of have a sense*

> *of justice and go, "Yeah, this is what we need to do to, to look after ourselves, look after our friends, in fact." […] I mean, what other way can you play with kind of the, the morals? You can talk to the children about right and wrong, but actually, what other way can they apply it without kind of sitting in a circle and saying what's the right thing to do, what's wrong? And actually they need to learn a little bit of that for themselves. I think it's important that they are learning themselves as well. There's us telling them things. And their understanding what's right and wrong through, through other things, rather than us just always, constantly go "no, you mustn't do that."*
>
> Leanne

> *And then, um, I suppose you know, talking about people dying as well comes a part of it. If they've shot somebody, then they're like, "oh, they died." So then you get that learning opportunity from it as well.*
>
> Julie

Practitioners understood play to be a vessel for children to re-enact things they have seen in their lives to help process and make sense of these experiences. Therefore, WCP can be seen as way for children to make sense of experiences they might have had involving weapons or conflict.

> *You know, often our children come from homes that are really full of conflict, and sometimes gunplay… I think it's a really good way of living that out, you know, sort of expelling it from your, um, from their little heads.*
>
> Holly

> *…I think they're understanding the wider world, but in their fantasy play in the, in the things that they know. So the things that they're watching, observing, reading, whatever their parents do for a living.*
>
> Julie

> *Because I think if, sort of, a child has made something and then they're expressing that they're gunna use it to, I don't know, go and shoot a deer, it might be then that you've gotta go and, like, investigate. Why do they know that? How do they know that? Actually, it might have been that they've gone camping at the weekend and they're on this farmer's ground and they've heard the gunshot and they it may be that they're retelling you actually, a past experience. That, that is part of them. They need to retell you stories. That's them building up their understanding of what's going on around them.*
>
> Emily

Practitioners acknowledged that, due to their local context, some children had family members in the armed forces. They understood that this would likely mean their role play might reflect some WCP aspects, given that children represent their life experiences through play.

> *…for example, guns to them….it might be they see Daddy on a parade holding a gun and therefore it's not really a scary thing. It's a, it's a, it's part of their uniform. And then actually, if they wanna make a gun, they've got it on their trousers, actually that's because Daddy had one on his uniform.*
> Emily

> *…so the same little boy that does Star Wars, his dad's in the army so he also has guns sometimes as well, and that's usually a smaller plank that he holds, like um, not like a pistol but like a rifle.*
> Julie

At the time of one of the interviews, the funeral for Queen Elizabeth II had recently been televised nationally. The practitioner commented that events in the national context, such as this, are likely to be processed by the children through representation in their play. She argued for the importance of letting children re-enact these scenes to not only follow their interests, but to deepen their understanding.

> *…from what we've been watching recently [Queen Elizabeth II's funeral], there's lots of children are seeing the, the soldiers standing and they've got a gun in their hand. And even one [child], he understood that the soldier did have a gun but it was facing the other way for respect and that little, that little 3 year old understood that it. Obviously, he'd clearly asked his mum and he was very, very into everything so don't get me wrong he was, he is an anomaly, I know he is, but he, he wanted to understand why. Why is that pointing in the floor, why is it not pointing up like? He could see that and you think, well I can't not encourage that. Let's stand like soldiers, I don't mind. Let's march around the garden, erm let make a gun so that we can hold it and put it downwards. It he wanted to do that so. And he knew it wasn't…it was for respect. It was in respect of the Queen so, I don't know how you can… you can't really take that away if, it, it's what they're bringing up themselves.*
> Emily

In the context of the Royal funeral, weapons were held as a mark of respect and to reflect history. Another practitioner shared her opinion that there are some legitimate contexts for weapons; the weapons themselves are not inherently bad, it is the purpose for which they are used, and children are capable of understanding this.

> *…guns aren't necessarily a bad thing. They can be, they're there for a purpose as well and obviously we, a lot of our parents were army parents, so they saw guns as a, you know, a protection mechanism as well.*
>
> Catherine

At the time of this research, Russia are at war with Ukraine. Some participants commented on this global context and felt that children's exposure to this and other global conflicts, unintentional or not, affected their play themes while they made sense of this information.

> *There's conflict around the world, conflict on European borders and I think children are picking up on that. There's rarely a news item you'll put on without seeing a soldier.*
>
> Holly

> *…there might be children that are sitting there watching the news and seeing, for example, like things on the news and parents talking about it, unaware that the children listen. So actually they wanna make a tank because they've seen a tank on the telly.*
>
> Emily

4.2.4.2 Subtheme 4.2 Children should be able to express themselves. The idea that learning should be child-initiated and children should be able to play in the ways that they wish was a value shared by many of the participants.

> *I just I think it's really important to let children be who they are and play with what they want to play with. And it helps us sort of plan for them around their interests.*
>
> Abi

> *We, we see whatever the children are into, we will empower them to express whatever they're, whatever's going on. Um, to a level, obviously. We go with whatever they're interested in […] if that's what they wanna do. Yeah, let's go for it.*
>
> Emily

Some practitioners felt that, if WCP was to be completely banned in their settings, it would contradict child-initiated practice. They advocated for children to be able to express themselves and use their creativity and imagination.

> *[You're] taking away the creativity a bit too. If you kind of stop it. So actually, you know, who are we to say what you can make and what you can't make? We want to encourage them to use their imagination to apply what they know themselves.*
>
> Leanne

> *Erm, I don't think stopping their play really is ever a good thing, because sometimes it needs to roll, erm, and if they're revisiting this thing over and over again, it's another way of learning, but it's also allowing that child to be them, and they obviously want to get that out of their system for a bit.*
>
> Catherine

4.2.4.3 Subtheme 4.3 Projection of adult understanding onto WCP.

Some participants shared their perception that children of pre-school age do not understand the reality of WCP, and it is adults that are viewing it through a mature lens which makes it seem more concerning than perhaps it really is.

> *…most of the time the children like playing cops and robbers; they probably have no concept of what a cop is or what a robber is. […] No, they're just playing it. They don't actually understand what that actually entails at all.*
>
> Emily

> *I think we see it as a weapon and a conflict play, but children are just children. They're they, they don't know that that's how we're seeing it, if that makes sense [...] I just think it's another thing of children being, learning, how to express, what's going on. And essentially, yeah, we see it as more of a concern than it is […] I do get it. I do get- there's some people that don't really like it or they don't want to do it. But they're children, and they're not playing it in the way that potentially we're seeing it.*
>
> Emily

> *…sometimes people go "ohh" that what they're, you know, "what, they're making guns?" and they question it like it's a bad thing. I think it's more about the adult than it would be the child […] So I think it's our perception that we've got to change rather than the children's perception.*
>
> Catherine

It was acknowledged that WCP can be perceived as promoting aggression or violence from an adult's perspective, but that this might not be the reality. EYPs distinguished between real and playful aggression.

> *I think it's hard. People kind of, you know, there's been a lot of people like "Ohh, if you let them play with weapons, it's kind of, you're encouraging them to be violent." But actually I don't think you particularly are. I mean, I wouldn't let the children hurt each other.*
>
> Leanne
>
> *I think it depends on your perspective as an adult, is gunplay to do with murder or is it to do with, you know, co-operative play and making sense of the world around them?*
>
> *Julie*

4.3 Overarching theme 2: The role of EYPs in WCP

This overarching theme addresses the role that EYPS perceive *they* have in relation to WCP, including how they approach and respond to it. It includes themes of uncertainty, the need to protect children and how WCP can be scaffolded by EYPs joining the children in their play.

Figure 4.7 The role of EYPs in WCP
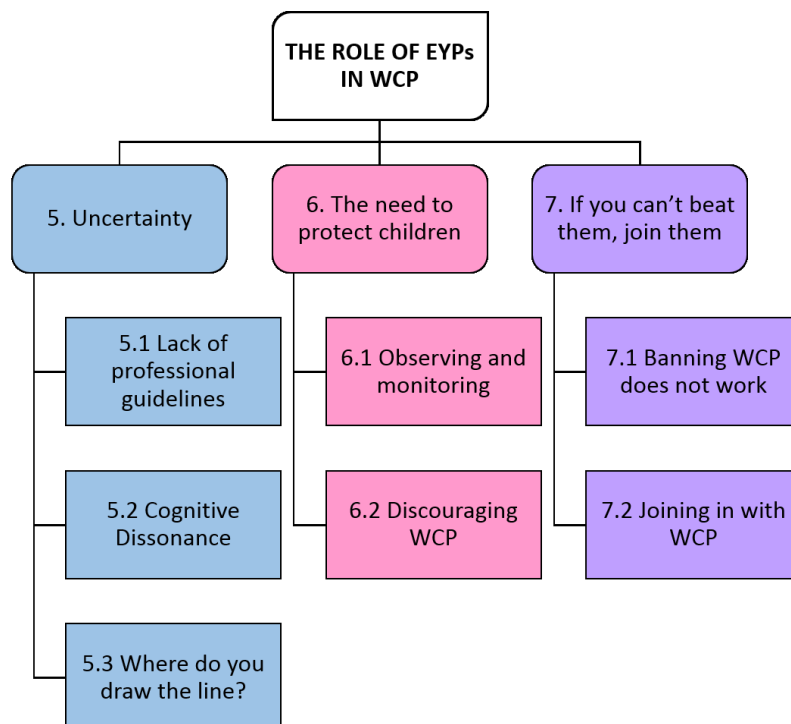
4.3.1 Theme 5: Uncertainty

This theme highlights the feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty that EYPs hold about WCP in relation to their role. Practitioners felt that a lack of professional guidelines can lead to variation between settings, and even between practitioners on how WCP is approached. Conflicting values lead to cognitive dissonance and concern over contradictory practice. Ultimately, practitioners voiced that they do not agree with zero tolerance of WCP, but are not sure where the limit or 'line' should be drawn.

Figure 4.8 Uncertainty

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                    │  5. Uncertainty  │
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  │ 5.1 Lack of   │  │ 5.2 Cognitive │  │ 5.3 Where do you│
  │ professional  │  │ Dissonance    │  │ draw the line? │
  │ guidelines    │  │               │  │               │
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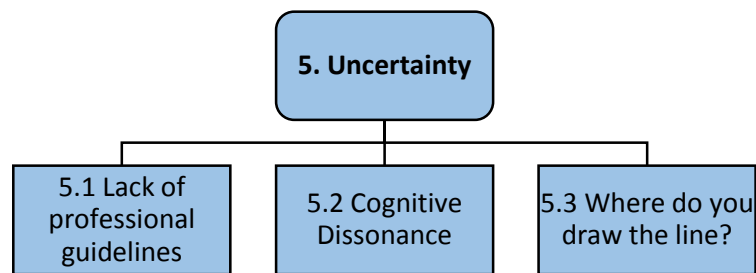
4.3.1.1 Subtheme 5.1 Lack of professional guidelines. The majority of practitioners explained that their settings had no official policy on WCP.

We don't actually have a policy on it.
Catherine
I don't think my old nursery had a policy either. I think it was just said in the staff meeting that you know, this is to be discouraged, they're not allowed to play with it and it was just that.
Kerry

Because of this, decisions about whether to allow WCP (or not) were felt to be at the discretion of the setting manager, or sometimes even down to the individual practitioner. This leads to variation in the approach taken by practitioners even in the same setting. Some of the variation was also attributed to a lack of practitioner confidence or experience.

> *I do feel it's very much personal preference and I know even within our team there are team members that would step in sooner than maybe what I would step in […] even with within the actual professional capacity, there's no guideline to tell you not to, so it is very personal and then you get into the views of, well, that's that personal for that setting, because that's what that manager doesn't like. So yeah, it's tricky to navigate all through it, isn't it?*
>
> Natalie
>
> *Yeah, I have worked in some that haven't allowed it, so I've had kind of that mixture and I think it depends on kind of who's in charge at that time. So I've had, yeah, kind of leaders who've been quite happy for weapon play, others who kind of didn't want any weapon play at all.*
>
> Leanne
>
> *And it was the manager was just, 'I don't like it', so it's a no.*
>
> Samantha
>
> *I think I'm the only staff member that does it [WCP] with them, like the staff are a little unconfident to do it.*
>
> Julie

A lack of general professional guidelines for WCP was a factor highlighted by one participant. She expressed that she would like if there was more consistency across EY settings.

> *It would be nice to have, like for early years to have like 'a way to do it.'*
>
> Julie

Practitioners explained how, in the absence of a policy, they worked together as a team to discuss any issues or concerns with WCP, making decisions together on how to approach it.

> *To be honest, I think as practitioners, that's kind of what we do anyway. Any time something, you know, is impacting the room in a negative way, we all just come together to try and find, you know, to flip it around and make it a positive.*
>
> Samantha
>
> *I think because we all, we're quite a small team, there's only like 10 of us. Erm, and we have regular meetings and things and, if, I think we're all very able to say if it's OK or not OK or we've noticed it, maybe a child that's doing it more, you know, why is that happening? You know, you unpick that as well. So we're very good at communicating with one another and if there was a person that thought actually they didn't like it, we can express why and, and listen to one another.*
>
> Emily

4.3.1.2 Subtheme 5.2: Cognitive dissonance. Participants shared their experience of having conflicting thoughts about WCP. Sometimes this conflict was between wanting to encourage child-led play, but also wanting to keep children safe and promote values of kindness and respect.

> It's really hard because, um, it's child-led and it's play-based nursery […] We was really struggling here of how to incorporate it in a safe way […] So we're still kind of trying to find a way […] you know, it's hard, isn't it?
>
> Samantha

> They've got to be able to choose what their interests are, which is very much British values; to have a voice. So actually, "I like to play like this and that's OK", but it goes back to it's OK, but we have to be, remember to be kind and have, not hurt each other because that isn't British values. So like, yeah, so it's keeping that balance of respecting what they want to do and their voices. But also reminding them that we're kind, you know, that's yeah…
>
> Abi

Some felt conflicted about WCP, knowing that some of their cohort had family members in the armed forces (or experienced weapons being part of their life in other legitimate contexts) and not wanting them to feel shame about their family background or lifestyle, if WCP was to be prohibited. They linked this to the importance of promoting British Values.

> Erm because with it being an army setting, they're gunna, some of their dads are going to be holding guns. So you've gotta be very careful on how you, you perceive it because you don't want children to think, well, my dad has a gun, but he's not bad. So it's really, really hard.
>
> Samantha

> …but you know they might have a family member who goes hunting, you know like shooting, might be farmer Grandad and off they go. They come here to the setting because Mummy works and they're kind of interested, that's what Grandad, that's what we do with Grandad on Sunday, but we're not allowed to talk about it. And that's kind of taken away their world a little their little cultural capital what they've come to school with […] "I went shooting with Granddad", "Ohh we can't talk about that." You know, and that's their world. That's their, I mean, I know that's like a probably totally extreme, but there must be some settings, quite rural settings that are involved with that kind of element of the child's life. Or, as I say, "Daddy loves paintballing or daddy, my daddy's in the army, he's got a gun", "Oh we can't talk about that" you know, I don't think that's right. Personally. […] And that would make

> *me quite sad if my little boy said "I can't talk about that, my daddy's job" […] I think it would make them quite confused and like it's wrong or it's shameful.*
>
> Abi

> *…it comes down to individual liberty so that little boy who's got the dad who's in the army, his dad's not got a bad job. He's protecting the country so you know, we're allowing him to act out what his dad does for his career. Like we would doctors, nurses, police officers. You know supporting all the children in their role play, so stopping the child, that you know, the child with the background of the army then might put in their head "Oh my dad's a baddie or my mum's a baddie because they own a gun", potentially.*
>
> Julie

Some participants shared concerns over contradictory pedagogy, such as sharing stories with children that involve weapons (e.g. pirates) but then not allowing children to act out these stories in their play, or educating children about people who protect us (e.g. police, military) but then being resistant to children representing these roles through play. The argument of future career aspirations was also raised, in that children are often encouraged to act out being a doctor or a teacher in their play, but could be discouraged from the role of a soldier even though that is a legitimate career path.

> *I kind of feel like swords, we read them stories with pirates and there were swords, so it's, it's kind of, it's very normal. So we can't kind of really say, oh, "we've read this story about a pirate with swords", but you can't play swords.*
>
> Leanne

> *…Or a police person, you know, it's the same thing. They do carry weapons and, you know, we wouldn't stop them re-enacting being a policeman. So why would we stop, you know?*
>
> Catherine

> *…they're just expressing themselves, but it might be at the end of the day they turn out and they go and be a rifleman, fight or like, you know, really might have, they might just go and do something with a gun and that is what they end up doing. And so who are we to say no, you can't play with that now, if actually in 20 years' time that is what they go and do?*
>
> Emily

4.3.1.3 Subtheme 5.3: Where do you draw the line? Practitioners shared a feeling of not knowing 'where to draw the line' with WCP as it can

present in many forms along a continuum from relatively 'safe' to extremely concerning. Even those who felt that WCP was not appropriate for their EY setting were not convinced on having a complete 'ban' on WCP. They expressed the importance of EYPs using their initiative and professional judgement.

> *Yeah, I think it's such a tricky path to tiptoe down to have a complete ban on it. Because when is? I mean, you've said about magic, wands and things, but that leads, can lead into further… at what point do you say no? […] So at what point do you stop them playing like that, if you have a complete cover over it? And is it healthy to stop them? That's how they're expressing themselves. […] I think you start getting into really funny realms of why is a sword safer than a gun? Within their little mind, it's the same. It's the same. It's on the same level, it's, um. Yeah, if pirates or any sort of thing. Yeah, swords and guns I would put all into the same bag to be honest, it's all the same thing in their little heads.*
>
> Natalie

> *I don't know if I 100% agree on a policy that says no gun play though. Because I think you can't do it 100% and I do think children, it's... I think a no gun policy, where do you stop at that? Because you do have water guns and things like that. There is, you know, where do you stop? […] And that we've had the pirate ship out, the pirate ships had a cannon. That's a weapon. So it's where do you do it? I think to have a policy that says no guns at all…it's quite, it's quite hard. I think it's too final. I think you should just use your initiative and everything to do with, well, if a child's gunna say I'm making a gun, and "I'm going to shoot you" then obviously we would need to redirect their play. And I think, yeah, I don't agree that you should just let them do it, but I also don't agree that it should be like "no guns whatsoever."*
>
> Kerry

4.3.2 Theme 6: The need to protect children

This theme captures how practitioners feel a duty to protect children in their care. Careful monitoring and observation of play allows them to get to know their cohort and make informed decisions as to when to step in with WCP in order to protect children. This theme covers the way in which practitioners might discourage WCP through distraction or re-direction, bringing attention to the idea that they feel this should be done in a mindful way rather than

repeatedly telling children *not* to do something. The need to protect children is also framed with regards to the local context.

Figure 4.9 The need to protect children
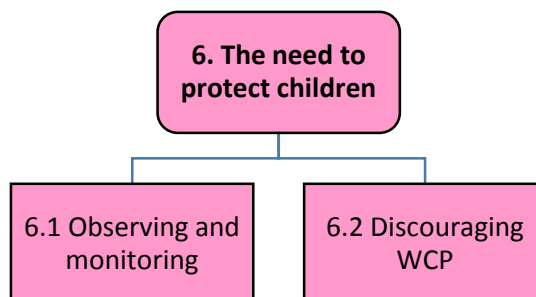
4.3.2.1 Subtheme 6.1 Observing and monitoring. Practitioners talked about the importance of good supervision of the children. They explained how they would carefully observe children's WCP to make sure that it was within acceptable limits.

So what we do is watch and watch. Just watch and see, see how it pans out. Deal with the situation as it happens.
Holly
It's kind of more observing to make sure they're staying safe.
Abi
It would just be a case of I'll be listening in to seeing if the words what was being used were ones that we really wanna hear or not.
Emily

Practitioners spoke about the importance of contextual factors and how their response to WCP differs depending on the context of the particular situation, on a case by case basis. The importance of practitioners knowing the children and families well was emphasised as a way of being able to judge the context in greater depth.

Depending on, you know are they going around being gangs and having bad language, and, you know, things like that and seeing stuff and exposing it on their play? Or are they just being superheroes and wanting to save the world?
Catherine

> *I think it's depends on what the context is that they're playing. If they're just running around and they're all giggling and they're laughing and it's a bit like "I'm going to shoot you with the Stickle brick gun I've just created here" and it's all sort of light hearted, for want of a better description, because I know obviously they don't get that context. But there are times when it can be much more aggressive play, and forceful play and that's when I, would really, I would try to separate that and take the children away from each other at that point and remove any guns that they've made.*
>
> Natalie

> *So it's, it's seeing, you've gotta judge who you've got in your setting as well and, and go from there and see what, what in what context is being used in, I think. You know that for me, that's how I see it […] Yeah. I mean, definitely it depends on your, as I say, your clientele that you have. I mean, because it was an army based sort of nursery. You know, I'd say, a good 70% of our children were from the, from the barracks. So, and they see it everyday, you know, and again, if it's farm life as well, you're gunna see that.*
>
> Catherine

> *Where we all know our children so well, there are children that we would let play in that way for longer because we know it's not going to progress past a certain point. And then there are children that we would see and we would try to distract them quite soon into that play because we know how it's going to progress because we've seen that progression repeatedly and we wanna stop it before it gets to there. So it can even be, setting to setting, cohort and cohort, but sometimes it is child and child.*
>
> Natalie

4.3.2.2 Subtheme 6.2 Discouraging WCP. Some EYPs expressed that, although WCP occurs in their settings, they would not actively *encourage* children to engage in WCP, like they might with other sorts of play. Natalie considered this in view of the limits of its value.

> *Um so, yeah, we do have weapon play, but we don't actively encourage that type of play. […] I don't think there's enough value for us to encourage it?*
>
> Natalie

> *Yeah, I don't [join in with WCP]. Other practitioners might, but no, I don't, don't… because I think that might be encouraging it. Does that makes sense?*
>
> Abi

As well as not encouraging it, some expressed how they actively *discourage* WCP. Some practitioners spoke about the need to protect children, either from an immediate safeguarding perspective or in terms of their future.

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This was sometimes framed in relation to the local context of deprivation which was cited as a reason for prohibiting WCP.

> [At a previous job at a different setting]…It was more of a deprived area. And things from like a safeguarding point of view were on the edge of, "OK, no, we can't do weapon play. We can't do that sort of, erm, thing because it was verging on the edge of some of the children physically acting out things they'd seen. So in was a case of right, no, we can't have weapon and conflict play, unfortunately.
>
> Emily

> …this nursery here is obviously an underprivileged nursery in a very poor area. I used to work for a very, very, I used to work for a very, very middle-class private nursery […] there wasn't, there is still not today the knife crime, the gun crime down there that there is up here. I think that also makes a big difference and I think that's why it's even more important up here that we have to be so careful. Because we don't want them to get involved in that, it can't, it, yeah…It's just a bit. It's a bit too dangerous. I think up here because we've got too many issues that they could see. There was that stabbing at the secondary school up at the top of the hill. It is that sort of thing and I think that worries me, more being up here and making sure that we really help them and distract them into other ways because the last thing I would want is one of these children to turn…. like that.
>
> Kerry

Practitioners explained how they felt discouraging WCP by repeatedly telling a child "no" is negative and does not fit with the way they wish to practice.

> Um the thing is for me, I know you should, there's time for me to tell a child "no", and that's enough, 100 per cent. But it when it was a zero tolerance, at my old setting, it was like, "no, don't do that. No, don't do that. No, you can't do that. No, don't make that. No." And I, I find that just too much. And they're so small, it's not […] That's not positive and it's not what we do with the children.
>
> Samantha

> We don't want to just be like, "no, you can't do this. No, you can't do this."
>
> Kerry

Participants shared how they want to be mindful of children's feelings when discouraging them from WCP, to protect their self-esteem.

> They need to feel that they've not had anything taken away from them […] for me the challenge would be to how you stop it without actually making that child feel like they're being challenged, their, um, preference being challenged, you know.

> *[The children] maybe make something like a gun and you're like, "no, you're not allowed to make guns. Go tear it up and make something else." Actually, that's not good for them, for their self-esteem, for you to say, go and pull apart what you've just made. Actually, you know, you're it's detrimental in that way to them really, when you think about it, because they've spent a lot of time on that. And telling them that what they're playing is wrong. It's kinda…*
>
> **Leanne**

> *…and you don't really want to interrupt their play because it's such a good scenario and they've made this like, kind of, they've made this construction. They're really proud of it and to walk over there and go "you can't play with that anymore", it's just like no. You need to kind of remind them gently…*
>
> **Abi**

Practitioners cited 'distraction' as a common, and sometimes first, response to WCP in their settings, rather than telling children an explicit "no." The importance of protecting children's feelings through acknowledgment and offering choices was explained.

> *Yeah, just distract, we acknowledge what they've done and then kind of move it on.*
>
> **Samantha**

> *Um you can give them choices. You could say "I'd like to play something else. What should we do?" And give them a choice of, say, think of something that they like and you could say, "shall I get the puzzles out or shall I get the marble run?" "Oooh marble run!" So that's what I would do in that situation. So again, it's distraction. But it's giving choices to a child that feels he's being robbed of his weapon [...] Especially if the stick is the thing that's making them feel like powerful and mighty.*
>
> **Holly**

> *So it would be case of, "oh, we're not gunna play like that, are we? We're not gunna use those words. Thank you. Should we go and find something?" We would distracted from probably anything around that situation at all. We would go and find something else just to get that sort of completely out of the child's mind.*
>
> **Emily**

Some practitioners prefer to re-direct the play and use of a weapon into something less threatening and more purposeful, but without necessarily removing the weapon itself. This still allows children to experience the same sort of physical play but in a way that perhaps fits better with the values of the setting.

> *Like, like, ohh, maybe we could do it to, or do this instead rather than, or give an example or something that you could do with it without hurting somebody else. You know, you know, I don't know, if you're a sword, if it's a sword, you chop the forest down with it rather than hurting somebody, a friend. You know, "I'm going to kill so and so", "well let's go and chop the forest down." Yeah. It's just little things like that, you know, trying to reword it into more of a, a nicer picture.*
>
> Catherine

> *So we were doing training and we were told to distract them with something else. So if they're saying "I'm gunna build a gun" I say, we'd be like, "why don't we build a water pistol and we can spray water at these things and knock them over it?" that sort of thing. So they're still having that play, but you're changing it into a safe play. Instead of a, a play that could turn nasty.*
>
> Kerry

4.3.3 Theme 7: If you can't beat them, join them

This theme captures the experience that, even when settings explicitly ban WCP or tell children they cannot play in this way, it rarely works. Children find creative ways to 'secretly' engage in WCP. This theme explores how some practitioners have therefore taken the stance that, if you can't beat them, join them- they actively get involved with WCP. Practitioners argued that this involvement allows for closer supervision, and opportunities to model safe and appropriate boundaries within WCP.

Figure 4.10 If you can't beat them, join them
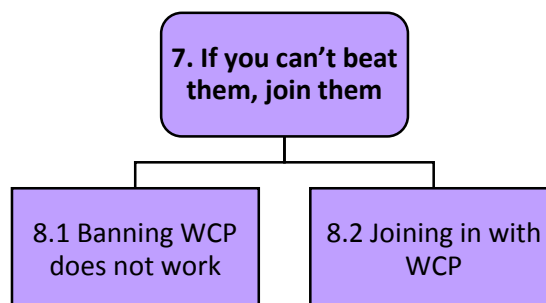
4.3.3.1 Subtheme 7.1 Banning WCP does not work. Participants shared that banning WCP in EY settings does not tend to work because

children will find a way to play it secretly, either by doing it out of sight or

pretending that their weapons they have created are other objects entirely when

questioned by an adult.

> *Plus you can't really ever stop them, because they'll just use their finger as a gun and they'll do it in secret. You'll hear them like whispering "pow pow" hiding in the corner doing it.*
>
> Julie

> *…they'd hide and do it and then or find somewhere else to go and do it. There's no way you can ever stop children doing something that they want to do.[…] But, you know, I think where we've looked at it, they're, they're very clever in the way that they go. "Ohh, have you made a gun?" and they're like, "it's an aeroplane", [laughs] and you're like, that's quite quick thinking there. […] They're finding ways to do it so you don't think they're doing it. And again, the way they go around it is very clever. They'll take themselves into an area and as soon as you come over, they'll completely change it. They know they're almost doing something they shouldn't. But using that initiative, so it is clever the way they play.*
>
> Samantha

Some practitioners expressed that, rather than totally banning the WCP,

they implement specific rules or boundaries so that children can engage with it

more safely.

> *We have the rule that you, it's 'actions and sounds, no touching.' So they're allowed to do the action of you know "dush, dush, pow, pow" and make the sounds, but they're not allowed to hit each other and they're only allowed to do it with those that want to play. So they can't just go round, you know, hitting everybody, shooting, and you know hitting everyone with planks […] they're actually quite good with those rules thinking about it now.*
>
> Julie

By being open about WCP, children can talk about it with adults and

boundaries can be agreed. Practitioners believed that having WCP 'out in the

open' makes it safer. It was also suggested that by allowing WCP, it makes it

less likely that children engage in it because it is less taboo.

> *If you stop that weapon play, kind of, they're gunna do it behind your back anyway. And actually you want to be more open with the children and be able to, not control, but be able to supervise that play so it doesn't get out of hand*

> *[…] and, it's kind of, you can ban it, but the children are gunna play it anyway. Then if they don't play in the classroom, they're going to play it in the playground. And they're gunna play it without you knowing and then that's actually when children get more upset because there's no openness there about it. And so yeah, it's kind of, there's no boundaries in place because it's not allowed. So it's, to me it's more... it's better to have it kind of open, allowed, if they want it and then, kind, of you'd be able to set those boundaries.*
>
> Leanne

> *It makes it something that they, they can talk about, like I'd rather they feel that they can talk to us about it and we can try and guide them.*
>
> Emily

> *I think the more you allow it, the less they kind of do it because they don't see it as a forbidden thing, I think, personally.*
>
> Catherine

One participant, based on her 16 years' experience, shared her perspective that WCP is generally more acceptable in EY settings now than it has been in the past due to greater understanding.

> *When I first started teaching, weapon play was a big 'no no', and it seems to have become more acceptable throughout the years. I think, it's, more people kind of realise that actually maybe there is a place for it.*
>
> Leanne

4.3.3.2 Subtheme 7.2 Joining in with WCP. Some practitioners shared how they get involved in WCP and join in with the children's storylines. In the case of one practitioner, this was on the basis of her own independent reading, which furthered her understanding.

> *The research that I found said it benefits the children so, I allow it. I, I actually get involved in it. […] I've reflected on my practice over the years that I, there was a question presented in an article or somewhere um, about, I think it was when I was researching about boys and how they learn, like where I spent most of my time. Most of my time was spent at the tables with the girls. So then I actively made myself be with the boys, which then led to the war games um so, I'm again, very conscious of where I am and what I'm doing. So I try and make time for that play deliberately.*
>
> Julie

> *They, they um, we've got a little climbing frame that they make into jail and they, they, they'll take the baddies and put them into jail. Quite often they, they make me a baddie and put me into jail […] I just play along with them.*

> *Yeah. Let them put me in and then kind of pretend to escape and they go and get you again and put you back in. So yeah, it kind of develops their role play that way.*
>
> Leanne

Actively getting involved with WCP allows practitioners to better understand the play, scaffold and model safe ways to engage in it.

> *I tend to ask them first what they're doing, like who they're playing, so I don't just like take over. Most of the time it's, like I said, Star Wars or superheroes. So then I become, like I'll ask them if they want me to play, and then ask them what character they want me to be, if I'm a goodie or a baddie basically. And then I'll act out whatever, whatever role they give me. And then role modelling that 'actions and sounds only.' Um, you know, pretending to be hit by fireballs. Um, I tend to try and do like the medic side. So if I am hit, "I'm like a medic needs to come and like help me make me feel better." […] because in war, you'd have a medic come to get you and patch you up. So the kind of role that I play is that, if we are going to play these games, we also need to look after each other.*
>
> Julie

> *…but it's kind of it's that kind of getting in there, getting involved with their play to make sure that, kind of, you know it is safe play, still leave you know, they are kind of exploring their ideas, but it is still safe play and just to have that communication with them to make sure they understand what they're playing as well […] you can kind of show them, you know, what is acceptable in that kind of weapon and conflict role play and, and kind of, because they'll see how far I go, then they know they shouldn't go any further than that really with their play.*
>
> Leanne

This includes modelling safe ways to use their weapons, and teaching children responsibility for keeping themselves and others safe.

> *…even when we've made swords here, like, "ohh, be careful because they're sharp so don't hold them in the sky. You know, put them in your pocket. Like, put them in your belt" or whatever, you know, it's just how, you know, they know they're not real. But if you pretend they're real and you use their safety aspects as well."*
>
> Catherine

4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has described the research findings developed through RTA. Two overarching themes were generated, 'Making sense of WCP' and

'The role of EYPs in WCP' with seven themes and 17 subthemes within them.

The themes identified were:

1. The threat of WCP
2. The appeal of WCP
3. Learning through WCP
4. It's just another type of play!
5. Uncertainty
6. The need to protect children
7. If you can't beat them, join them

The following chapter discusses the findings in relation to the research question, published literature and existing theory.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter overview

This final chapter presents a discussion of the findings in relation to the research question, psychological theory and existing literature. This chapter also provides a critical examination of the implications, strengths and limitations of the research, as well as outline plans for dissemination. Directions for further research are offered and the researcher provides overall reflections on the research process. The chapter closes with a conclusion of the thesis.

5.2 Situating the findings within a theoretical framework: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

This research highlighted how WCP can be understood by examining the surrounding context and the interaction of the different 'systems' around a child who engages in WCP. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory proposes that children's development happens as a result of the different systems in their lives, and the interactions between these systems. See Figure 1.1 for a visual depiction of the five different systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem.

The microsystem includes aspects of the child's environment that impact directly on their daily life. This includes their parents/carers, siblings and other family members. The religious beliefs and cultural ethos of the child's family will impact on their view of childhood and approach to parenting, and therefore the types of activities that children might engage in, including the different types of play available to them. Different types of play may receive varying levels of encouragement. In families where members are involved with weapons in a

legitimate context (e.g. farming), or enjoy WCP in their adult lives (e.g. through paintballing, video games), children may be exposed to weapons more. EYPs felt that this may result in children showing greater interest in WCP when at the setting.

EYPs and children's peers at EY settings are also included within the microsystem. In EY pedagogy, the child and the learning environment are very closely connected. The ethos of the EY setting therefore has a significant impact on the child (Hayes et al., 2017). Learning environments in EY are socially constructed and influenced by the beliefs, values, and theoretical models that EYPs embrace (Papatheodorou, 2010). With regards to WCP, the values held by the EYPs appear to affect how they conceptualise and respond to WCP, particularly when few settings have specific WCP policies, and EYPs therefore rely on their personal beliefs and values to inform their practice.

The mesosystem refers to the relationship and interaction between the different aspects of the microsystem. In EY practice, this includes the relationship formed between children's parents/carers and EYPs, and the links made between play and learning at home, and at the EY setting. WCP can sometimes be a way for children to bridge the gap between home and their EY setting (Grimmer, 2020). One EYP commented on how they try to foster a 'home from home' ethos at their setting and therefore strive to keep play opportunities consistent between the two contexts. So, a child who likes superheroes and replicating their actions and weapons at home would not be discouraged from representing this interest at the pre-school.

The exosystem refers to more distant and less visible influences on the child's life. This includes the decisions made by the EY setting manager which affect the provision and approach taken by EYPs in the setting. This, in turn, affects the children's experience of EY education. Children who attend settings where managers take a permissive attitude towards WCP may experience a difference in the play themes available to them, compared to a manager who does not permit WCP. EYPs in the current research explained how, sometimes, the decision as to allow WCP or not was made by the setting manager. Children who wish to engage in WCP may not necessarily be allowed to, depending on the manager's perspective.

The exosystem also includes the influence of mass media, including the news, video games and TV programmes. EYPs in this research recognised how children who have seen weapons being used, either in a fictional sense such as in a TV cartoon, or in reality on the news, may use WCP as a way to make sense of, and experiment with, what they have witnessed. In particular, they referred to events such as the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II with its military presence, and to the significant news coverage of warfare such as the current war in Ukraine that children may have seen.

The macrosystem is the furthest removed from the child. It refers to influences that occur at a socio-political or cultural level. For example, socio-cultural beliefs regarding childhood itself and the value of EY education. In England, the DfE promotes high quality EY provision to support a safe, secure and happy childhood for young children. The four overarching principles (DfE, 2021a, p. 6) consider that:

1. Every child is unique
2. Children learn to be independent and resilient through the development of positive relationships
3. Children develop in 'enabling environments' where teaching is responsive to their individual interests and adults support them to build on learning over time
4. Children learn and develop at different rates

In England, EY education is seen as the foundation for lifelong learning. Play is described as essential to support children's development and there is emphasis on the importance of the adult skilfully scaffolding and guiding learning through varied play opportunities (DfE, 2021a). The EYFS encourages EYPs to plan for, and build on children's interests, "observing and listening to each child with an open mind" (DCSF, 2007, p. 4). EYPs frequently touched on this in their responses; they spoke about how some children are very interested in WCP and to prevent them from engaging in it would be in opposition of child-initiated play. However, EYPs also experienced cognitive dissonance, feeling conflicted between wanting to support children's interests, but finding that WCP poses too many risks (e.g. it becomes too aggressive), or does not align with the values of the setting.

Legislation also forms part of the macrosystem. In England, the ownership and use of firearms is highly regulated. There are restrictions on the types of weapons available to purchase, and a license must be applied for and renewed every five years (Home Office, 2022). Firearms must be stored securely (Home Office, 2021). The risk of children accidentally acquiring a gun in the UK is therefore low. EYPs did not raise concerns about this happening,

though one did voice her worries about knife crime in the local context. The macrosystem in a different country with more relaxed gun laws, such as the US, may result in different perspectives on WCP.

The chronosystem reflects change or continuity over time and it therefore impacts on each of the other systems. The historical period in which the child is developing influences the types of experiences they have. Systems evolve and change over time, influenced by the values and beliefs of that era. Childhood itself can be seen as a construction affected by the social, cultural and economic systems and environments (Frønes, 1993). One EYP perceived that attitudes towards WCP in EY have become more permissive over time, as a result of practitioners having greater understanding.

In summary, although they did not name Bronfenbrenner explicitly, EYPs recognised the influence of the different systems on children and their engagement in WCP. They spoke about the influence of family members though their careers, livelihoods and interests. They felt strongly about the influence of media on young children's play themes. They also acknowledged WCP as a reflection of children making sense of events occurring within the socio-cultural time they are developing in. They reflected on the impact of national and global events and how children may process these through play.

EYPs frequently made reference to the *context* of WCP being the important factor in deciding their response to it. They considered how WCP can take many forms from magical fantasy, to superhero, to war. EYPs spoke about being alert to the play in the room and carefully observing to monitor for

concerning language or overly aggressive behaviour. WCP was therefore described as almost being evaluated on a case-by-case basis and with consideration of contextual factors.

EYPs' knowledge of individual children and their families forms an important part of how they approach WCP. Knowing about a child's family circumstances means WCP can be observed contextually. Enacting shooting within a game may be interpreted as more or less concerning depending on the child, and the practitioner's understanding of their family background. For instance, whether the child has a military or farming/hunting family member, or whether they are known to have experienced domestic violence or other safeguarding concerns. The extent to which WCP would become a safeguarding concern was deemed to be heavily informed by the knowledge and understanding of the systems around the particular child at the time. Once again, this highlights how EYPs frame WCP with relevant contextual information.

The following sections explore the research findings by theme, in relation to the research question.

5.3 Research question: What are the perspectives of early years practitioners on weapon and conflict play within their settings?

The research question was concerned with exploring the perspectives of EYPs on WCP. RTA resulted in the development of two overarching themes to help understand these perspectives: (1) Making sense of WCP and (2) The role of EYPs in WCP. These overarching themes are used to structure this section

of the discussion. The main findings for each theme are discussed in relation to existing theory and research.

5.3.1 Making sense of WCP

EYPs conceptualised WCP and the reasons for children's engagement in it in different ways. Similar to the reviewed literature, a mixture of challenges and opportunities were highlighted (e.g. Logue & Harvey 2009; Rosen, 2015; Wiwatowski et al., 2020).

5.3.1.1 The appeal of WCP.

5.3.1.1.1 There's 'something' about WCP. Practitioners commented on how there is 'something' about WCP which sets it apart from other types of role play, though they struggled to definitively name what this is. EYPs grappled with ambivalent feelings about this type of play which has the power to make them feel uncomfortable.

EYPs cited many reasons for why children might engage in WCP. The physical, risky and exciting elements were deemed part of its appeal. Practitioners explained how children become highly engrossed in WCP, having fun and laughing with each other. One practitioner described it as a "whole body experience" (Natalie), where children can immerse themselves in the action of the game. These findings are reflected in existing literature. For example, as part of Bauman's (2015) study, children were asked why they liked playing with weapons and they all described feelings of happiness and excitement. Pre-school age children are also drawn to the fascinating strength and powers held

by superheroes, and seem to enjoy the chasing, shouting, capturing and rescuing elements, as well as 'winning' and 'saving' their peers (Barnes, 2008).

EYPs in the current study described how WCP is a chance for children to take on different identities/roles and experience feelings of power and confidence. This is corroborated by Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) who argued that children find war play appealing because it gives them a chance to experience power and control, when so much of early childhood lacks this. They proposed that WCP is a way for young children to develop their competence as separate, independent beings.

Like Bauman (2015), some EYPs in the current research thought the language-accessible nature of WCP (i.e. it is not excessively demanding on verbal language ability) makes it an appealing way for children to interact with peers and join in with a game. One EYP shared that children can attract their peers to play with them through WCP, even if they do not "have the words" to be able to engage using language (Abi). This concurs with Barnes (2008) who wrote that children do not necessarily require well-developed social or language skills to join in with WCP and it can therefore provide an easy way for them to feel belonging.

5.3.1.1.2 Influence of popular culture. Practitioners attributed children's exposure to media as another key reason for their engagement in WCP. They raised concerns about children viewing video games, TV programmes/films or Youtube videos intended for more mature audiences (e.g. Marvel superhero films and violent games such as Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto) and then

re-enacting these in their EY setting. Previous research has also found that EYPs perceive children to be imitating the fictional characters they watch (Doliopoulou, 1998). Viewership of superhero programmes has been found to increase weapon play for both girls and boys (Coyne et al., 2014). Concern regarding consumption of such media was also expressed in research by Peterson et al. (2018) where practitioners spoke about the perceived negative effect of children viewing person-to-person gun violence. Many professionals share worries about the potentially detrimental effects of children viewing violent content (Popper, 2013).

Concerns regarding children copying the aggressive behaviour they have seen in the media may be linked to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). This theory outlines that children learn by imitating role models. Their learning is reinforced vicariously through seeing others being rewarded for aggression or violence. For example, seeing pirates on TV successfully overthrowing an enemy ship using cannons and swords. Research has found that children often engage in role play based on programmes they have seen on TV (Palaiologou, 2016). Social learning theory would suggest that the more violent media children consume, especially that which features characters they admire seemingly being rewarded for such violence, the more likely they are to act in these ways (Bandura, 1973). However, Daly and Perez (2009) examined correlates of aggressive behaviour in pre-school children and found that the strongest link to aggression was poor self-regulation, not the viewing of violent media. Poor self-regulation was associated with aggression independent of the quantity of violent media consumed. They concluded that the role of the EYP in helping children develop self-regulation is therefore paramount. Furthermore,

Logue and Detour (2011) argued that children *pretending* to play aggressively is not the same as children *being* aggressive. Aggression is further discussed in section 5.3.1.2 'The threat of WCP.'

5.3.1.1.3 Perceived sex differences in WCP. All EYPs reported that boys engage in WCP significantly more than girls. This view has been found consistently in previous literature (e.g. Doliopoulou, 1998; Holland, 2000; Logue & Harvey, 2009; Peterson et al., 2018). Storli and Sandseter (2015) found that instances of nurture/care types of role play were more common amongst girls, while superhero play and conflict-type games were most prevalent among boys. EYPs in the current research perceived this difference to be due to an innate masculine drive that exists within boys which draws them towards WCP. Some thought that boys are 'built' to learn in different way from girls, i.e. in more physical ways rather than sitting down at a table, hence WCP appeals to them more. This perspective were also shared by EYPs/teachers in studies by Rosen (2015) and Peterson et al. (2018). One participant in the current study explained that a higher ratio of boys to girls in the cohort often results in more WCP. This concurs with teachers' perspectives in Doliopoulou's (1998) research.

Holland (2000, 2003) discussed perceived sex differences in WCP at length, challenging the assumption that girls are not interested in WCP. She suggested that girls receive validation for playing in ways that are quiet, settled and co-operative, (e.g. drawing, playing in the home corner) which reinforces this behaviour. On the other hand, boys' interest in more active play themes such as WCP is often received with negative attention from EYPs who perceive it as too noisy, risky and disruptive. Holland (1999) raised the concern that if

boys are not allowed to pursue their interests in WCP, and their activity is continuously re-directed, it may have a detrimental effect on their future academic achievements. Given that the DfE (2022a) statistics show boys to be falling behind girls in terms of EY progress, this highlights the importance of ensuring boys' play is valued and supported just as much as girls'.

Holland (2003) found that some girls *did* independently show an interest and join in with WCP, though their interest appeared to focus more on chasing the 'enemies' rather than constructing weapons. EYPs in the current study reported that, where girls do participate in WCP, they are less likely to enact playing with guns, and more likely to engage in the fantasy realms of WCP such as pretending to use magic wands to turn people into frogs, or pretending to be Elsa, a Disney princess who uses her hands to shoot ice to 'freeze' others. Of the existing research interviewing EYPs/teachers reviewed in Chapter 2, none explicitly reported these differences in girls' types of WCP. This may therefore be considered a distinctive contribution to the research base.

5.3.1.2 The threat of WCP.

5.3.1.2.1 Incongruence with EY values. Some practitioners in the current study perceived WCP as risky, dangerous, and a threat to the values upheld by the setting. They expressed concern over the physical risks such as children hurting each other while engaging in WCP (e.g. running into one another, hitting each other with swords etc.). EYPs have a responsibility to keep children safe while in their care (DfE, 2021a), and WCP can pose a direct risk to this. These concerns are consistent with those found in previous literature e.g.

Doliopoulou (1998), Logue and Harvey (2009), Peterson et al. (2018), Rosen (2015). In a reflective account, Logue and Shelton (2008) also discussed worries over the physical nature of the play leading to injury. Moreover, they documented concerns about the noisy and distracting nature of 'bad guy play' leading to other children in the environment feeling unsettled and unsafe. Practitioners in the current study had similar reflections regarding the safety of others in the setting, reporting how sometimes WCP can frighten younger or quieter children and lead to innocent bystanders sustaining accidental injuries.

Some practitioners, but not all, also expressed concern over the potential for WCP to promote aggression in children both 'in the moment' and in their future lives. This concern is reflected in the existing literature (e.g. Delaney, 2017; Peterson et al., 2018). Continuing with the application of social learning theory in section 5.3.1.1.2 'Influence of popular culture', Bandura and Jeffrey (1973) suggested that the encouragement of war play themes can lead to aggression in children. Repeatedly playing with toy guns has been found to predict 'real' aggression in boys (Watson & Peng, 1992). However, evidence on whether this persists into children's future is mixed. Smith et al. (2018) found that *pretending* to be aggressive as a child plays little role in predicting criminal behaviour in later life, after other factors including gender, depression and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) are accounted for. They concluded that engagement with toy guns in early childhood is unlikely to pose a significant risk for adult criminality. There is even some evidence to suggest that the experience of being able to make sense of fearful situations through play means children may be *less* likely to engage in real violence (Berson & Baggerly, 2009). Furthermore, Holland (2000) argued that establishing such a

link between WCP and aggression is futile as it would add nothing to EY practice other than confirming zero tolerance as an appropriate approach, when EYPs have already established that this approach does not work well in practice.

Some practitioners perceived WCP as a way for children to get their feelings of aggression 'out'- a form of catharsis. Catharsis, as explained by Lorenz (1966), is the method through which pent-up aggressive energy can be released through displacement behaviours and thereby reduce the likelihood of 'real' aggressive acts. In children, this might be through the form of playful aggression in WCP. Many studies have investigated whether catharsis can actually reduce the likelihood of aggression but, on balance, the evidence suggest this is not the case (Sutton & Douglas, 2013). The notion that WCP is a way for children to get feelings of aggression or stress out of their system was not reflected by EYPs/teachers in the reviewed literature in Chapter 2, and thus it may be offered as a distinctive finding of this study.

5.3.1.2.2 There are limits to 'acceptable' WCP. Most EYPs spoke about how they would allow WCP, but under certain conditions. Teachers have been found to frame what sorts of play themes are 'acceptable' using their own values (Sherwood & Reifel, 2010), and may avoid permitting play that could draw attention to their personal fears (Henricks, 2010). EYPs shared that they would be comfortable with children playing with constructed weapons (e.g. from Lego bricks), as long as they were not hurting any other children. This concurs with findings from previous research e.g. Doliopoulou (1998) and Wiwatowski et al. (2020). Another condition placed on WCP by EYPs in the current study was

that children are not to use any 'concerning' language. The word "kill" was flagged by several practitioners as being something which was outside of the acceptable limits, and phrases such as "you're going to die", or "I'm going to shoot you" were also raised. One practitioner shared that this type of language makes her feel uncomfortable (Natalie), and another thought that it "crosses a boundary with being a little bit violent" (Leanne). Practitioners also explained how the use of this language might raise safeguarding concerns due to its adult nature. Concerning language was seen as a key marker for whether the play would be allowed to continue or not. This finding appears to be unique when compared to the reviewed literature in Chapter 2; participants in previous research did not raise specific concerns regarding language use in WCP.

Some EYPs suggested that WCP involving superheroes with powers or princesses with magic is perhaps less worrisome than that which involves war or gun violence. In her book, Holland (2003) ponders why magic wands, which can inflict pain and death in a fantasy game, are often considered more acceptable than guns and swords. Practitioners in the current study attributed this difference to the idea that fantasy is less threatening because it is not real, compared to play involving guns and other weapons which *do* exist in the real world. Practitioners had constructed boundaries around what types of WCP were acceptable to them. This links to the subtheme 'Where do you draw the line?' when considering the role of EYPs in section 5.3.2.1.3.

5.3.1.3 Learning through WCP.

5.3.1.3.1 Working towards ELGs. Some practitioners took the perspective that children can make progress towards the ELGs through engaging in WCP. For example, through the construction of weapons, children can develop their fine motor skills. They can also develop their gross motor skills through the physical aspects of WCP i.e. running, jumping, climbing, and hiding. Some EYPs shared how they perceived WCP to be a vessel for improving children's personal, social and emotional skills such as understanding their own and others' emotions, building friendships, sharing resources and sharing experiences as children work together to construct weapons and fight the 'bad guys.' These findings concur with Bauman (2015), Logue and Harvey (2009), and Wiwatowski et al. (2020). Broadhead (1992) also noticed the emergence of social reciprocation and co-operative dialogue between peers when children engaged in WCP.

EYPs in the current research identified that children often act out scenarios and storylines as part of WCP. These may be storylines created by the children, based on experiences or stories they have seen/heard which form the basis of their socio-dramatic WCP. Socio-dramatic play has links with the development of early literacy skills (Roskos & Christie, 2007) and narrative competence (Smith, 2010). Hart and Nagel (2017) found that children engaging in 'play fighting' involving symbolic weapons are frequently observed to change roles and collaborate in developing storylines. Similarly, Parsons and Howe (2013) found superhero play can enhance creativity as children negotiate roles and narratives. EYPs in the current research also perceived these storylines to represent children's developing imagination, and the early development of literacy skills. One practitioner commented on the sounds that children make to

represent their weapons firing or magic powers activating, and how this might be considered useful pre-phonics development.

Overall, EYPs described ways in which all of the prime areas of learning in the EYFS (C&L, PSED, PD) could be enhanced through WCP, as well as some of the specific areas (literacy, mathematics, expressive art and design). This is in contrast to findings from Rosen (2015) in which EYPs reported finding it difficult to always map such play onto ELGs clearly.

5.3.1.3.2 Developing skills for the 'real' world. EYPs in the current research also spoke about the development of skills for 'life' or the 'real' world such as resilience, problem solving and negotiation. Children learn to take risks through WCP which can build their resilience and help them learn valuable lessons for life. EYPs expressed that children test out their theories and develop problem solving and conflict management skills through WCP. This is echoed in research from Bauman (2015) who, in their self-study, noticed children developing co-operation and responsibility within their WCP. The perspective that WCP offers learning opportunities for important life skills was also taken by Hart and Nagel (2017) who argued that supporting playful aggression themes can help foster prosocial skills such as resolving conflict, taking turns, and taking the perspective of another person. Ultimately, Cupit (1996, p. 24) argued that WCP themes should not be seen as a "disruption to be prevented, but as another gateway for learning."

5.3.1.4 It's just another type of play!

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5.3.1.4.1 Making sense of the world and experiences. For some

practitioners, their view was that WCP is simply just another form of role play.

This is comparable to the view of Sutton-Smith (1988) who argued that war play

is entirely pretend and mirrors features of life just like other forms of pretend

play do. EYPs in the current study positioned WCP as way for children to retell

past experiences (either things they've experienced in 'real life' or things they

have seen via the media/popular culture) in order to make sense of them.

Previous research has also found that some EYPs perceive children to be

making sense of feelings (Logue & Harvey, 2009), and experiences (Peterson

et al., 2018), through WCP. This view aligns with Bruner (1986), who positioned

play as a learning process where children act out roles and feelings in a journey

of discovery. Described by Smidt (2010), Bruner framed play as 'memory in

action', meaning that children play as a way to recall events and experiences in

their lives to think about and make sense of them.

EYPs were keen to emphasise that, due to the geographical location of

their settings, many of the children in their cohorts had family members in the

military. They reflected on how children pretending to march with a gun because

that is what their parent/carer does is comparable to children acting out any

other job roles that their relatives might have. It is a representation of their life

experiences, and EYPs look beyond the weapon to recognise this. It is

characteristic of children to represent their life experiences through their play

(Delaney, 2017; Grimmer, 2020; Smidt, 2010).

EYPs spoke about how "guns aren't necessarily a bad thing" (Catherine)

because they offer a protection mechanism and can be the tool of 'people who

help us' e.g. police officers. The legitimate context for some weapons was framed by one participant in the context of Queen Elizabeth II's funeral, where armed forces held weapons as a sign of respect, and a child at her setting was keen to re-enact this, having seen it on TV. Similarly, teachers in Peterson et al. (2018) spoke about how children at their setting used pretend weapons in 'hunting' play, representing a common activity in their culture. Engaging in WCP may be a way for children to represent, and make sense of, life experiences in the exosystem as well as the microsystem.

EYPs explained how children can also use WCP as a way to explore 'adult' concepts such as morality and justice, through 'goodies v.s. baddies' type play. Children experiment with what it means to be good or bad through taking on different roles, and gain satisfaction from 'saving' their friends from the 'enemies.' This is echoed by Popper (2013), who has written extensively on how superhero play can support exploration and understanding of morality. Piaget believed that children younger than 6 or 7 are focused on the consequences of actions and he deemed this to be the stage of moral realism (Piaget, 1965). Through WCP, young children can begin to understand what it can mean to be good or bad, and what might happen when people act in these different ways. In this way, WCP can offer opportunities for children to bring abstract moral concepts into reality (Hoffman, 2014). Furthermore, children can begin to explore justice (what it is fair and unfair) through negotiation of play rules with peers for example, or deciding what is an appropriate punishment for the 'bad guys' (Hoffman, 2014). Although WCP being a potential vessel for exploring 'adult' concepts such as morality has been commented on by several authors, this is not something that EYPs reported in the reviewed research

studies. Therefore, it can be argued that these findings offer a distinctive contribution to the literature.

One practitioner in the current research reflected on her thoughts that the best way for children to get a sense of these 'adult' concepts is not through explaining it to them, but by letting them experience it for themselves (Leanne). Indeed, Smidt (2010) wrote that children use play to try to make sense of complex themes that most adults still grapple with, for instance, right and wrong, good and bad, and life and death. Katch (2008, p. 73) argued that children have always played to work through what they love and desire, as well as what scares them; they use this play to "gain mastery over their fears and desires." Several authors (e.g. Hoffman, 2014; Holland, 2003; Mawson, 2008) have considered the way that children use play to process the concepts of life and death/dying. Mechling (2008, p. 206) wrote that "playing at dying tames real fears about dying." In contrast, although some practitioners in the current research mentioned that children might begin to explore the concept of death through WCP, they did not expand upon this in great depth. Equally, the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 did not reveal practitioners' views on how children might understand and explore death as part of WCP either. This appears to be a potential area for further exploration.

5.3.1.4.2 Children should be able to express themselves. A common thread throughout the interview responses was that EYPs feel strongly about following the interests of the children. They shared the view that children should be able to express themselves and the things they enjoy at the setting. Some practitioners felt that to prohibit WCP would be to prevent some children from

enjoying what interests them. After all, the EYFS states that EYPs should "respond to [children's] individual interests" (DfE, 2021a, p. 6). EYPs emphasised how they strive to explore children's passions and empower them to express these; "we go with whatever they're interested in" (Emily). One practitioner situated this in the context of the British Values- noting the importance of encouraging children to have a voice and the freedom to make choices.

These findings are similar to those in the reviewed literature. For example, some teachers interviewed by Logue and Harvey (2009) felt that restricting such play would place limits on children's naturally occurring creativity. Similarly, participants in Rosen (2015) were keen to follow the lead of the child. A practitioner in Wiwatowski et al. (2020) shared her opinion that adults should not "dictate to children what they should be interested in" (p. 176). Bauman (2015) felt that, to be an effective teacher, she should show understanding of, and respect for children's WCP interests and guide them through these in a supportive way.

5.3.1.4.3 Projection of adult understanding onto WCP. Some practitioners offered their perspective that adults project their own understanding of what WCP is, and what it means, onto children's play. This means they can interpret it as more risky, worrying or aggressive than children do. Some EYPs perceived that children's engagement in WCP is innocent (Emily) and they do not "understand the reality" of the connotations associated with it (Holly). Similarly, Levin and Carlsson-Paige (2006) argued that, while adults perceive connections between WCP and violence in society, children do

not, and the concepts within their WCP have a different meaning to them as they do for adults. Katch (2008) argued that the types of play themes that make adults nervous are not necessarily the same as the ones that might worry children. Previous research has found that pre-school age children were aware of the differences between pretend guns and real ones, and did not liken their play to real violence (Bauman, 2015).

5.3.2 The role of EYPs in WCP

EYPs considered what their role might be in relation to WCP, including the different ways in which they might respond to it in their settings. They expressed mixed views and cognitive dissonance. This uncertainty was also captured by Logue and Harvey (2009) who concluded that teachers felt ambivalent about their role in allowing or prohibiting play themes such as this.

5.3.2.1 Uncertainty.

5.3.2.1.1 Lack of professional guidelines. EYPs in the current research spoke about the perceived lack of professional guidelines available to them on WCP. From the researcher's knowledge, there is a wealth of grey literature including books and EY magazine articles discussing such play, however these may not be widely available to EYPs in their everyday practice. Previous research has found that policies on WCP guide practitioners' responses (e.g. Delaney, 2017; Logue & Harvey, 2009). However, most of the settings that participated did not have a policy on WCP. They tended to take their lead from the setting manager in how to approach it. Nevertheless, individual variation still existed in EYPs' reported responses to WCP,

suggesting that without an agreed policy, there may be inconsistency across the team. EYPs expressed that some of the variation between them in how they respond to WCP may be related to individual practitioners' confidence and experience in their role. This concept was also discussed in previous research by Delaney (2017). Holland (2003) suggested that EYPs may feel alienated by some of the concepts in WCP, or lack confidence in their ability to support and extend it.

Interestingly, EYPs and teachers in previous research have expressed concern over being judged unfavourably by their colleagues for allowing or supporting WCP (e.g. Logue & Harvey, 2009; Peterson et al., 2018). They were worried about others judging their competency as an EY professional. This was not a concern reflected by the participants in the current research. Instead, most reported feeling supported by their colleagues and explained how they try to work together to discuss issues with WCP when it occurs. Even though EYPs shared how their approach to WCP might differ to other practitioners in their setting, it was not framed as a slight on anyone's practice, nor did EYPs disclose feeling shamed or judged by their colleagues for their response to WCP.

5.3.2.1.2 Cognitive dissonance. As demonstrated in the discussion so far, the perspectives on WCP are mixed. The theme 'Uncertainty' includes the cognitive dissonance that practitioners experience in relation to WCP. Cognitive dissonance refers the psychological discomfort experienced when two opposing and conflicting cognitions are held (Festinger, 1957).

Practitioners frequently expressed the importance of following the child's lead and building on their interests, but at the same time also wanting to instil the British Values and values promoted by the EYFS such as kindness and respect. Children's interest in WCP can be perceived to conflict with such values. This is further complicated by the fact that some children in the EY settings had family members who used weapons in legitimate contexts (i.e. farming or military), so in those cases WCP is an expression of not just the child's interest, but potentially their culture and lifestyle. Practitioners were concerned with how to approach managing WCP without causing children to feel shame or confusion e.g. thinking their parent has a 'bad' job, or is a 'bad' person because they hold a gun as part of their career. They spoke about the importance of being sensitive to children's "worlds" (Abi). This is reflected in the non-statutory guidance document, Birth to Five Matters, which states that EYPs should respect and celebrate the "diverse backgrounds of the children and families with whom they work" (Early Education, 2021 p. 31). They should be sensitive to children's lived experiences and value family 'ways of being.'

Cognitive dissonance has also been found in previous research. A small proportion of teachers who sought to ban WCP in Doliopoulou's (1998) study reflected feeling confused as to whether they were doing the right thing or not. This conflict was also documented by Logue and Shelton (2008) who discussed concerns over whether it was insensitive to stop WCP and invalidate children's play choices, but at the same time being fearful that allowing the play promoted the use of aggression to solve conflicts. Similar to findings from Rosen (2015), EYPs in the current research identified that WCP can allow children to take

risks and build resilience, but some experienced conflicting thoughts about permitting it due to the danger of injuries.

In the current study, practitioners expressed that they strive to be consistent in their practice but recognised that sometimes there are incongruities between the things that children are taught and exposed to, and the things that are deemed appropriate to demonstrate in their play. For example, one practitioner, (Leanne), expressed that she often reads children stories with pirates in, so she felt that she could not then say to children that they cannot play with swords. Another practitioner, (Emily), raised the point that children of this age 'act out' the roles of different careers e.g. doctor, teacher, or hairdresser. She felt it would be contradictory to allow these in play, but not allow the role of a soldier as this is a legitimate career path too.

In Rosen's (2015) research, practitioners spoke about the importance of 'school-readiness' i.e. ensuring children have well-rounded development and are suitably prepared to start their formal education. Their participants felt that WCP can impact negatively on this because children become 'stuck' playing in this way and it can be difficult to move them onto other areas of learning. They felt conflicted between allowing children to use play to express their interests and ensuring they were experiencing the full breadth of the curriculum in order to be ready for school. Some EYPs in the current study did touch lightly on how WCP can sometimes be repetitive, but they did not speak directly about the concept of school-readiness or frame their concerns in this way.

5.3.2.1.3 Where do you draw the line? Practitioners reflected on the difficulty with 'where to draw the line' with WCP. For example, some practitioners spoke of the "funny realms" that adults are in danger of getting into of "why is a sword safer than a gun?" (Natalie). As discussed within 'The threat of WCP' theme in section 5.3.1.2, practitioners place limits on acceptable forms of WCP. Based on the discussion so far, this may be more likely to occur when they view WCP from an adult perspective, instead of from the point of a view of the child.

This uncertainty of where 'the line' should be drawn was also reflected by the teacher in Delaney's (2017) ethnographic study. She diverged from the zero tolerance rules in her setting by allowing Spiderman web play, but drew the line at pretend guns. Logue and Harvey's (2009) study revealed that teachers drew the line at the enactment of certain characters. A teacher in Peterson et al. (2018) perceived the construction of 'long' guns to be acceptable compared to 'short' ones as they represented rifles which could be used for hunting, a legitimate use of weapons in their cultural context, rather than for person-to-person violence. It is clear that even when WCP is permitted, there is variation on the kinds or sub-types deemed acceptable.

EYPs shared how they would *not* specifically encourage WCP as they might with other sorts of play. Yet, despite some reservations held against WCP, all practitioners in the current study disagreed with a complete 'blanket ban' on it. This concurs with findings from Wiwatowski et al. (2020) but contrasts with commentary from Holland (2003) and evidence from Dolioupoulou (1998) where 15% of teachers tried to prevent WCP, and 4%

sought to ban it completely. The current research suggests that perspectives towards WCP may be becoming more permissive in this specific context.

5.3.2.2 The need to protect children

5.3.2.2.1 Observing and monitoring. Hart and Tannock (2013) emphasised that a key element for supporting WCP themes is adult supervision. EYPs in the current research expressed how their role involves monitoring and observing play from a distance. In the case of WCP, they are often listening out for the kind of language that is being used to gauge the tone of the play, and observing physical behaviour to ensure children's safety. They phrased this as "watch and see, see how it pans out" rather than always intervening straight away (Holly). This response is similar to that expressed in Peterson et al. (2018) where practitioners spoke about observing facial expressions to check that children were still enjoying the play, or if they were becoming too aggressive.

A study by Hart (2016) concurs with these findings, concluding that how teachers perceive playful aggression scenarios is situationally dependent. Perceptions of different WCP scenarios shown to participants through video clips varied greatly. Videos where children were shown to be supervised were rated more playful (less aggressive) than videos where children were playing unsupervised. Variation in weapon type also affected 'playfulness' ratings. Even within the video clips ranked as the most/least playful there was significant variability in teachers' perceptions. Videos were muted meaning participants were not able to make judgements based on what they could hear the children

saying. This is an important limitation to note as EYPs in the current study expressed how they would monitor WCP by "listening in to seeing if the words [being] used were ones that we really wanna hear or not" (Emily).

Practitioners in the current study emphasised the importance of context (i.e. the type of WCP, and the specific children playing it) affecting their level of concern and subsequently their response. As discussed in section 5.2, EYPs demonstrated knowledge of the different systems that children are developing within and the impact this can have on their play. They highlighted the importance of knowing their children and families well so that they can understand the play in context. Smidt (2010) argued that practitioners should ensure they know about children's experiences outside of the EY setting to better understand their reality, and thus their play themes.

5.3.2.2.2 Discouraging WCP. EYPs expressed the need to discourage WCP sometimes. This was justified by some in terms of protecting children, either in the moment or with regard to fearing for their future. For instance, due to the local context of deprivation and high crime rate, EYPs held some anxiety that allowing WCP might negatively influence children to behave in violent ways in the future- "we don't want them to get involved in that" (Kerry). Likewise, one practitioner reflected on her experience working at a different setting where safeguarding concerns for children who had experienced violence in their lives meant the team decided WCP was not to be permitted. By the same token, Bauman (2015) contemplated that children living in contexts with violence and trauma will likely need teachers to respond to WCP with a different view.

Because of these perceived risks, practitioners described how limits are placed on WCP in an effort to 'soften' the play themes and protect children. In this way, Rosen (2015) argued that children are positioned by adults as innocent and vulnerable, in need of defence from adult themes and realities such as violence and death. In the current study some EYPs shared how they distract children away from WCP. They described how they might try to draw the child's attention to another activity they are known to enjoy in order to bring a stop to the WCP. This is a common approach reported in the literature (e.g. Doliopoulou, 1998; Holland, 2000, 2003; Logue & Harvey, 2009).

Some EYPs described implementing re-direction of the weapon behaviour. For instance, encouraging a child with a 'sword' to use it to pretend to chop down trees rather than to fight with. This is similar to the 'replacement' approach noted in Wiwatowski et al. (2020). This allows children to experience the physical benefits of the play but within a theme that perhaps fits better with the values of the setting, or makes the practitioner feel more comfortable.

Regardless of the approach taken, EYPs expressed how they try to protect children's feelings by ensuring they move children on from WCP gently with positive language. For example, they might acknowledge the weapon the child has made and speak with them about it before encouraging them on to a different activity, rather than immediately telling them they must break it apart, because "that's not good for them, for their self-esteem" (Leanne). EYPs emphasised how repeatedly telling children "no" all day is tiring, negative and not useful, not least because they do not always listen and will engage in WCP regardless. Holland (1999, 2003) also came to the same conclusion. EYPs in

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the current study therefore found distraction or re-direction to be more effective approaches than just saying "no."

5.3.2.3 If you can't beat them, join them

5.3.2.3.1 Banning WCP does not work. A common perspective among EYPs was that it is impossible to stop children engaging in WCP if that is how they want to play. Attempts to stop WCP often result with children 'secretly' constructing weapons, or simply using their hands as guns instead. Children were described as being "clever" at transforming their WCP into something different when adults notice what they're doing (Samantha). These experiences are consistent with those shared in previous research (e.g. Bauman, 2015; Delaney, 2017; Holland, 1999; Logue & Shelton, 2008) where, when confronted about their weapon, children would pretend it was something else and practitioners thus felt they were teaching children how to lie creatively. Rich (2003) suggested this switches the moral issue of condoning violence in EY settings to the moral issue of promoting deceit. Overall, practitioners in the current study expressed that 'banning' WCP is not usually a successful strategy.

EYPs reported that when WCP is permitted instead of prohibited, instances of it tend to decrease. Similar reports have been made by Holland (1999, 2003). So, rather than banning WCP, some practitioners instead choose to allow it with the condition that certain rules are adhered to. This links to the subtheme 'There are limits to acceptable WCP' in section 5.3.1.2.2, which reflects how WCP can be permitted but still policed to a degree based on

practitioners' views on what is appropriate. Practitioners described implementing rules such as "actions and sounds, no touching" (Julie), and only shooting with children who are part of their game. This acts as a sort of compromise, meaning that WCP can occur but with optimistically less risk. The setting of boundaries concurs with findings from Bauman (2015) and Peterson et al. (2018), where participants also reported developing rules such as 'no guns pointed towards people.' They emphasised the importance of constructing these rules *with* the children so that they were mutually agreed and understood. Katch (2008) argued that by remaining curious about children's play and asking them inquisitive questions about it, practitioners can help them to develop rules about types of behaviour that worry them. By doing this, children build up their skills to listen to each other, compromise and keep their play safe and enjoyable.

When WCP is banned, this creates a space where there is no knowledgeable 'other' (i.e. an EYP) to scaffold and help children with their sense-making during play (Delaney, 2017). Some EYPs in the current study believed that, by being open about WCP, children feel more comfortable to talk about it. Any issues that arise during it are therefore not hidden but can be addressed by an adult without fear of punishment. This thought was echoed by a practitioner in Rosen's (2015) study.

5.3.2.3.2 Joining in with WCP. Some EYPs' response to WCP is actively join in when it occurs in their settings. This concurs with findings from Wiwatowski et al. (2020) who reported some practitioners taking an 'engagement' approach. In the current study, EYPs justified this through an

explanation of how their involvement means they are present to monitor the play, reinforce the rules, role-model and scaffold learning. One practitioner spoke about modelling 'caring' roles within WCP such as role-playing as a medic in a war game to emphasise the values of kindness and care in EY (Julie). Another described how getting involved means they can model safety around weapons, for example, ensuring 'swords' are safely tucked into belts (Catherine). It was suggested that joining in with children's WCP can aid in developing children's understanding of morality, empathy and responsibility within their play. This aligns with the views of Kindergarten teachers interviewed by Peterson et al. (2018) who perceived their role to involve teaching empathy and problem solving. These perspectives also align with the opinion of Rich (2003), who suggested that it is the responsibility of the practitioner to support and extend WCP so that children can make sense of their social and cultural world.

In the current research, there was a sense that joining children in their WCP, whether physically or through conversation, can bolster the learning opportunities associated with it. This has been found in previous research too. For example, Logue and Shelton (2008) found that when they actively engaged with their cohort's interest in 'bad guy play', rather than stopping or ignoring it, children demonstrated increased social awareness and engagement with reading and writing tasks set up to extend the play. Similarly, Logue and Detour (2011) reflected on how getting involved and supporting their pre-school class with 'bad guy play' allowed them to remark at the complexities of such play and consider how their previous discomfort might have inhibited valuable play opportunities. Cupit (1996) argued that adults should identify the learning

potential of WCP (he referred specifically in this case to superhero play) and respond to it as they would with other types of play. This could mean having conversations about issues arising from it, actively joining children in their play to understand it better, and extending it to bring new challenges.

Like the participants in the current study, Hart and Tannock (2013) concluded that WCP should be supported via clear direction, agreed rules and support from the adults to promote safety and learning. The importance of adults being able to scaffold WCP to improve safety as well as bolster learning opportunities links to the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The more knowledgeable 'other' (EYP), can impart their knowledge through mediation and extension of WCP, supporting children to become mindful of wider issues of safety, empathy and responsibility as well as increase their learning, for instance, through the development of a storyline.

5.4 How can understanding of these perspectives inform practice?

The researcher was concerned with how the knowledge gained from this research could help inform EY practice. In order to consider this, it is useful to summarise the key findings. The themes suggest overall that EYPs associate both challenges and opportunities with WCP in their practice. See Figure 5.1 for an overview.

Figure 5.1

The perceived challenges and opportunities of WCP

Perceived challenges

Risk of physical harm/injury

Risk of upsetting or scaring other children

Noise and disruption

Risk of promoting aggression, unkind behaviour and language (now and in later life)

EYPs cannot control children's access to violent media which they imitate in their play

There are a lack of professional guidelines

A lack of setting policy can lead to inconsistency between different EYPs' responses

EYPs are unsure where to 'draw the line.' Are superheroes with powers acceptable? What about magic wands or swords? Are they different from guns?

Some EYPs lack confidence in guiding WCP

Banning WCP does not tend to work. Children still engage it, but secretly. Does this promote deceit?

Can support learning and development and progress towards ELGs across the EYFS

Children can learn skills for life e.g. resilience, problem solving and conflict management

Children can expresss aggressive tension in safe ways (catharsis)

Children can make sense of the world and process events to deepen their understanding

Children can begin to make sense of concepts such as morality, justice and death

If WCP is permitted, it can be talked about openly. EYPs are able to set rules and boundaries to help children navigate WCP safely and responsibly

By joining in with WCP, EYPs are able to scaffold and role-model the play, and understand it better

Perceived opportunities

To support EYPs with overcoming some of the ambiguity surrounding WCP, the researcher has proposed a framework for practice (see Figure 5.2). It is understood the text is too small to read clearly- this figure is purely for illustrative purposes and a full scale version is provided in Appendix O with an introductory note for practitioners.

Figure 5.2 Proposed framework for conceptualising and responding to WCP

CONCEPTUALISING AND RESPONDING TO WEAPON AND CONFLICT PLAY

Characteristics of effective learning	Area of learning	Observe: What are children doing?	Consider: Why might they be playing in this way?	Response: Where might you go from here?
Finding out and exploring Playing with what they know Being willing to "have a go"	Personal, social & emotional development	Are they playing alone or with others? Are they showing co-operation and/or compromise? Are they demonstrating empathy or perspective-taking? Are they taking on a new role or identity? Are they managing emotions (self-regulation)? Are they managing conflict/disagreements?	Is the game exciting and fun? Do they wish to feel powerful or strong? Do they enjoy playing in groups? Are they seeking to develop friendships? Are they using WCP to work through things they are anxious/ worried about? Does playing in this way give them confidence?	**Scaffold:** Self-regulation, resolution of conflict, perspective-taking, problem solving **Discuss:** Violence, emotions, being kind *Teach language e.g. "Stop. I don't like that"* **Extend:** Model caring roles within WCP e.g. medic or use of healing potions *Are they following the setting rules?* *Monitor wellbeing*
Being involved and concentrating Keeping on trying Enjoying achieving what they set out to do Having their own ideas (creative thinking) Making links (building theories) Working with ideas (critical thinking)	Communication & language	How are children communicating? Are they making sound effects? What language can you hear?	Is it a language- accessible form of play? Are they practicing conversation? Are they developing sustained, shared attention?	**Extend:** What vocabulary could you add? *Are they using concerning language?*
	Physical development	Are they developing fine motor skills? Are they developing proprioception, balance and co-ordination? Are they developing gross motor skills?	Are they seeking out ways to enjoy large physical movements?	**Discuss:** How we can we stay safe? **Extend:** Use of targets to bring skill into weapon use *Are they physically hurting each other? Can the play be redirected or should it be stopped?*
	Literacy	Are they developing or following a storyline? Are they making sounds that might be important for phonics?	Are they interested in stories?	**Discuss:** What is the story? Who are the characters? **Scaffold:** Relevant mark making
	Maths	Are they using mathematical language such as number, shape, size or measure?	Are they interested in construction?	**Scaffold:** How many? How big? One more/less?
	Understanding the world	Are they representing different roles? Are they representing events and experiences? Are they exploring concepts such as morality, justice or death?	Are they making sense of the things they've seen/heard or experienced? Are there people who use weapons in their lives?	**Discuss:** Who uses weapons and why? How can we be safe using them? Talk about different cultures and livelihoods, life/death and good/bad
	Expressive arts & design	Are they using their imagination to act out scenarios and/or create weapons? Are there 'bad guys'?	Do they wish to re-create or re-experience things they have seen? Are they exploring fantasy v.s. reality?	**Extend:** Who are the 'bad guys'? Why are they bad? Explore their imagined worlds - can they describe it or draw it?

REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY What are your values and beliefs? How does WCP 'sit' with you? Why?	*PRACTITIONER CONSISTENCY* Agree on responses What are the values of your setting?	*MANAGING RISK* Is it 'real' or playful aggression? How can you support 'careful' risk-taking?	*RULES AND BOUNDARIES* What are the acceptable limits? Can you co-construct rules with children?	*SAFEGUARDING* Remain alert to safeguarding concerns See WCP within a context

Essentially, the framework encourages EYPs to carefully consider both the challenges and opportunities before responding to WCP. It provides suggested questions to support practitioners to examine their own values and the play narratives that could exist 'beyond the weapon.' It maps elements of WCP onto the seven areas of learning, and the Characteristics of Effective Learning in the EYFS. It is based on the theoretical understandings of WCP and perspectives on it presented across the existing literature, as well as the findings from this research.

5.5 Implications of findings

This research has provided insight into the perspectives of EYPs on WCP within a LA in Southern England. The following section outlines the potential implications of these findings for EYPs, EPs, and children.

5.5.1 Implications for early years practitioners

As reported in previous literature, the findings reflect a persistent feeling of uncertainty regarding WCP among EYPs. Perspectives varied between settings, with some EYPs explaining how they accommodate and even join in with WCP, and others feeling strongly that WCP is not appropriate. Based on this, it appears that a key implication of this research is the need for developing greater shared understanding of what WCP is, why children engage in it, and its potential pedagogical value, as well as how to manage it when it occurs. All participants agreed that WCP is not something which can be avoided; if children wish to play in this way then it is near impossible to stop them. Therefore, it is important that WCP is discussed and planned for in EY settings, regardless of the approach decided upon. The framework proposed as part of this research has been designed to support this and can be found in Appendix O. The collective view that WCP should *not* be completely prohibited is a reflection of practitioners' appreciation for the variance and nuance in such play, seen within a socio-political and cultural context.

5.5.2 Implications for children

Practitioners commented that they were glad to have taken part in the research and the interviews had encouraged them to reflect and think about WCP in ways which they had not previously considered. This reflection on practice is, in itself, an implication of the research. Reflective practice involves the development of self-awareness and critical evaluation of practice in order to gain new insights and learn from experience (Finlay, 2008; Schön, 1983). It is crucial for all professionals including EYPs. Reflective practice enables practitioners to develop skills and knowledge to achieve the "best development,

learning and progress" for the children at their setting (Birth to Five Matters, 2021, p. 1).

Children attending EY settings benefit from having EYPs who carefully consider the underlying factors affecting their practice, such as their personal experiences, their values and their understanding of child development and play (Paige-Smith & Craft, 2011; Parenta, 2021). This is known as reflexivity. Reflexivity allows practitioners to deepen their understanding of their own views and ways of working. It involves reflection on the *why* (e.g. the moral or cultural assumptions), that underpin behaviour and decisions (Rix, 2011). With regard to WCP, this may involve practitioners taking time to carefully consider their beliefs and values and reflect on how these might affect how they interpret, make sense of, and approach WCP in their settings. Regardless of individual EYPs' perspectives on WCP, it is hoped that this research has prompted personal reflection and group discussion within EY settings for the benefit of all children.

5.5.3 Implications for educational psychologists

The research findings indicate feelings of uncertainty around WCP and one practitioner specifically perceived there to be a lack of professional guidelines. There may be a role for EPs to bring awareness to the psychological theory underpinning WCP, the pedagogical opportunities, and current research in the area. In particular, the distinctive findings from this research should be highlighted as part of this, such as how WCP can be a way for children to explore morality, how girls' WCP varies in type and content to boys', how EYPs may perceive WCP to function as catharsis, and finally, how EYPs judge acceptable WCP not just by the risk of physical harm it poses but also by the

language children use. This awareness might be raised by providing training which could bring EYPs from different settings together in order to share their experiences, and consider the framework proposed by the researcher to use in their practice going forward. EPs could also offer supervision to EYPs on a group or individual basis so that worries or concerns regarding managing WCP could be discussed, and good practice can be shared.

More broadly, EPs could have a role in facilitating conversations with EYPs around the psychology of play generally, and its potential purposes and functions. This could be through the form of training or webinars. EPs could also offer more general supervision or reflective spaces to support EYPs to consider how their experiences, biases and values affect their practice, for example, the sorts of play they may feel more comfortable supporting. Dissemination of the findings of this research through publication in relevant EY literature, such as magazines, could further promote psychological understandings of play.

EPs are well-placed to work at the organisational or systems level (Farrell et al., 2016). Given that many of the EYPs reported the lack of a WCP policy, EPs could support settings at a systemic level with the development of a policy that draws on psychological understandings of WCP and acknowledges the values of the setting while improving the consistency of practice. More broadly, EPs could also support with policy writing for other kinds of play (e.g. rough and tumble play), as well as general pedagogical approaches.

Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that, as it stands in the LA in which this research was undertaken, EY settings do not 'buy in' to the EP

service. Consequently, their only interaction with EPs is usually for the purposes of a statutory assessment of a child in their care. The EP service delivery model in this LA therefore currently limits the scope of the potential involvement EPs can have in supporting EY settings. It is hoped that, in the future, this might change so that opportunities for EYPs and EPs to collaborate become available.

5.6 Dissemination of findings

The researcher intends to produce a short summary of the research findings and implications to be sent to all the participants. Beyond this, the researcher hopes to disseminate the summary to all settings through the EY Service, so that all practitioners in the LA can be made aware of the findings. As discussed, the EY settings do not currently buy into the EP service so the availability for the researcher to directly work with them on this topic is limited.

The researcher plans to present the research findings to her placement EPS, as well as her colleagues and tutors at UEL in the summer of 2023. An electronic copy of this thesis will be available through UEL's repository and the British Library EThOS website. Furthermore, the researcher has aspirations to publish the findings from this thesis in an academic journal. Such journals are not widely accessible to those outside of academia, so the researcher also intends to pursue other avenues of publication, such as Early Years magazines (e.g. Early Years Educator) or psychology magazines (e.g. The Psychologist) so that the information is more widely available.

5.7 Critique of the research

This section describes the strengths and limitations of the research.

5.7.1 Strengths

This research has provided valuable insight into the perspectives of EYPs on WCP, an under-researched area in the UK. The findings have the potential to improve the understanding and practice of EYPs and several implications have been identified as a result.

The study was designed with an aligned and well-considered ontological and methodological approach. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to speak freely, and the researcher to pursue the topic area flexibly. A pilot study enabled the researcher to experience the interview process before beginning the official data collection, and improve the interview schedule as a result. The researcher took a neutral and 'curious' position and made this clear to all participants, in an effort to encourage them to feel comfortable to share their honest perspectives.

Through inductive RTA, interview responses were analysed in a detailed and iterative way across six phases. The researcher kept a research diary to keep track of developing thoughts regarding both the data and the process itself, which promoted reflection and reflexivity throughout.

5.7.2 Limitations

The recruitment for this study proved to be more difficult than first imagined. The majority of settings did not get in contact following the first email.

The researcher suspects this is likely due to settings not having the time to read and consider the research opportunity fully, or being concerned about having to release an adult from ratio in order to complete the interview. Some settings may have been anxious that their practice would be judged or criticised by someone unknown.

Many of the practitioners who volunteered to be interviewed had an interest in the topic of WCP which may have influenced the breadth and depth of knowledge shared, and their overall perspectives on WCP. In addition to this, managers of EY settings acted as 'gatekeepers' to the recruitment of EYPs as they were the people who were emailed the details of the study and encouraged to ask their employees if they would be interested in participating. Managers also had to sign a consent form before employees could participate. This may have led to sampling bias, where only managers who thought WCP was important, worth volunteering time to talk about, or had a clear understanding of what it is, offered the opportunity to their staff.

All participants in this study were female. This could have implications for how WCP was conceptualised. Male EYPs may have different viewpoints that were therefore missed in this study. Nevertheless, the EY workforce is predominantly female; only 2% of staff working in EY group-based settings in England are male (DfE, 2022b). Consequently, this study could be seen to reflect the current context. Similarly, all participants were White British which means the findings may not represent the perspectives of all cultures and ethnicities. The LA where the research was conducted is a multi-cultural community. However, according to the DfE (2022b), around 80% or more EY

staff in group-based settings are White British, so again the findings may be seen to reflect the broader context.

Although a range of different settings participated (pack-away, linked to a school, day nursery etc.), this does not represent the full variety of EY education available in the local area. Despite being contacted, no outdoor settings such as 'Forest' pre-schools or settings with a particular ethos, such as Montessori, volunteered to participate. This is important to note because the values promoted by these EY settings, and therefore EYPs' perspectives on WCP, may differ from those included in the study.

Furthermore, the researcher only interviewed EYPs working in one LA in England. This limits the generalisability of the findings to the wider EYP population. However, the research was not intended to represent the views of all EYPs nationally and instead offers an in-depth exploration of perspectives in one specific geographical area. The research has built upon previous studies completed in other countries and identified similarities that exist between them. Therefore, it is plausible the perspectives on WCP explored in this area of the country might also share similarities with those expressed in other parts of the UK.

5.8 Recommendations for further research

Future research exploring the topic of WCP could focus on gaining the perspectives of male EYPs as their voices were absent in this study, and may represent a different viewpoint compared to female EYPs. Future research could also interview a wider range of EYPs including those who work in other

types of pre-primary education such as Montessori and Steiner settings, and outdoor or Forest pre-schools. It could also explore the perspectives of parents and their views on their children engaging in WCP at their EY setting.

The first overarching theme in this study was *how* EYPs conceptualise WCP. It would be useful for future research to more deeply explore the influences on EYPs perspectives on WCP- the underlying reasons *why* they might take such perspectives*.* Previous researchers such as Logue and Harvey (2009) have, for example, found that teachers perceived their EY training to have had a large impact on their attitudes towards R&T play. An invitation for EYPs to reflect on their values and experiences and how these influence their practice might prompt further reflexivity, and deepen understanding of how and why WCP is positioned in different ways. A second recommendation for further research regarding EYPs' conceptualisation of WCP is specifically around the 'adult' concepts of life and death. As discussed, concepts such as death, and how children might begin to explore this through WCP were briefly touched on by some EYPs but not explored in detail. Further research to better understand how EYPs perceive children to make sense of such concepts would be valuable.

The second overarching theme in this study was the role that EYPs can play with regards to WCP. Further research into the 'in-the-moment' response of EYPs to WCP might allow greater understanding. This could take place through an ethnographic or case study approach, similar to that conducted by Delaney (2017), where a researcher observes practice in the setting over a period of time. This could also involve a participatory component where the

children are given an opportunity to share their perspective on why they do or do not engage in WCP, what it means to them, and what they like or dislike about it. Exploring children's views may help EYPs to further conceptualise and understand the functions of WCP. As children are ultimately the ones affected by any decisions on/approaches to WCP, the importance of gaining their voice should not be underestimated.

5.9 Overall reflections

In this section, the researcher reflects on their learning and journey through the research process. These reflections are written in the first person owing to their personal nature.

As a novice coming to qualitative research, the journey for me has been enlightening. I have enjoyed the process of taking the time to speak in depth with others about their experiences and consider how this important knowledge can be shared with others to improve understanding and practice. I was pleased to be able to give voice to EYPs, who are often under-estimated in their knowledge and capability. Their level of qualification and understanding of child development is often overlooked, and their pay reflects an under-valuing of their professional expertise (Social Mobility Commission, 2020). This study allowed them to demonstrate such knowledge and highlight the complexities of EY education and the role of an EYP.

Conducting interviews, and later transcribing and analysing them encouraged me to reflect on my interpersonal skills. I was surprised by how difficult the interviewer role was. Having worked in EY education in the past,

and having developed my own views on WCP through reading the literature when embarking on this journey, I had to be careful that I remained neutral and did not inadvertently influence my participants' responses. Ensuring that I explored the topics that they raised in enough depth but avoiding the use of leading questions was a fine balance. The use of my research diary to reflect on this was important and containing. The research process in general allowed me to appreciate the dual role of 'researcher-practitioner' that EPs take on. It has encouraged me to pursue further research when in my qualified post.

It is not to say that I did not find the research process stressful and overwhelming at times. I found ways to cope by carefully planning my time, speaking with colleagues, and using my research diary to reflect on the journey throughout. These experiences will serve me well in my career as an EP, which involves having good time management skills and engaging in regular supervision. As well as this, it was important to take regular breaks and ensure I kept a work/life balance so that I could return to the research feeling refreshed and energised to keep going. This research, and the resulting thesis has certainly been a marathon, and not a sprint.

5.10 Final conclusion

This research has offered insight into how WCP is perceived by nine EYPs in a LA in the South of England. Two overarching themes were created based on data collected from semi-structured interviews: (1) Making sense of WCP, and (2) The role of EYPs in WCP. These summarised EYPs' perspectives on what WCP is, why children engage in it, and what their responses are to it when it occurs in their setting.

The findings build on the existing literature available on war, weapon and superhero play. The perspectives shared in this study run largely parallel to those of EYPs and teachers in previous research. For example, EYPs perceive WCP to have both risks (e.g. physical harm and/or increased aggression) and benefits (e.g. learning opportunities across the EYFS and/or a way to make sense of events in their lives). EYPs were in agreement with those in previous research who voiced that banning WCP does not work because children still find ways to engage in it if they wish to. Most practitioners therefore reported using distraction or re-direction responses. Conversely, some reported setting rules or joining in with WCP to extend children's learning. Overall, the general consensus was that most settings represented in this study permit WCP under certain conditions, or within acceptable limits. The findings suggest that perspectives on WCP in EY settings in this specific LA are generally more permissive when compared to existing research. Despite some EYPs having strong concerns about WCP, none fully agreed with a complete zero tolerance approach to it.

Nevertheless, findings from this study suggest that WCP still appears to be a 'grey area' in EY, with practitioners experiencing conflicting thoughts around wanting to allow children to follow their interests and express their livelihoods, but also wanting to keep them safe from harm and promote values of kindness and respect. EYPs situated WCP within the local context, referring to concerns of knife crime and violence in the community and wanting to protect children from this reality. They also referenced the national context, discussing how children are exposed to mass media reports on global conflicts and wars,

such that it is nearly impossible to shield them from this. Thus, the decision to allow or prohibit WCP is a complex one. In the absence of policy, unspoken rules or individual decisions based on the context of the play are what shape practice. Practitioner confidence was also highlighted as significant factor leading to variation in responses to WCP.

Several distinctive findings have resulted from this research. To start, EYPs position which sorts of WCP are acceptable not just by the level of physical risk that is apparent but also by the level to which the language used by children is concerning. For most, use of 'adult' language, such as "kill", crosses a boundary and would result in them stopping the play. To the researcher's knowledge, this has not been reported in previous studies of EYPs' perspectives on WCP.

A second distinctive finding was that EYPs expressed how WCP can be an opportunity for children to explore the concept of morality. Although several authors have advocated for this in the grey literature, previous studies interviewing EYPs/teachers have not specifically reported on this aspect. EYPs reflected that children are beginning to learn what it means to be good or bad and can experiment with this through different roles in WCP.

Another distinctive finding was that EYPs position WCP as a form of catharsis, a way for children to release pent-up energy and aggression. In this way, WCP was seen as natural. Some EYPs attributed this to biological differences in boys which cause them to seek more physical play. Catharsis

itself was not something raised by EYPs in the reviewed literature, beyond some discussion in the grey literature.

Finally, EYP expressed differences in the sorts of WCP that girls may engage in, compared to boys. They shared how, in the unlikely event that girls in their settings do engage in WCP, their play often centres around Disney princess themes or fantasy worlds with magic wands or magical powers rather than the use of guns or role-playing of soldiers. This specific finding has not been directly reported by EYPs in previous research, to the best of the researcher's knowledge.

A finding that was *not* replicated in this research was the notion of EYPs feeling judged by their colleagues for allowing WCP. EYPs in the current study expressed a feeling of working together with their team if concerns arose regarding WCP, and did not voice worries that being seen to support WCP would reflect negatively on their professional status. Furthermore, previous research has highlighted concerns regarding how WCP can have a negative impact on school readiness. This was not a concern raised by the EYPs in this study.

Implications of the findings were discussed in relation to EYPs, children and EPs. These included the proposal that EPs could offer training to EYPs to share their knowledge on the psychology of WCP and best practice approaches. They could also support at an organisational level with the development of a WCP policy to improve consistency and confidence in the whole setting's approach. A framework to support EYPs in their consideration

and response to WCP was created by the researcher as a direct implication of the research findings.

Overall, this research offers an important contribution to the existing literature by presenting the views of EYPs on WCP, an under-researched area in the UK in recent years. Ultimately, EYPs' perspectives indicate that WCP presents both opportunities and challenges in EY practice. It is ever more important for EYPs to be reflective and reflexive, and engage in evidence-based practice to provide the highest quality EY education for young children. Fundamentally, EYPs are individuals, guided by their own values and influenced by the systems surrounding them. It is therefore likely that perspectives on, and responses to, WCP will continue to vary not just by setting but also by practitioner. The balance of challenge and opportunity will fall in favour of permitting WCP for some EYPs more than others. Or, as Julie said:

"Even if my colleagues don't get it, I'm there with my lightsaber."

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Appendices

Appendix A: Summary of papers in the literature review

Study	Location	Participants	Methodology & Procedure	Data Analysis	Findings	Critique
Doliopoulou (1998)	Greece	82 pre-school teachers and 77 parents in Greece	Qualitative 2 questionnaires. One on war play and one on power rangers Replicated two studies by Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1987, 1995). Distributed two questionnaires to parents and pre-school teachers. 'Most' were interviewed as well with 'similar' questions to the questionnaire	Unclear	The relevant findings to the current research are detailed below (teacher questionnaire responses): Presence of war play: • 98% teachers answered that the children in their class engage in war play and 2% said they *sometimes* do • 78% teachers answered that they permit it but they set some limits concerning the children's safety • 15% try to prevent it • 4% ban it completely • 3% allow it completely Teachers who ban war play:	Strengths: • Sample size is large- promotes credibility • Clear reporting of results in line with the research questions Limitations: • Conducted in Greece- limits transferability to UK • Over 20 years old, views may have potentially changed a lot since then • Unclear which method of data analysis was used – limits confirmability

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					• When asked what they say to children when they forbid the play 73% refer to the idea that they may get hurt, 14% say that war and violence are bad and make people unhappy. 13% redirect them to other games • When asked how they feel about banning war play, 84% teachers answered that they feel good because they think they are doing what is best for the children. Some said they feel obliged to (10%) and 6% mentioned feeling confused about whether they were doing the right thing or not Teachers who permit war play: • When asked about the circumstances in which they allow war play, 84% set safety rules and limits only if children do not keep these rules	• No direct quotes provided – limits credibility • Unclear how many participants completed the interviews or what the interview questions were- limits dependability, credibility and confirmability

					• 12% take a neutral position when the play occurs • 4% mentioned trying to redirect the children's attention when they start engaging in this kind of play • When asked how they feel about allowing war play, 76% felt as if they were doing the right thing because children feel good • 12% said they were satisfied and feel children accept rules more easily through this play • 8% said they feel as if they don't have any other choice • 4% mentioned that they feel good about their choice but have concern for the children's safety • When asked to describe the play , 53% said children pretend to be "powerful characters who fly, drive fast, avoid dangers, destroy the enemy" (p. 80). 36% felt that children imitate what they see on TV. 11% said that	

					children make their own weapons from resources and engage in lots of different types of fighting Sex differences: • 75% teachers report that boys engage in this play very much and girls rarely do • 22% said that girls never engage in war play and only boys do • 3% boys usually pretend to be the male strong figures and girls the female less powerful ones Changes in war play through the years: • 88% report that whenever there is a change in TV heroes there is a change in the children's play too • 7% said if there are more boys in the class, war play becomes more aggressive and violent	

					3% said that older children engage in war play more intensely than younger ones 2% reported not having noticed any changes Influence of power rangers: 64% said that children quarrel when they play power rangers because they all want to pretend to be the same one 28% said they imitate the characters but they don't hurt each other 8% said that children like to show others the Power Rangers they possess 81% said the children like to dress up like them 14% said the children's play becomes more violent when the heroes are included 5% did not notice any influence on the children's play	

					Study concludes that most teachers seek to limit the play whereas most teachers in America (at the time of this research) seek to ban it. They write that across cultures war play seems to be appealing to children, particularly boys, potentially as a way to serve some of their needs (sense of power and control etc). *Parent opinions are also reported in this study but not included in this table due to the current research being focused on the perspectives of early years professionals.*	
Logue and Harvey (2009)	USA	48 pre-kindergarten teachers in America. All female.	Questionnaire – qualitative and quantitative measures. Preschool teachers completed the Preschool Teacher Beliefs and	A series of T tests and a one-way ANOVA for quantitative data. Appears to be thematic analysis for	• Those who allowed rough-and-tumble play, particular behaviours of play involving use of weapons or certain characters (e.g., Power Rangers) were not allowed • Almost half of teachers stopped or redirected boys' dramatic play daily or several	Strengths: • Clear definition of terms provided - promotes credibility • Good sample size- promotes credibility • Data analysis for quantitative data clearly explained- good level of transparency

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| | | | Practices Questionnaire, a self-developed instrument designed by the researchers. The face and content validity was tested through a pilot study.

Surveyed 98 teachers of 4-year-olds about dramatic play in their classrooms and about their attitudes and practices about rough-and-tumble play. Their definition included superhero play. | the qualitative data but does not explicitly say. | times weekly compared to 29% teachers stopping girls
• Boys engaged in superhero play and play fighting significantly more often than girls
• A strong ambivalence among pre-K teachers about what types of play are acceptable and not acceptable, and what the function of R&T is for children
• Teacher- supplied play themes are deemed valuable but child-initiated ones such as superhero are viewed as problematic
• Teachers felt their attitudes towards R&T play were mostly informed by their coursework as EY educators. Several teachers expressed interest in further training and development in this area | • Direct quotes provided- credibility

Limitations:
• Conducted in America in one state- limits transferability
• Unclear how many participants completed the interviews or what the interview questions were- limits dependability, credibility and confirmability
• Unclear which method of data analysis used for qualitative section- limits credibility and confirmability |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Bauman (2015) | USA | 1 transitional kindergarten teacher and | Qualitative self-study | Video and audio data were | The findings were organised into two stories demonstrating gun play (these had been video | Strengths:
• Detailed information on participant provided |

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		17 children in the class. 8 children in the class who regularly engage in gun and weapon play were purposely sampled. Study was conducted in America	Gun play interactions were videoed. Multiple observations in the setting indoors and outdoors were carried out as well as interviews with the children to better understand their perspective on weapon and gun play. Another type of interview was carried out during the children's play sequences to examine how they were experiencing the play. Reflective journaling was used to keep a record of the development of the play and allow	transcribed. First cycle coding (descriptive coding, simultaneous coding and emotion coding) was used to find common themes in the data. Data was then code mapped to compare the themes.	recorded) with teacher reflections. • Gun play provided opportunities for practicing language in an easy-to-follow narrative (building weapons). They used repetitive sentence structures and common labels for resources Children were asked why they liked playing with weapons: • All responded that it was fun • 2 said they played because others did • One said "I don't know why. I think because other kids like to play with me." (building connections) Children were asked if they were allowed to play guns at home or at school: • 7/8 were unsure for both settings	– promotes transferability and credibility • Evidence of reflexivity – promotes confirmability • Verbatim quotes included – provides credibility Limitations: • Single self- study – limits transferability

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			for reflection on researcher biases.		- Some alluded to playing when the teacher leaves / cannot see them The teacher had some rules about gun play: - No pointing weapons at other children - No physical contact of weapons and people - Only playing with those who are willing participants *These rules were developed in discussion with the children* The researcher reflected on their feelings towards gun play: - She felt that it is an injustice to children when they are "shamed and discouraged from engaging in an act that comes as naturally to them as playing house" (p. 196) "I believe there is true value that occurs in this play, especially when supported by an experienced teacher." (p. 196)	

					• In the past the teacher had largely ignored the gun play • "I recognize that children living in very different contexts where violence and trauma are a significant part of their experiences will have variant developmental needs, and their teachers may respond to these needs with a different set of beliefs and rules regarding gun and weapons play." (p. 196) • "if the children are going to engage in the pretend gunplay anyway, then I want to be able to provide them with a structure that is going to facilitate their pretend gunplay experiences and the lessons learned from it." (p. 201) • She noticed that children did not talk about pretend guns in the same way that they spoke about real guns • She noticed that she could go beyond the 'bang, bang,	

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					you're dead' narrative and explore social and emotional topics such as being aware of each other's feelings in the play • She noticed co-operation and responsibility	
Rosen (2015)	UK	6 early years educators at a UK nursery interviewed in the first phase 10 interviewed at the end	18 month ethnographic study investigating pretend physical violence (including weapon play) Interviews and observations used to examine practitioners' views towards 'violently-themed play' in a local authority nursery in England	Bakhtinian analysis	Practitioners spoke about: • Trying to keep children safe but also letting them take risks • Concerns over the danger aspects • Finding it hard to map the children's interests in such play to the early learning goals • Finding it difficult to know how to extend this play and build on it • Feeling concerned about needing to 'move children on' who were getting 'stuck' in this play- these children were often labelled as accountable for their 'inappropriate' interests	Strengths: • Detailed application of theory to findings • Unique perspective offered through chosen data analysis method • Direct quotes used to support findings – promotes credibility Limitations: • Does not explain data analysis process in detail – limits creditability • Small sample size – limits transferability Does not give much detail on participant

					Concern about school readiness and ensuring children's learning corresponded with that	demographics – limits transferability
					• Concern about school readiness and ensuring children's learning corresponded with that • Some staff found it uncomfortable to allow children to play at such themes, wanting to preserve their innocence • Worry that such play might normalise aggressive masculinity • Rosen concluded that violently-themed play is permitted in policy, but taboo in practice	• demographics – limits transferability • Lacks reflexivity – limits confirmability
Delaney (2017)	USA	A female preschool teacher and class of 15 pre-schoolers in America	Qualitative, interpretive case study of a class of US pre-schoolers and their teacher Used interviews and field notes as well as photos over a period of one academic year to	Use of NVIVO and coding for themes. Unsure on precise data analysis method Use of Foucault's theory	• The teacher's approach was restrictive, at the same time as allowing the play if it was out-of-sight • The teacher's values and beliefs framed her understanding of the play. She felt that their play represented real violence rather than children making sense of the world around	Strengths: • High level of transparency • Triangulation across data sources • Some direct quotes included- promotes credibility • Evidence of researcher reflexivity- promotes confirmabillity

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			explore how the teacher and the children made sense of incongruous practices of 'playing at violence' at school. Use of vignettes in the paper to illustrate findings.		them. Her personal discomfort placed limits on the children • The teacher also viewed the play as a Pandora's box for conversations that she was not prepared for or did not feel equipped to have about weapons and violence. The teacher lacked support professionally on how to have these conversations • She felt that the play may be out of control and possibly dangerous • The district had a zero tolerance policy on playing at pretend violence and the teacher was afraid that allowing them to play in this way would put them at risk of punishment • The researcher made suggestions of an alternative perspective – that children were playing in this way to make sense of the world around them, or to	Limitations: • Single case study, in America- limits transferability • Unclear what questions were asked during teacher interviews which limits credibility

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					experience feeling powerful. Even with this understanding the teacher was conflicted • The researcher concluded that children used play to make sense of violent events including acting out bad guy scenarios and using pretend weapons. This was largely framed as unacceptable. • When the children did not have the space to discuss violent events and lockdown drills, the play seemed to increase • The researcher discussed how this incongruity between having to play the victim in lockdown drills, yet being unable to play at violence in their own ways denied them the opportunity to make sense of violent events	
Peterson et al. (2018)	Canada	Ten kindergarten and grade one teachers, three of	Qualitative – focus group discussions on rough and tumble play. This included weapon	Transcribed and analysed inductively, highlighted	They identified the following themes: R&T play is natural, but children's safety and external perceptions	Strengths: • Clear research questions and purpose

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| | | whom are Indigenous and grew up in or near the northern Canadian Indigenous communities where they are teaching.

All female bar one | and superhero play.

Focus group conversations were held with the questions:
 (1) What are kindergarten and grade one teachers' perspectives on various types of R&T play and the place of such play in classrooms? How do sociocultural differences across the group of teachers appear to influence teachers' perceptions?
(2) What are teachers' views of their roles vis-à-vis R&T play? | sentences and phrases.

Findings were member checked. | of teachers are concerns
• All teachers said the play was natural
• They observed that boys were more likely to engage in it
• They shared anecdotes of children making guns from items in their classroom
• Teachers expressed concern about the play turning into real aggression and the potential for injuries
• They also expressed concerns over external perceptions i.e that they may be seen as an incompetent teacher by allowing it as they are responsible for keeping children safe

Cultural conflicts regarding guns
• Some expressed conflict over the perspectives on guns in the urban communities v.s. those in the Ingenious community where they were | • Detail provided on the participants – promotes confirmability
• Transparent in providing the outline of the focus groups, links to the videos and papers discussed
• Data was member checked- promotes credibility and confirmability
• Verbatim quotes used- promotes credibility

Limitations:
• Definition unclear – limits credibility
• Small sample size and very specific culturally – limits transferability |

			Focus groups were audio recorded. Prior to the focus group sessions, a short literature review and two articles that were written for teachers on the topic of R&T play were given to the participants. They were asked questions in relation to the articles and the youtube videos.		teaching. In the Indigenous community guns are used for hunting. They spoke of recognising their own biases that weapons are always an issue for violence, e.g. the children can be pretending to be hunters shooting moose which is a part of their culture. This conflict was less apparent with teaches who lived in rural communities • Some had developed rules e.g. no guns pointed towards people, only animals • All teachers were in agreement about the negative influence of popular culture e.g movies and video games on children's dramatic play Teacher's role is to observe and set boundaries	

					• Emphasis on the need to keep all children safe but this being difficult in a big class. The need to be vigilant was highlighted • One teacher talked about watching for facial expressions to indicate whether children are OK / having fun or not • One teacher said that she does not allow the play because she has observed that many of the children in her class appear not to have learned how to read social cues and take turns in their play • Teachers talked about setting boundaries by setting specific classroom rules. One talked about co-constructing these with the children Teacher's role is to teach problem-solving and empathy

					All teachers agreed that it was important for children to learn to advocate for themselves but the would intervene if someone was getting hurt	
Wiwatowski et al. (2020)	Australia	8 early childhood teachers from 6 different kindergartens in Melbourne, Australia. All female with experience between 9 and 23 years working in early years.	Qualitative semi-structured interviews Investigated attitudes and responses towards superhero play at preschool investigated using semi structured interviews Focus is mainly on superhero play but considers the conflict scenarios	Thematic analysis using a combined inductive and deductive framework	Reported responses to superhero play included: • Intervening to stop children hurting each other, address concerns about aggression and dominance, making play unfair • Intervening to extend children's learning by supporting them to create their own storylines • Enacting cooling off periods • Employing a replacement approach / redirecting • Using an engagement approach to help support the play • Using a curriculum application approach to	Strengths: • Clear, accessible paper – transparency • Interview questions provided – credibility • Clear definition given to participants - credibility • Clear data analysis method stated- promotes confirmability Limitations: • Small sample size and in Australia- limits transferability • More focused on the responses to the play rather than the underpinning views

					grow their interest into something bigger • Using superhero play as a context for supporting children's social wellbeing and conflict resolution skills • Engaging in conversations about their play to encourage the children to create, express and act on their own ideas • Refraining from getting involved because they believed children did not want them to • They did not report using a prevention approach The study builds on Cupit's framework (2013), adding two novel approaches. The researchers acknowledge that teachers report using more than one type of approach which suggests it depends on the context.	

| | | | | | The study identified some barriers to supporting young children's superhero play such as some teachers believing that it is not a context for learning and is not productive. Some educators may not have enough knowledge about superhero play which can also present as a barrier. Some also feel that the play becomes too repetitive and they need to 'move the children on'. | |

Appendix B: Weight of evidence table

Study	Weight of Evidence A: Generic on quality of execution of study	Weight of Evidence B: Review specific on appropriateness of method	Weight of Evidence C: Review specific on focus/approach of study to review question
1. Doliopoulou (1998) A- Low/Medium B- Medium C- Medium D- Medium	**Transparency:** Purpose of the research is clear. Research questions link to literature review and theoretical background. Interview and questionnaire questions are provided. Sampling method not explained. Data analysis process was not explained. Does not include quotes from participants to support conclusions. **Accuracy:** This study acknowledges that it replicates work done by Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1987)- permission was gained from them to do this.	**Purposivity:** This study sought to find the views of parents and teachers through a qualitative design. The aims of the study were met through the research design.	**Utility:** This study examines parent and teacher views of war/superhero play and reports them separately. The current research is concerned with the views of preschool teacher/practitioners so this study is relevant in that regard. The participants are Greek and the current research is interested in the perspectives of UK practitioners. **Propriety:** Permission sought to replicate study. Ethical considerations not reported.

	A good sample size was achieved- 82 teachers and 77 parents. Sample was varied with participants from various districts of Athens with different socioeconomic backgrounds. However, little detail was provided other than that. The paper refers to "most" of the participants being interviewed as well as completing the questionnaire but does not specify how many. The findings are in line with the findings of other research. **Accessibility:** This study was easy to read and logically set out. **Specificity:** This study used questionnaires and interviews. Some evidence of triangulation- the views of parents and teachers were compared. Both were given opportunities to add information that they felt was relevant beyond the questions presented to them.		

	This study examines attitudes to war play and their definition appears to include superheroes within that. They do not provide an operationalised definition. No evidence of reflexivity.		
2. Logue and Harvey (2009) A- Medium/High B- Medium/High C- Medium D- Medium/High	**Transparency:** Purpose clearly explained in the introduction. Literature review and theoretical background provided. Definition of 'rough and tumble play' is provided – this is useful as it varies throughout the literature. Recruitment clearly explained as well as participant characteristics. Interview questions provided in article. Includes some quotes in answer to the interview questions. **Accuracy**: SPSS was used for quantitative data analysis.	**Purposivity:** This study met the research aims, with a large sample size. It used a mixture of qualitative and quantitative data.	**Utility:** Although the title of the paper and the content talks of active play and rough and tumble play, the authors state: "For purposes of the current study, the definition of *rough-and-tumble* play used by the ethologists was expanded to include superhero play." Therefore this study is relevant to the current research as it gathers views from preschool teachers on superhero play (included in this research as part of weapon and conflict play definition). The design was mixed-methods, however, the qualitative elements are relevant to the current research. **Propriety:**

	Preschool teachers completed the Preschool Teacher Beliefs and Practices Questionnaire, a self-developed instrument designed by the researchers. The face and content validity was tested through a pilot study. The themes identified are in line with the findings of other research. **Accessibility**: The paper was understandable though the quantitative results may have been easier to interpret had they been presented in a table format. **Specificity**: Sample of 98 teachers is good, and the type of setting varied between them, however all teachers were from one North Eastern state of America which may limit generalisability somewhat to other areas of America or the world. Nevertheless, detailed information on the context and participants is provided so that readers may compare to their own. Evidence of reflection on the definition of rough and tumble play.		Approval from the Human Subjects Research Committee was gained. Confidentiality was preserved.

| 3. Bauman (2015)

A- Medium/High
B- Medium
C- Low/Medium
D- Medium | **Transparency:**
Clear purpose and aim provided.

Detailed information provided on the context and setting.

Literature review and theoretical background provided.

Research questions link to literature review and theoretical background.

Data analysis steps explained.

Interview questions provided in Appendix.

Includes some quotes to support themes identified.

Accuracy:
This is a self-study. LaBoskey (2004) characteristics were taken into account.

As this is a self-study the generalisability may be limited, however it does provide a very detailed description of the context for the reader to be able to compare to their own. | **Purposivity:**
This study met the research aims.

This study gained children's views which informed the teachers view and practice, as per the aim. | **Utility:**
This study explores the reflections and perspective of an early years teacher and how their views on weapon play in their transitional kindergarten (stepping stone between pre-school and kindergarten) classroom evolved through her engagement. It does not gain the views of multiple members of staff (due to the self-study design) but it does focus on weapon play which very few studies have done. It is therefore somewhat relevant to the current research.

Propriety:
Reference was made to informing parents but no reference made to gaining the consent of the children to include them in the study.

Names are pseudonyms. |

	Accessibility: The paper is easy to read and understand. **Specificity**: Evidence of reflexivity and acknowledgement of potential bias. A reflective journal was kept. Several forms of detailed qualitative data were collected- observations, interviews with the children. Extracts from some transcripts are provided.		
4. Rosen (2015) A-Low/Medium B-Medium C- Low/Medium D-Low/Medium	**Transparency** Research aim was clear. Context was clearly defined. Methodology and data collection was explained clearly. Explains the Bakhtinian frame but this was not as clear and perhaps would benefit from some examples for the novice reader. Direct quotes included to support conclusions. No interview schedule included or transcripts.	**Purposivity:** Study aims were met by the design.	**Utility:** This study takes a different approach and uses a different framework and method of data analysis to the current research. However, at its core it is examining the perspectives of early years practitioners on 'violently themed play' which included weapon play. It is therefore relevant to the current research. **Propriety:** Ethical considerations were not written about.

	Accuracy Data analysis method was 'Bakhtinian interpretive analysis" however this was not explained in detail. Small sample size, however data was collected over 18 months. **Accessibility** This study used language that was complex. It was not as easy to follow as the others. **Specificity** Data gathered in different ways including formal and informal interviews with adults and children and observations. However it does not appear that child interviews were reported on in this paper. Lacks reflexivity. Data collection and analysis were appropriate to the design. Small sample size given the study design which may limit its generalisability.		Use of pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
5. Delaney (2017)	**Transparency:** The research aim is clear.	**Purposivity:**	**Utility:**

| A- Medium
B- Medium
C- Low/Medium
D- Medium | The research links to theoretical background and theory.

The teacher and child participants are carefully described.

'Playing at violence' is defined.

Some direct quotes are provided in the vignettes to illustrate the teacher's perspective.

Lack of detail provided about interview/discussion questions.

Accuracy:
Data analysed using NVIVO 8, frameworks of power theory and comic subjectivity theory. Coding methods were described.

The findings are in line with the findings of other research.

Small sample size given case study method. Based in America, where the culture around weapons is significantly different compared to the UK. | This study is a qualitative, interpretive case study of a pre-kindergarten class and their teacher. The design allowed for the research aim to be met. | This study is a case study examining 'playing at violence' in a pre-Kindergarten classroom, what the teacher's perspective was and how she responded to it. It is useful in that it provides very detailed vignettes and direct quotes from the teacher about her experiences of the children 'playing at violence'. The focus of the study is on the incongruity between children having to act like victims of violence by practising code red lockdown drills but then not being able to 'play at violence' due to a zero tolerance policy on such play. This part of the study is less directly relevant to the current research but does provoke interesting thought.

Propriety:
Ethical considerations are not mentioned but it is explained that this study was part of a larger research project so it is assumed that ethical protocols were followed.

Use of pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. |

	Accessibility: This paper was extremely logical and was easy to understand. It linked to theory throughout. **Specificity**: Lots of type of data collected through observation, interviews, etc. This was clearly explained. Evidence of researcher reflexivity. Triangulation of data across sources.		
6. Peterson et al. (2018) A-Medium B-Medium C-Medium D-Medium	**Transparency:** Purpose of the research is clear. Research questions link to literature review and theoretical background. The rationale for the study is explained but could be more detailed; "We invited these teachers to participate in this branch of the research because they are teaching in cultural contexts that have not been represented in previous research on R&T play"	**Purposivity**: The qualitative design with use of focus groups, discussion of papers and Youtube clips allowed generation of rich data The study sought the views of early years teachers. The research design met the study aims.	**Utility**: This study explores the views of early years teachers on their experiences of rough and tumble (including superhero and weapon) play in their settings. It is therefore relevant to the current research. **Propriety**: This study does not detail how informed consent was gained but this particular study is part of a larger research project. It is presumed that they have given their consent for this.

	Detailed information is provided about participants, and researchers.		All names of teachers and communities are pseudonyms.
	The focus group schedule is provided, and the Youtube video links that were shown.		
	Includes some quotes to support themes identified.		
	Accuracy: The themes identified are in line with the findings of other research.		
	Transcripts are not provided.		
	Sample is small and specific, so not generalisable to other populations necessarily. All except one participant were female.		
	Accessibility: The paper is easy to read and understand.		
	Specificity: Views were gathered through focus groups and transcribed data was member-checked		

	Title is about rough and tumble play but study talks about superhero play and guns as well – not sure on their exact definition		
7. Wiwatowski et al. (2020) A-Medium B- Medium C- Medium/High D-Medium	**Transparency:** Purpose of the research is clear with two research questions. Research questions link to literature review and theoretical background. Recruitment of participants clearly explained. Interview questions provided in Appendix. Quotes are provided to support themes but no full transcripts are included. **Accuracy**: Pilot study completed and interview questions amended as a result. Participants were provided with a clear definition of superhero play at the start of the interview. The themes identified are in line with the findings of other research.	**Purposivity:** The research design met the aims of the study, to answer the two research questions. The use of thematic analysis to map the responses onto a framework made it clear how aims had been met.	**Utility:** This study investigated how early years practitioners are responding to superhero play and looked their beliefs underpinning this. It is highly relevant as although it purely focuses on superheroes, its purpose and methodology are aligned with the current research. The study identifies the need for practitioners to engage in critical reflection to ensure their responses to superhero play are based on professional knowledge informed by research and theory. **Propriety:** Ethical conditions were met. This study has ethical approval from Melbourne University's Human Ethics Advisory Group. Pseudonyms used.

	Accessibility: This study was accessible and easy to understand. The themes are clearly linked to framework and the use of a table helps to summarise data. **Specificity**: This study uses a framework by Cupit (2013) to group interview responses by theme (type of response to play). Given the large amount of interview questions, the results section was very short, mostly focused on the response to the play rather than the attitudes towards it. This may be due to the demands of shortening the article for publication i.e. choosing the most salient points, but it felt as if some of the richness and detail was lost. A probability sampling technique was used. A small sample size of 8 early years practitioners all from Melbourne- may not be generalisable to other populations. All participants were female. Thematic analysis was used as method of data analysis but little detail given on the process.		

Appendix C: Final interview schedule

Introduction

I am a doctoral student investigating practitioner's perspectives on weapon and conflict play. I am here in a research capacity and am interested in your thoughts, feelings and experiences. In the write up of my findings, you will not be identified by individual name or setting name at any point, all responses will be carefully transcribed with the use of pseudonyms. This interview will last up to an hour. I will ask you open ended questions and encourage you to answer as fully as possible. As a researcher taking a neutral position, you should feel free to express your opinion without judgment. Please can you confirm that you have: read the information sheet, signed the consent form, and that you are willing to participate now and understand that this interview will be audio recorded. Are you happy to proceed?

WCP Definition

WCP refers to any such play where objects or imagined objects are used as weapons towards another person/ object (real or imagined). WCP may occur in different contexts e.g. war games, fantasy play or superhero battles etc. For the purposes of this research WCP is classified separately to rough and tumble play, and risky play.

Interview Questions

1. What does the term 'weapon and conflict play' mean to you?
    Provide definition to participant.
    a) *Have you read any books or articles about it?*

2. Does weapon and conflict play happen in your setting?
    a) *Can you give me an example?*
    b) *Do you notice differences in the children who do or do not tend to engage in this type of play? If so, why do you think this is?*

3. What sense do you, as an adult, make of weapon and conflict play?
    a) *Why are children interested in it? Why do they engage in it?*
    b) *Do you think it's any different to other kind play?*

4. How do you respond to this type of play?
    a) *Does your response differ with particular children or in different situations?*
    b) *How do the children tend to respond to your approach?*

5. What sense do you think the children might make from this kind of play?
    a) *Why do they do it?*

6. Are there any challenges or risks presented by this kind of play?
    a) *If so, how could these be mitigated?*
    b) *Can you give me an example?*
    c) *Do you think these risks are unique to weapon and conflict play?*

7. Are there any opportunities presented by this kind of play?
    a) *Why? How? In what circumstances?*
    b) *Can you give me an example?*
    c) *Do you think these opportunities are unique to weapon and conflict play?*

8. How do you think this play and your response to it aligns with the EYFS?
    a) *Do you think it aligns with the British Values?*

9. Does your setting have a policy on weapon and conflict play?
    a) *If so, what is it like, what's in it?*
    b) *If not, are you aware that other places might do?*
    c) *Do you think it's a useful policy?*

Vignettes

I am going to read some vignettes now. All vignettes are works of fiction. They depict children in a pre-school setting. I would like you to share your thoughts on:

a) How you might respond in this situation

b) Why you might respond in this way

1. Out of the corner of your eye you notice two children in the construction area, playing. There are no adults close by to them. One is hurriedly fixing Stickle Bricks together into the shape of what looks like a gun. They point it towards the other who ducks behind a unit. When the second child pops their head back up they are holding a long wooden block, unmistakably representing a gun too. The children cry out "peow, peow" simultaneously and begin to chase each other around the setting, laughing as they go.

2. Soren approaches you, eager to show you their Lego construction. "It's my superpower *wizard staff*. This bit on the top spins to get the power. This part is the light and it shoots the baddie with magic. It makes the baddie get zapped away into another world. It's got these bits on the side, that's how you hold it. We need to stop the baddies but we have to be careful or they might get us."

3. You notice Lola and Richard are playing in the home corner. They're both holding long columns of unifix cubes. Another child enters the area. You hear

Lola exclaiming "he's going to steal our pirate treasure! Richard replies "have you got your sword? Ok, good, let's get him!" They both wave their unifix cubes through the air as they lunge towards the intruder, much to the surprise of the child who looks worried and quickly runs away. Lola and Richard 'high five' each other, "the treasure is safe now, it's time to sail to the island."

4. In the outdoor area, a child approaches another with a large stick held in such a way that it looks like a gun, "I'm going to shoot your brains out!" they threaten, "and then you're going to die".

10. Is there anything else you would like to add?
    a) Is there anything that you feel I should have asked you about and I haven't?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION (to be completed before interview)

Qualification level	
Number of years teaching	
Age of children at setting	
How many children at setting	
How many hours they attend	
Type of setting e.g. forest school, day-nursery, term time only etc?	

Appendix D: Information sheets, consent forms and debrief sheet

RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION SHEET & CONSENT FORM FOR SETTING MANAGERS

May 2022
Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play
Louise Lazell
u2064592@uel.ac.uk

A member of staff at your setting is being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether you give consent for them to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what their participation would involve. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

Who am I?
My name is Louise Lazell. I am a postgraduate student at the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL) and am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that staff at your setting are being invited to participate in.

What is the purpose of the research?
I am conducting research into early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play within their settings to see what current views, attitudes and policies are.

Why has my setting been contacted?
To address the study aims, I am inviting qualified early years practitioners or teachers to take part in my research. Your setting meet the inclusion criteria as a recognised early years provider in [Local Authority].

What would my staff be invited to do?
If you agree to take part, a staff member will be asked if they would like to take part in an individual interview with the researcher. They will be asked questions about their perspective on weapon and conflict play in the early years, including their understanding of it and experiences of it in your setting. The interview will be like an

informal chat that should last between 40-60 minutes. It will be audio recorded. Interviews will take place at your setting in a face to face context, or via Microsoft Teams.

I will not be able to pay participants for their time, however, their involvement will be very valuable in helping to develop knowledge and understanding of how weapon and conflict play is perceived in early years settings in [Local Authority].

How will the information that my staff provide be kept secure and confidential?
Privacy and safety will be respected at all times.
- Anything discussed in the interview will remain confidential, except in the case of a safeguarding issue or disclosure when it would be the researcher's duty to report to the designated safeguarding lead
- Participants will not be identified by the data collected, on any material resulting from the data collected, or in any write-up of the research
- Audio files will be stored with anonymous codes, and deleted once transcribed fully.
- Participants will not be asked to name any children specifically.
- Any names inadvertently referred to during recorded interviews will be replaced with pseudonyms in the transcriptions.
- Password protected data will be securely stored on the UEL One Drive
- Personal contact details will be stored for a maximum of 3 months after data collection to allow for potential 'member checking'. This is when participants are offered to look at the findings to ensure they accurately reflect their contributions
- Personal contact details will be stored on the UEL one drive but in a separate file, with a different password to the data
- If data needs to be transferred this will be done via UEL secure email
- Research data will be anonymised through the removal of any identifying information and the use of pseudonyms
- Audio recordings will only be available to the researcher. Anonymised transcripts will be accessible to the researcher and her director of studies. It may be necessary for peers to read extracts once analysed, in order to check for validity. Examiners may need access to anonymised data.
- Data will be kept for a maximum of 3 years, in case it should be required by the university. After this, data will be deleted

For the purposes of data protection, the University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University processes this information under the 'public task' condition contained in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where the University processes particularly sensitive data (known as 'special category data' in the GDPR), it does so because the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information

about how the University processes personal data please see
www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/data-protection

What will happen to the results of the research?
The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publically available on UEL's online Repository. Findings may also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, professionals, public) through journal articles, presentations, talks, and posters. In all material produced, participants' identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify them personally. Pseudonyms will be used throughout and all identifying information will have been changed or removed.
You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided. Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Dr Miles Thomas for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

Who has reviewed the research?
My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?
If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

<div align="center">

Louise Lazell
U2064592@uel.ac.uk
If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor Dr Miles Thomas. School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: m.thomas@uel.ac.uk
or
Chair of School Research Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

</div>

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet. If you would be happy for staff at your setting to participate, please read and complete the consent form below.

PERMISSION FOR STAFF TO PARTICIPATE	Please initial
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet dated May 2022 for the above study and that I have been given a copy to keep.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that staff participation in the study is voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time, without explanation or disadvantage.	
I understand that if they withdraw during the study, their data will not be used.	
I understand that staff will have 3 weeks from the date of the interview to withdraw my data from the study.	
I understand that the interview will be recorded using audio-recording equipment	
I understand that personal information and data, including audio recordings and transcripts from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, to which I give my permission.	
It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research has been completed.	
I understand that short, anonymised quotes from interview/group level data may be used in material such as conference presentations, reports, articles in academic journals resulting from the study and that these will not personally identify me.	
I would like to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed and am willing to provide contact details for this to be sent to.	
I agree for staff at my setting to take part in the above study.	

Manager's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……
Manager's Signature

……
Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……
Researcher's Signature

……
Date:

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

May 2022
Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play
Louise Lazell
u2064592@uel.ac.uk

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what your participation would involve. Feel free to talk with others about the study (e.g., friends, family, etc.) before making your decision. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

Who am I?
My name is Louise Lazell. I am a postgraduate student at the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL) and am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that you are being invited to participate in.

What is the purpose of the research?
I am conducting research into early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play within their settings to see what current views, attitudes and policies are.

Why have I been invited to take part?
To address the study aims, I am inviting qualified early years practitioners or teachers to take part in my research. You are eligible to take part in the study if you:
- are an early years practitioner or teacher (holding a relevant qualification)
- currently working in an early years setting
- have been in position there for at least a year

It is entirely up to you whether you take part or not, participation is voluntary.

What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?
If you agree to take part, you will be asked to take part in an individual interview with the researcher. You will be asked questions about your perspective on weapon and conflict play in the early years, including your understanding of it and your experiences of it in your setting. The interview will be like an informal chat that should last

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between 40-60 minutes. It will be audio recorded. Interviews can take place at your setting in a face to face context, or if you prefer (or as might be necessary due to Covid-19), they can be held on Microsoft Teams.

I will not be able to pay you for participating in my research, but your participation would be very valuable in helping to develop knowledge and understanding of how weapon and conflict play is perceived in early years settings in [Local Authority].

Can I change my mind?

Yes, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw without explanation, disadvantage or consequence. If you would like to withdraw from the interview at you can do so by contacting the researcher at u2064592@uel.ac.uk (or, if during the interview, tell her you would not like to continue). If you withdraw, your data will not be used as part of the research.

Separately, you can also request to withdraw your data from being used even after you have taken part in the study, provided that this request is made within *3 weeks* of the data being collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible).

Are there any disadvantages to taking part?

Taking part in this research should not cause any psychological distress but it is acknowledged that the concept of weapon and conflict play may be uncomfortable for some. Information about supportive services will be provided.

How will the information I provide be kept secure and confidential?

Your privacy and safety will be respected at all times.

- Anything discussed in the interview will remain confidential, except in the case of a safeguarding issue or disclosure when it would be the researcher's duty to report to the designated safeguarding lead
- Audio files will be stored with anonymous codes, and deleted once transcribed fully.
- You will not be asked to name any children specifically.
- Any names inadvertently referred to during recorded interviews will be replaced with pseudonyms in the transcriptions.
- You will not be identified by the data collected, on any material resulting from the data collected, or in any write-up of the research
- Password protected data will be securely stored on the UEL One Drive
- Personal contact details will be stored for a maximum of 3 months after data collection to allow for potential 'member checking'. This is when participants are offered to look at the findings to ensure they accurately reflect their contributions
- Personal contact details will be stored on the UEL one drive but in a separate file, with a different password to the data
- If data needs to be transferred this will be done via UEL secure email
- Research data will be anonymised through the removal of any identifying information and the use of pseudonyms

- Audio recordings will only be available to the researcher. Anonymised transcripts will be accessible to the researcher and her director of studies. It may be necessary for peers to read extracts once analysed, in order to check for validity. Examiners may need access to anonymised data.
- Data will be kept for a maximum of 3 years, in case it should be required by the university. After this, data will be deleted

For the purposes of data protection, the University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University processes this information under the 'public task' condition contained in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where the University processes particularly sensitive data (known as 'special category data' in the GDPR), it does so because the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information about how the University processes personal data please see www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/data-protection

What will happen to the results of the research?
The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publically available on UEL's online Repository. Findings may also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, professionals, public) through journal articles, presentations, talks, and posters. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally. Pseudonyms will be used throughout and all identifying information will have been changed or removed.
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Who has reviewed the research?
My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?
If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Louise Lazell

U2064592@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted,
please contact my research supervisor Dr Miles Thomas. School of Psychology,
University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: m.thomas@uel.ac.uk
or
Chair of School Research Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology,
University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

PARTIIPANT CONSENT FORM

University of East London

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play
Louise Lazell
u2064592@uel.ac.uk

	Please initial
I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet dated May 2022 for the above study and that I have been given a copy to keep.	
I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, without explanation or disadvantage.	
I understand that if I withdraw during the study, my data will not be used.	
I understand that I have 3 weeks from the date of the interview to withdraw my data from the study.	
I understand that the interview will be recorded using audio-recording equipment.	
I understand that my personal information and data, including audio recordings and transcripts from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, to which I give my permission.	
It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research has been completed.	
I understand that short, anonymised quotes from my interview/group level data may be used in material such as conference presentations, reports, articles in academic journals resulting from the study and that these will not personally identify me.	
I would like to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed and am willing to provide contact details for this to be sent to.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……

Participant's Signature

………

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

……

Researcher's Signature

……

Date

………

PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET

Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play
Louise Lazell
u2064592@uel.ac.uk

Thank you for participating in my research study on early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play. This document offers information that may be relevant in light of you having now taken part.

How will my data be managed?

The University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. More detailed information is available in the Participant Information Sheet, which you received when you agreed to take part in the research. The audio recording of our interview and its transcript has been stored securely using a randomised code. Your code is _____ should you wish to withdraw your data. Data can only be withdrawn in the first 3 weeks following interview, as after this time the analysis process will have started.

What will happen to the results of the research?

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publically available on UEL's online Repository. Findings may also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, professionals, public) through journal articles, presentations, talks, and posters. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally. Pseudonyms will be used throughout and all identifying information will have been changed or removed.

You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Dr Miles Thomas for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

What if I been adversely affected by taking part?

It is not anticipated that you will have been adversely affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise distress or harm of any kind. Nevertheless, it is possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may have been challenging, distressing or uncomfortable in some way. If you have been affected in any of those ways, you may find the following resources/services helpful in relation to obtaining information and support:

LA Talking Therapies	*Local details removed to protect confidentiality*	
MIND charity for general wellbeing	*Local details removed to protect confidentiality*	
Armed Forces Charities	https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/armed-forces-community/charities-support/	Links to charities that support armed forces communities

Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?
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or
Chair of School Research Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology,
University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking part in my study

Appendix E: Examples of transcription with initial coding

R= researcher, P= participant

Extract from Transcript 3 (Natalie)

R: That's interesting, OK. What sense do you, as an adult, make of weapon and conflict play?	
P: I think it's depends on what the context is that they're playing. If they're just running around and they're all giggling and they're laughing and it's a bit like "I'm going to shoot you with the Stickle brick gun I've just created here" and it's all sort of light hearted, for want of a better description, because I know obviously they don't get that context. But there are times when it can be much more aggressive play, and forceful play and that's when I, would really, I would try to separate that and take the children away from each other at that point and remove any guns that they've made.	Context matters OK, if light-hearted OK if all having fun Concerns about aggression Stop the play if aggressive Remove the weapons
R: Yeah.	
P: Because the aggression can then turn into hurt, actual, physically hurting each other. So within the context of which they're playing, I would never actively encourage them to play with it. But within the context of how they are playing would determine whether I disperse them and stopped them playing it or just actually let them, follow out that role play.	Risk of physical harm Don't want to encourage WCP Response depends on context Watch and see
R: Yeah, sure.	
P: Ultimately, if they're just running around and they're re-enacting things that they're watching on the telly, they're not really doing any harm in my view,	WCP can be harmless
R: Yeah.	
P: but if they're chasing down and being quite aggressive to each other, then that's when it can become quite nasty.	WCP promotes aggression
R: Yeah, sure, OK. Why do you think children are interested in it? What is it about it that makes them want to engage in it?	
P: I suppose the action… when they're watching the television or something, because this is where it all stems from, isn't it? It's things that they've watched or things that they've seen themselves anyway, children who are particularly active children… It's much more, it's much more lively, isn't it?	Children enjoy the action and physicality of WCP Influence of media
R: Yeah.	
P: It's much more they're in, they're out, they're up, they're down there all about. It's a very whole body experience of playing, and I think that's where it sort of mainly stems from and they watch these action type things and we are talking right down to like I said PJ masks earlier, is chasing the baddies and they don't have guns but they chase, they're still chasing baddies and having a result and there's lots and lots of cartoons and things that are based from very small that	Children enjoy the action and physicality of WCP Influence of media

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could be interpreted. I mean even Spiderman has toddler based spider.	

Extract from Transcript 4 (Julie)

R: Ah, we'll come to that later. OK, alright and so the second question is, does weapon and conflict play happen in your setting?	
P: Yes.	
R: Can you give me an example?	
P: Uh, so I've got a little boy who is he likes Star Wars so he tells me. I'm not gonna remember the names, but he tells me the names of the characters that he wants me to play and the colour of my lightsaber. We've got like bed planks, so he uses the long plank of wood as his lightsaber. And gives me one. And then we basically pretend to, you know, fight each other with such light sabers, um or it's, er, superheroes, so they're using their hands or Elsa as well. The girls would do their freezing with their Elsa. So we make the sounds like "tttssshhh" and like "pow pow" with our hands or they'll make like fists. But we have the rule that you, it's actions and sounds, no touching. So they're allowed to do the action of you know "dush, dush, pow, pow" and make the sounds, but they're not allowed to hit each other and they're only allowed to do it with those that want to play. So they can't just go round, you know, hitting everybody, shooting, and you know hitting everyone with planks. Um, which those rules, they're actually quite good with those rules thinking about it now, um. It's only if they accidentally get too close they might hit each other but they don't do it deliberately. Erm and then guns as well, so the same little boy that does Star Wars, his dad's in the army so he also has guns sometimes as well, and that's usually a smaller plank that he holds, like um, not like a pistol but like a rifle.	Hands as weapons Girls WCP is magical Rules: Actions and sounds, no touching Children respect the rules Army parents
R: Yeah, OK. And so you kind of already touched, touched on it there, but do you notice differences in the children who do or do not tend to engage in this type of play?	
P: Hmm. So at the moment it's the older children engaging in the play and it's, majority of it is boys. Superheroes and Star Wars, or just generally just guns. The girls, if a girl, sometimes the girls do get involved. Another cohort of children that I had, I had boys telling me that girls couldn't be soldiers.	Older children more likely to play WCP than younger Boys engage more in WCP
R: Ahhh.	
P: They went to school last year. Um, but the girls, they don't, they don't really get involved with the boys. If anything, it's more, more to do with Elsa. Interestingly with the girls with Elsa, they either want her long hair or they want her cape before they want her power. Um, so it's probably slightly	Boys engage more in WCP Girls WCP is magical

different. Um, and then for the younger children theirs is more rough and tumble at the moment.	
R: OK.	
P: Erm, they don't, so thinking about the younger children because we've got a two to four room.	
R: OK, yeah.	
P: The two year olds don't really interact with the older children doing the war games, um, weapon play. They're kind of still doing like their play on their own or in the construction area with the trains and cars.	Older children more likely to play WCP than younger
R: Yeah, OK, that's interesting. Do you, Do you have any thoughts as to why you tend to see more of the boys engaging in it compared to the girls, any kind of guesses or hypotheses?	
P: Yeah, I think it's superheroes. They probably watch a lot of superhero things, and superheroes tend to be more boy-led, there are obviously more girl superheroes coming out now, but it's still very much male-dominated. And I think boys, boys, from my research of how boys learn, they're more active, so they like movement, they like moving and the weapon play allows them to move around because they've got to fight each other and you know, fight the baddy and be the goodie and do all the flying round, whereas girls like you know being at a table, being calm and drawing.	Influence of media Boys learn differently to girls Boys need physical play
R: Yeah, yeah.	
P: Um so I think I think that's probably where it comes from, and I suppose like schematic play as well, depending on what their schemas are, probably plays a role in it as well.	Schemas
R: Yeah, OK, do you think um, the weapon play happens more indoors or outdoors or in any particular area of the setting?	
P: Hmm, I probably see it more indoors because that's where the resources are, I thinking about it, actually. So the wooden planks that they use are inside. They do transport them outside. But most of the time actually thinking about it now, it's probably more inside than it is outside. Um, which is something that I will observe more of now.	WCP happens more indoors
R: Yeah, OK. My next question is. What sense do you, as an adult, make of the weapon and conflict play? Why do you think it happens? Why? Why are the children interested in it?	
P: Umm, I think that they're trying to figure out right and wrong because a lot of the talk around it is goodies versus baddies. Now I'm a goody and they're a baddie. We've got to catch the baddie. Which sometimes turns into like police, and then they're taking the baddies to jail,	Children are exploring morality Storylines
R: OK.	

P: Um and I think, yeah, so I think they're, understanding the wider world, but in their fantasy play in the, in the things that they know. So the things that they're watching, observing, reading, whatever their parents do for a living. They are, trying to figure out and plus it's cooperative play as well, so they are acting out a narrative with their friends and leading off of each other as well. So usually there is a leader who, who tends to lead the play, erm, but most of the time they go with the flow of it as well. So if somebody wants to, I don't know, they keep going to like different countries at the moment so they'll go "we're going to Africa, we're going to Austria!"	WCP as expressing and working through scenarios and experiences (making sense of the world around them?) Storylines Opportunities for children to work together
R: Wow!	
P: I know I, I don't know why I haven't quite figured out where they where it's coming from yet, but the other children will play along with it as well so they're all, able to, uh, I suppose, compromise and then negotiate um. And then, um, I suppose you know, talking about people dying as well comes a part of it. If they've shot somebody, then they're like, "oh, they died." So then you get that learning opportunity from it as well. Yeah, I think that's it.	Compromise and negotiation Exploring the concept of death

Extract from Transcript 8 (Catherine)

R: And so have you ever read any books or articles about weapon play?	
P: Yeah, erm, a lot, I did an essay based upon it on my, well, cos I'm degree level.	EYPs doing research
R: Yeah?	
P: So when I went back to university to do my level 5, we did a bit of a, a dissertation about it as well. So and, and I think because it's so out there now in the news and the public and social media, and you always hear about stabbings and you always, you know, children are driving in the car on the way to school and they're hearing that on the radio. I mean, things do happen and it's explaining to the children that these things do happen in a in a sugar-coated way.	EYPs doing research Influence of media Can't avoid exposure to violence
R: Yeah	
P: But also and, and taking it very seriously.	
R: Yeah	
P: But I also feel they should be allowed to be those superheroes. *Become* those people, you know, whoever it may be, a Marvel character or whatever power they have, because again, that's enriching their play, but it's sensitively, with the wording they use, which is my thing, personally. I have no problem with them pretending to make guns. Erm, as long as they don't use the wording of, "I'm going to kill you" and "I'm going to…" those, they're the kind of things for me that make it a little bit different.	OK, so long as no concerning language WCP SHOULD be allowed Construction of weapons is OK WCP allows for taking on a new identity
R: Yeah	

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P: Again, also because that kind of play is very good for children that are maybe suffering in a different kind of background. So their expression of being able to pretend to be someone else, they're able to put themselves in a position where they're not them and they can maybe re-enact a story that we need to know about as such, so we've got that bigger picture as well.	WCP allows for taking on a new identity WCP as expressing and working through scenarios and experiences (making sense of the world around them?)
R: Yes definitely. And I think there's some of the questions there that I, I've got kind of got for later. We'll definitely kind of come back to that and allow you to expand a little bit more because I think all those points are really important. But it sounds like you've got an interest in it yourself?	
P: I mean, yeah, I used to work as well, before I worked here, I worked at [previous setting]; it doesn't exist anymore. But it was a nursery in [borough] and we had one at [town] Barracks.	
R: Right. OK.	
P: So our parents were all Army parents.	Army parents
R: Right, Yeah.	
P: So, and guns aren't necessarily a bad thing. They can be, they're there for a purpose as well and obviously we, a lot of our parents were army parents so they saw guns as a, you know a protection mechanism as well.	Legitimate use of weapons
R: Yeah	
P: So it's, it's seeing, you've gotta judge who you've got in your setting as well and, and go from there and see what, what in what context is being used in, I think. You know that for me, that's how I see it.	Context-dependent whether to allow WCP
R: OK. So the second question is does weapon and conflict play happen at your setting?	
P: Yeah. I, some, some ladies don't necessarily like it, but personally I don't mind it as, as I said, as long as the language isn't sort of horrible to another child so they could then become upset by, them saying "I'm going to kill you" you know, "you're dead." That kind of scenario might not be very nice for that child to hear. So letting them make a gun out of Lego is absolutely fine because it is an object that they might see on you know,or a different type of weapon maybe, inflict it somewhere else, like a pirate sword. Or you just go down a different, different role, don't you? And act on impulse there and then with the children.	Differences across practitioners' approach in the same setting OK, so long as no concerning language Construction of weapons is OK Children are constructing things they have seen
R: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.	
P: You know that you know them as well. Like when you've worked with them such a long time, you know what their interests are. So you can sort of spin it and it will be, like, I don't know, it might be girls as well. But, you know, like Elsa, she freezes people into being frozen.	Importance of knowing your children well Girls WCP tends to be magical
R: Yeah.	

P: So, so you can take it that way and, and you know, you maybe you could make a gun that just turns people into being frozen. So it hasn't got be about killing that person.	Changing the play
R: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. There's lots, there's different weapons. It's not just a gun with a bullet, is it?	
P: No, exactly.	
R: And so it happens here and what, what kind of examples can you give me? So they build guns out of Lego?	
P: Yeah, yeah, Duplo bricks, erm Maga Snaps- we have these like different shapes with magnets in and they can make, make those. They're really good. Again in imaginative play, I mean, in the garden I'd say is a lot more that comes out with lots of, actually with the boys, they like to do that superhero play more I'd say in the garden, they've got more space to jump and freely move about.	Construction of weapons More space outside for WCP?
R: Yep.	
P: What was I going to say about that? Uh, it's gone now.	
R: I was just asking kind of asking for examples…	
P: Yeah. Just trying to think of…. Yeah because when I when I did my dissertation and they were saying about children that make guns and there was a lady that kept taking everything away from the children at the time and she would take that away because it's making a gun. You take a stick away because it, you're thinking it's a gun, then they use their fingers. You can't take them away.	EYPs doing research Research says its OK You can't ever really stop WCP
R: Nope.	
P: So again, you've got kind of allow it. And I think the more you allow it, the less they kind of do it because they don't see it as a forbidden thing, I think, personally.	You can't ever really stop WCP
R: Yeah	
P: But yeah. Yeah I think I think the children should be able to explore it but within reason, again with that language, you know, and how they're playing as a group, if it's getting too rough, you know, it's monitoring that behaviour as well, isn't it? Or if it's a child that *only* makes guns when they're here, that's another could be another issue. So there's or you know looking at the bigger picture now we have to, or other weapons, you know if they're starting to think, or use the language or you know, maybe language of 'bombs' and things like that, you know, start to hone in on that. But again, we have records that we can make and, and go down the right avenues.	OK, if no concerning language Watch and see Risk of physical harm Children engaging solely in WCP Language used can be a safeguarding concern

Appendix F: Ethics review decision

University of
East London

| **School of Psychology Ethics Committee**

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

For research involving human participants
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and
Educational Psychology |

Details	
Reviewer:	**Melanie Vitkovitch**
Supervisor:	**DR MILES THOMAS**
Student:	**LOUISE ELIZABETH LAZELL**
Course:	**Prof Doc in Educational and Child Psychology**
Title of proposed study:	**Early years practitioners and weapon play**

Checklist (Optional)			
	YES	**NO**	**N/A**
Concerns regarding study aims (e.g., ethically/morally questionable, unsuitable topic area for level of study, etc.)	☐	☐	☐
Detailed account of participants, including inclusion and exclusion criteria	☒	☐	☐
Concerns regarding participants/target sample	☐	☒	☐
Detailed account of recruitment strategy	☒	☐	☐
Concerns regarding recruitment strategy	☐	☒	☐
All relevant study materials attached (e.g., freely available questionnaires, interview schedules, tests, etc.)	☒	☒	☐

Study materials (e.g., questionnaires, tests, etc.) are appropriate for target sample	☒	☐	☐
Clear and detailed outline of data collection	☐	☒	☐
Data collection appropriate for target sample	☒	☐	☐
If deception being used, rationale provided, and appropriate steps followed to communicate study aims at a later point	☐	☐	☒
If data collection is not anonymous, appropriate steps taken at later stages to ensure participant anonymity (e.g., data analysis, dissemination, etc.) – anonymisation, pseudonymisation	☒	☒	☐
Concerns regarding data storage (e.g., location, type of data, etc.)	☒	☐	☐
Concerns regarding data sharing (e.g., who will have access and how)	☐	☒	☐
Concerns regarding data retention (e.g., unspecified length of time, unclear why data will be retained/who will have access/where stored)	☐	☒	☐
If required, General Risk Assessment form attached	☒	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks/burdens to participants have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☒	☐	☐
Any physical/psychological risks to the researcher have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise	☒	☐	☐
If required, Country-Specific Risk Assessment form attached	☐	☐	☒
If required, a DBS or equivalent certificate number/information provided	☒	☐	☐
If required, permissions from recruiting organisations attached (e.g., school, charity organisation, etc.)	☒	☐	☐
All relevant information included in the participant information sheet (PIS)	☒	☐	☐
Information in the PIS is study specific	☒	☐	☐
Language used in the PIS is appropriate for the target audience	☒	☐	☐
All issues specific to the study are covered in the consent form	☒	☐	☐

Language used in the consent form is appropriate for the target audience	☒	☐	☐
All necessary information included in the participant debrief sheet	☒	☐	☐
Language used in the debrief sheet is appropriate for the target audience	☒	☐	☐
Study advertisement included	☐	☒	☐
Content of study advertisement is appropriate (e.g., researcher's personal contact details are not shared, appropriate language/visual material used, etc.)	☒	☐	☐

Decision options	
APPROVED	Ethics approval for the above-named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice), to the date it is submitted for assessment.
APPROVED - BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES	In this circumstance, the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box at the end of this form once all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to the supervisor. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records. Minor amendments guidance: typically involve clarifying/amending information presented to participants (e.g., in the PIS, instructions), further detailing of how data will be securely handled/stored, and/or ensuring consistency in information presented across materials.
NOT APPROVED - MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED	In this circumstance, a revised ethics application must be submitted and approved before any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application. Major amendments guidance: typically insufficient information has been provided, insufficient consideration given to several key aspects, there are serious concerns regarding any aspect of the project, and/or serious concerns in the candidate's ability to ethically, safely and sensitively execute the study.

Decision on the above-named proposed research study

Please indicate the decision:	APPROVED - MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES

Minor amendments

Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

I note that the Local Authority permission letter refers to the need for families etc agreement, and also contact with XXX. I assume the latter will be contacted and permission confirmed, but I am unclear why families etc need to give permission for the research, since the study does not require the practitioner participants to refer to specific children. Please talk over with supervisor and then clarify with Local Authority the need for this (before commencing).

I was unclear how specific participants will be invited to participate, once the Local Authority provided settings have been randomly selected. Is there a poster/broad invite to go out, so that interested practitioners can contact you by email, for example, and then be sent the more detailed invitation letter? Please discuss how best to do this with supervisor, and Local Authority.

Good attention to data management. However, aim to use encrypted audio device/s, and consider the deletion of audio recordings as soon as possible (once transcribed), also from UEL one drive and any other temporary storage device (given people are potentially identifiable).

I advise storing/saving the audio recordings using an anonymised random code (which transcripts can have also). You can give code to participants (e.g., in debrief letter) in case they later want to withdraw their recording.   Suggest reassure participants (e.g., in information sheet or consent form) that audio files will be stored with anonymous code, and deleted once transcribed fully, and that any names inadvertently referred to during recorded interview will be replaced with pseudonyms in the transcribings.   If you think relevant, uou might want to indicate on information sheet that participants will not need to refer to any children specifically.

Ensure any signed printed consent forms are kept separately in locked storage eg., locker. Likewise, contact details.   Good that these are being kept in different file to audio recordings and transcripts – hence no names linked with the coded data.

Major amendments

Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

N/A		

Assessment of risk to researcher

Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?	YES ☒	NO ☐
	If no, please request resubmission with an **adequate risk assessment.**	

If the proposed research could expose the <u>researcher</u> to any kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard, please rate the degree of risk:

HIGH	Please **do not approve a high-risk** application. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not be approved on this basis. If unsure, please refer to the Chair of Ethics.	☐
MEDIUM	Approve but include appropriate recommendations in the below box.	☐
LOW	Approve and if necessary, include any recommendations in the below box.	☐
Reviewer recommendations in relation to risk (if any):	**N/A**	

Reviewer's signature

Reviewer: (Typed name to act as signature)	Melanie Vitkovitch
Date:	01/02/2022

This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE

For the researcher and participants involved in the above-named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Research Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

For a copy of UEL's Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard.

Confirmation of minor amendments
(Student to complete)

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data

Student name: (Typed name to act as signature)	*LOUISE ELIZABETH LAZELL*
Student number:	U2064592
Date:	24/02/2022

Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed if minor amendments to your ethics application are required

School of Psychology Ethics Committee

REQUEST FOR TITLE CHANGE TO AN ETHICS APPLICATION

For BSc, MSc/MA and taught Professional Doctorate students

Please complete this form if you are requesting approval for a proposed title change to an ethics application that has been approved by the School of Psychology

By applying for a change of title request, you confirm that in doing so, the process by which you have collected your data/conducted your research has not changed or deviated from your original ethics approval. If either of these have changed, then you are required to complete an 'Ethics Application Amendment Form'.

How to complete and submit the request

1	Complete the request form electronically.
2	Type your name in the 'student's signature' section (page 2).
3	Using your UEL email address, email the completed request form along with associated documents to Dr Jérémy Lemoine (School Ethics Committee Member): j.lemoine@uel.ac.uk
4	Your request form will be returned to you via your UEL email address with the reviewer's decision box completed. Keep a copy of the approval to submit with your dissertation.

Required documents

A copy of the approval of your initial ethics application.	**YES** ☒

Details

Name of applicant:	**LOUISE ELIZABETH LAZELL**
Programme of study:	**PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE IN EDUCATIONAL AND CHILD PSYCHOLOGY**
Title of research:	Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play: pedagogical challenges and opportunities
Name of supervisor:	**DR MILES THOMAS**

Proposed title change

Briefly outline the nature of your proposed title change in the boxes below	
Old title:	Early years practitioners and conflict play
New title:	Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play: pedagogical challenges and opportunities
Rationale:	The title written by the reviewer on my decision letter was abbreviated and did not match the title I provided

Confirmation

	YES	NO
Is your supervisor aware of your proposed change of title and in agreement with it?	☒	☐
Does your change of title impact the process of how you collected your data/conducted your research?	☐	☒

Student's signature

Student: (Typed name to act as signature)	**LOUISE ELIZABETH LAZELL**
Date:	**24/03/2023**

Reviewer's decision

Title change approved:	**YES** ☒	**NO** ☐
Comments:	**The title on the Ethics decision letter was incorrect.**	
Reviewer: (Typed name to act as signature)	**Dr Jérémy Lemoine**	
Date:	**27/03/2023**	

Appendix G: Local authority consent form

Please contact: Principal Educational Psychologist [named removed for
          confidentiality]

Your ref: --

Our ref: --

Date: 10 February 2022

Dear Louise

    Thank you for your letter requesting permission for you to undertake your thesis project exploring early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play.

    Subject to Ethical Approval by UEL's Ethics Committee and to agreement from participating early years settings or schools, the XXX EPS are happy to support you in undertaking your work in Local Authority. [Name removed] (XXX Council) will also need to endorse this. She is aware you will be approaching her.

    Please keep me updated about how your work is proceeding and discuss any potential ethical issues with me as they arise so that we can ensure that we are managing the work within the Local Authority context effectively and are providing you with appropriate support.

    Yours sincerely

    [Signature removed for confidentiality]
    Principal Educational Psychologist
    XXXXX Educational Psychology Service
    Email: XXXXX

UEL Data Management Plan
Completed plans <u>must</u> be sent to researchdata@uel.ac.uk for review

If you are bidding for funding from an external body, complete the Data Management Plan required by the funder (if specified).

Research data is defined as information or material captured or created during the course of research, and which underpins, tests, or validates the content of the final research output. The nature of it can vary greatly according to discipline. It is often empirical or statistical, but also includes material such as drafts, prototypes, and multimedia objects that underpin creative or 'non-traditional' outputs. Research data is often digital, but includes a wide range of paper-based and other physical objects.

Administrative Data	
PI/Researcher	Louise Elizabeth Lazell
PI/Researcher ID (e.g. ORCiD)	
PI/Researcher email	u2064592@uel.ac.uk
Research Title	Early years practitioners' perspectives on weapon and conflict play: pedagogical challenges and opportunities
Project ID	
Research start date and duration	September 2021- June 2023

Research Description	This research aims to explore the perspectives of early years practitioners towards weapon and conflict play within their settings. This type of play is contentious, with many settings upholding a zero tolerance policy. Literature suggests there are benefits to allowing this play; this study aims to investigate whether this is recognised in practice. Findings will add to the discourse around weapon and conflict play.
Funder	
Grant Reference Number (Post-award)	
Date of first version (of DMP)	04/02/2022
Date of last update (of DMP)	
Related Policies	Research Data Management Policy
Does this research follow on from previous research? If so, provide details	No
Data Collection	
What data will you collect or create?	Qualitative data will be collected from 10-15 participants in audio format (*.mp3, or *.mp4 if Teams interviews). Interviews are estimated to be between 40-60 minutes long. Transcripts will be in *.docx format. The researcher will collect demographic data e.g. age, gender and years of experience from participants, as well as data about the setting e.g. number of children on roll, number of staff and type of setting. This will recorded and stored in a spreadsheet separate to the data and transcripts themselves.
How will the data be collected or created?	Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with early years practitioners. These are planned to be face-to-face and take place at the participant's early years setting, however the option will be given to conduct the interview on Microsoft Teams, given potential Covid-19 restrictions.

	Participants will be given an information sheet detailing the procedure of the study, and how their data will be collected and stored. Participants must read this sheet and sign the consent form before proceeding. Please see ethics section below for more information on consent. A Dictaphone will be used to record participant's responses. After interview, the recording will be transferred via USB to the One Drive for secure storage. These will be transcribed manually at a later date and pseudonymised. Audio recordings will be deleted once full transcripts are complete. The data will be stored in a secure folder on the researcher's UEL One Drive using the date of the interview and pseudonym of the participant as the file title.
Documentation and Metadata	
What documentation and metadata will accompany the data?	A blank consent form, participant information sheet, debrief sheet and list of interview questions. A word document containing the file naming conventions will be stored alongside the data.
Ethics and Intellectual Property	
Identify any ethical issues and how these will be managed	**Informed Consent:** participants will be fully informed as to the nature of the research with a detailed information sheet and consent form. Questions will be welcomed at any stage. Withdrawal procedures will be explained. Participants may end the interview at any time and withdraw their participation. Data can be withdrawn up to 3 weeks after interview. I will seek informed consent for data collection and storage, as well as for sharing and archiving research data in the future (via the information sheet and consent form). **Psychological Distress:** The topic of conflict and weapons has the risk of being upsetting for some staff. They may have experienced distressing or traumatic events that may mean parts of the interview could be uncomfortable. It will be important to ask questions sensitively and to 'check in' on their wellbeing throughout as well as afterwards. The debrief form will signpost relevant support if required. **Confidentiality**: Only the researcher will know the identity of the participants and the schools they work at. In the transcripts and data analysis they will be referred to by pseudonyms. Demographic data will be gathered but no names or addresses of settings will be reported.

	Contact information for participants will be saved on UEL One Drive, accessible only to researchers, in the event that a participant wishes to withdraw. This will be a separate file from transcripts/ data analysis. I will follow guidelines from the UK data service on robust anonymisation and pseudonymisation techniques. To comply with data protection legislation and GDPR I will minimise any personal data collected and ensure its secure storage and deletion within the specified time frame. **Safeguarding:** if any concerns arise about children in the setting, the researcher will immediately contact the designated safeguarding lead. Upon entering the setting, the researcher will ensure they are informed of who this is.
Identify any copyright and Intellectual Property Rights issues and how these will be managed	None identified
Storage and Backup	
How will the data be stored and backed up during the research?	Audio recordings will be transferred from the device to the UEL one drive on the same day that they are recorded. These files will also be backed up in a password protected file on a laptop, on a password protected user account. The audio recording will then be deleted from the recording device. Transcripts will be stored in a separate folder and backed up on the UEL one drive. All files will <u>be encrypted.</u>
How will you manage access and security?	Only the researcher will have access to the raw data via password. Audio recordings and pseudonymised transcripts will be accessible to the researcher and her director of studies. It may be necessary for peers to read extracts once analysed, in order to check for validity, but these will contain no identifying data. Use of secure links via UEL OneDrive for Business will be used.
Data Sharing	
How will you share the data?	Raw/original data will not be shared. Anonymised transcripts may be made available upon request for up to 2 years post-completion of the research. The completed thesis will be made available RE the UEL repository so that knowledge generated can be disseminated.

Are any restrictions on data sharing required?	None
Selection and Preservation	
Which data are of long-term value and should be retained, shared, and/or preserved?	The anonymised transcripts may be of use to future researchers but will only be kept for up to 3 years post-generation of them.
What is the long-term preservation plan for the data?	Pseudonymised data (interview transcripts) will be kept until August 2025, two years after the researcher is expected to finish their current university studies, in case it should be required by the university. It will be kept a password protected, encrypted hard drive. My director of studies will liaise with me should the transcripts be required by later students. Data is not planned to be kept for longer than 3 years post-collection.
Responsibilities and Resources	
Who will be responsible for data management?	The researcher, Louise Lazell
What resources will you require to deliver your plan?	A dictaphone, access to laptop for data analysis, access to Microsoft Teams in the event that interviews have to take place online
Review	
	Please send your plan to researchdata@uel.ac.uk **We will review within 5 working days and request further information or amendments as required before signing**
Date: 28/02/2022	Reviewer name: Penny Jackson Assistant Librarian (Research Data Management)

Appendix I: Extracts from research diary

17.06.22- First interview (face to face)
- This went well I think! I enjoyed the process despite being a little nervous at the start
- I need to remember to emphasise on the first question that we are thinking about WCP in terms of a *definition*
- Remember to stay neutral, be aware of biases creeping in. I tried to keep my responses neutral but it can be tricky balance between wanting to encourage richer responses but not 'rewarding' particular responses!
- Can be difficult when participant seems to stray far from the topic, knowing when to bring them back without influencing answer or using leading questions

15.08.22- Literature review
- I have spent a long time carefully going through papers to look at which are relevant
  - I have decided that ones that ONLY speak about rough and tumble play are not relevant for my work because I am looking at weapon play. Some definitions include this within R&T but some do not so it means I have to read carefully e.g. Tannock 2008 sounded in principle like it was going to be really good but it only covered physical R&T type play

17.08.22- Literature review
- I have almost finished going through papers today and analysing them. There a few that I have now decided not to include based on their lack of methodological / scientific rigour. They are more like critical reflection essays as opposed to a study on people's perspectives on weapon play so I don't think they are appropriate to include in my literature review at this stage
  - Logue & Detour 2011
  - Logue & Shelton 2008
  - Holland 1999

02.10.22- Transcribing and noticing patterns
I've been transcribing interview 5 today and as I'm reading some interesting commonalities are popping into my head that I might keep a note for later during data analysis

- Rights and wrong/ good and bad and moral development
- Letting children learn experiently
- Controlling and understanding emotions
- Superhero characters
- Armed forces parents
- Guiding and modelling play
- Physical injury
- Making sense of what they've seen
- Villianising their friends
- Taking risks in play

Also, transcribing takes a very long time!

14.10.22- More transcription

A little bit more transcribing done today. I have picked up on some other themes so I thought I would keep a note here

- Something about fear… fear that this play will affect children's behaviour in the future e.g. cause them to get into gun crime or gangs
- Noticing differences between people in interviews picking up on the systemic issues of the wider society in the LA, the media nationally, and the families e.g. army, and children's cultural capital… linking with Bronfenbrenner

25.10.22- Reflection on the context & chronosystem

I've just paused transcribing the last interview and thought to myself that many of the participants mentioned recent events in the world that were going on at the time of the interviews. I started interviewing in June when there was a big school shooting in America, right through to the Queen's funeral in the September, where soliders and guns were present on the TV. There had also been a stabbing at a school near one of the nurseries, not long before I interviewed there and this was mentioned in the interview. As well, we are within the wake of Covid-19 and the impact that has had on children's social interactions and learning, and media consumption possibly too. All of these events are likely to have influenced the way participants interpreted and answered the questions. It made me reflect that all research represents a 'point in time'…Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem….

31.10.22 – Halfway through initial coding

I am onto coding the 5th interview today. I am my way to 200 codes(!) but having read the Trainor paper I'm not too worried about that. I have already noted a few that will likely end up being merged and I know it's a recursive process. I am trying to be okay with the messiness and uncertainty of all of it. I know I will get there in the end, just trying to enjoy the process as I go. There have been a few instances where I'm not sure what to name the code so I've given a (probably not great) name for now that I know will evolve and change as my thinking becomes clearer e.g. "there is a line?" is one that I can't quite pin down at the moment but rather than get hung up on what it might/could/should be, I've left it with a question mark and then I will come back to it later. There are plenty more codes to come! It's re-assuring to me that there is actually a lot of variety in individual responses.

01.11.22- More coding

Still coding. I'm on interview 7 now. I'm reflecting on my over-200 codes and thinking hmmm that's a lot but trying to trust in the process. I am starting to see some potential clusters or early themes around:

- Children as innocent explorers
- WCP as reflecting children's backgrounds e.g. relatives in the army, or into hunting
- The role of the EYP in scaffolding learning experiences
- The setting being a safe place to explore such play themes
- The uncertainty and challenge of it all, linked with the confidence of practitioners and their experience

But keeping an open mind as I still have plenty more coding to do. I am also reflecting on how my data kind of fits with the literature and I plan to spend some time having a re-read of Holland's chapters to refresh myself.

25.11.22- Refining coding

Revision process began! I laid all the codes out (243) on a table and began grouping them by similarity and then noticing which ones might be the same/similar enough to be one code. I took photographs of this process.

28.11.22

I have spent more time today revising the codes. Some I have condensed e.g. WCP is easy to join in with, and WCP requires no verbal language became 'WCP is an accessible form of play'.
This process is definitely taking long than I thought it would.

20.12.22

- Codes are continuing to be collapsed, we're on 179 now
- I am starting to notice some things such as there are times or types of weapon play which are seen as OK, or safer or preferred compared to others... such as superhero play, or weapon play so long as it doesn't have bad language

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04.02.2023

Wow the themes have actually evolved quite a bit since I last updated this diary. I've used a mixture of post-its and digital formats to help my thinking evolve. This is where we are at so far:
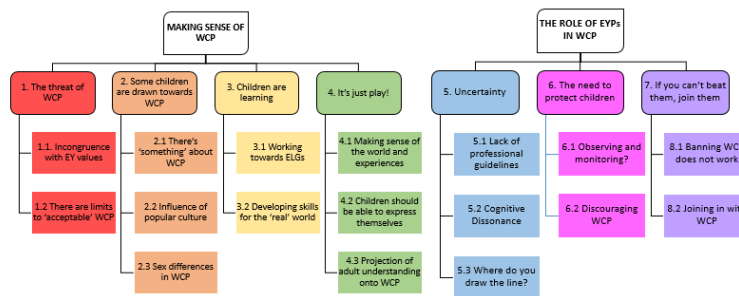
In the space of a week I have dipped in and out of them each day. I think I am ready to start writing about them now. I am aware that as I write, my ideas might change and therefore my thematic map might change as well. I just need to have the faith to take the plunge and write *something!*
It's been so nice going through the extracts again and getting back in touch with the data. I hope to do it justice.

Appendix J: Initial refinement of codes
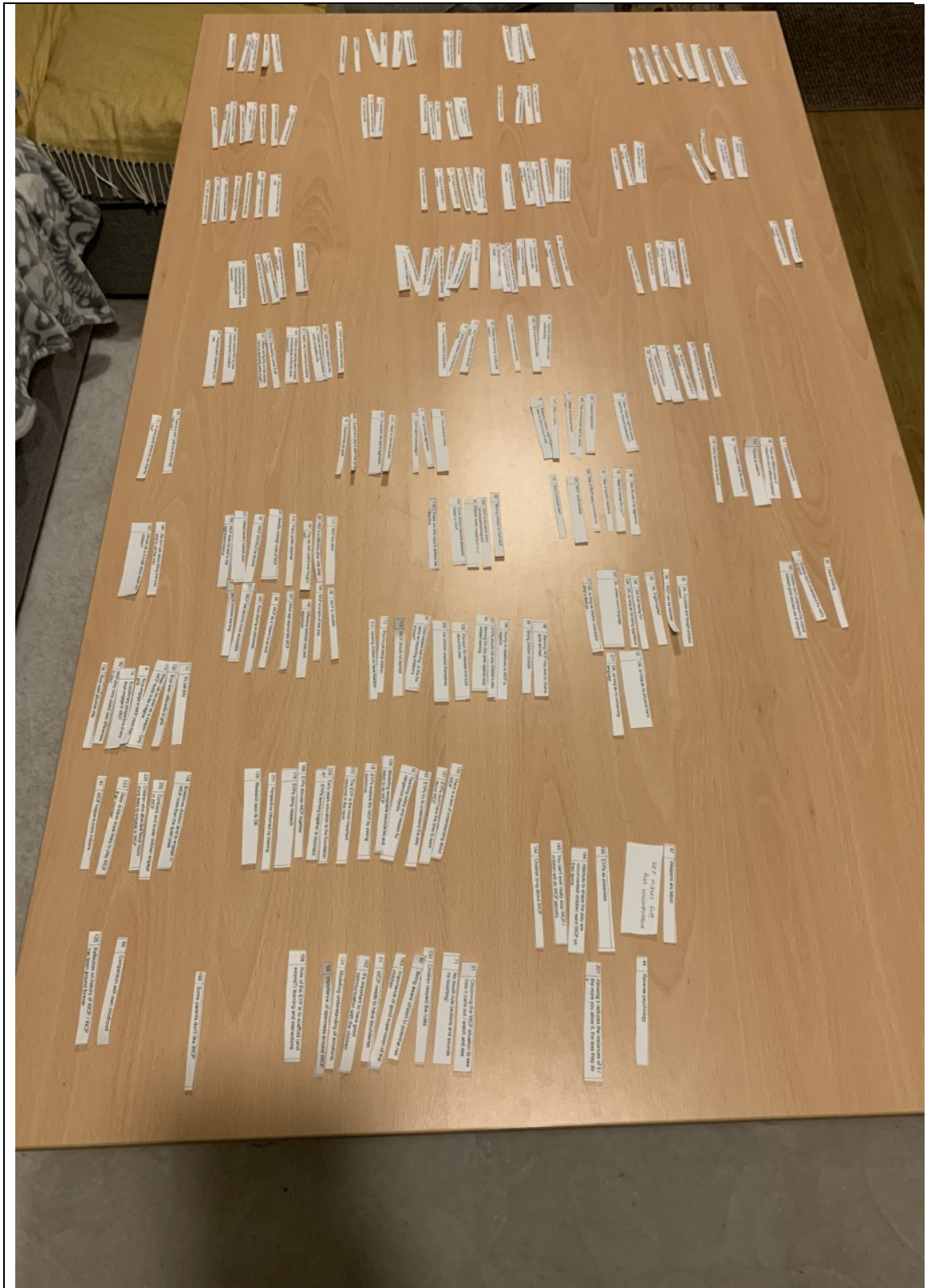
Appendix K: Final list of codes

1. Risk of physical harm
2. Risk of emotional harm to others
3. WCP promotes aggression
4. Ok, so long as no physical harm
5. Superhero play is safer than gun play
6. Innocent bystanders
7. WCP could escalate
8. There's 'something about' WCP
9. Children want that 'magical' moment
10. Protecting children's futures
11. We need to protect children
12. There are other ways to achieve this learning
13. Early years education is the foundation
14. Protecting children's feelings
15. Saying no repetitively to WCP is negative
16. No policy
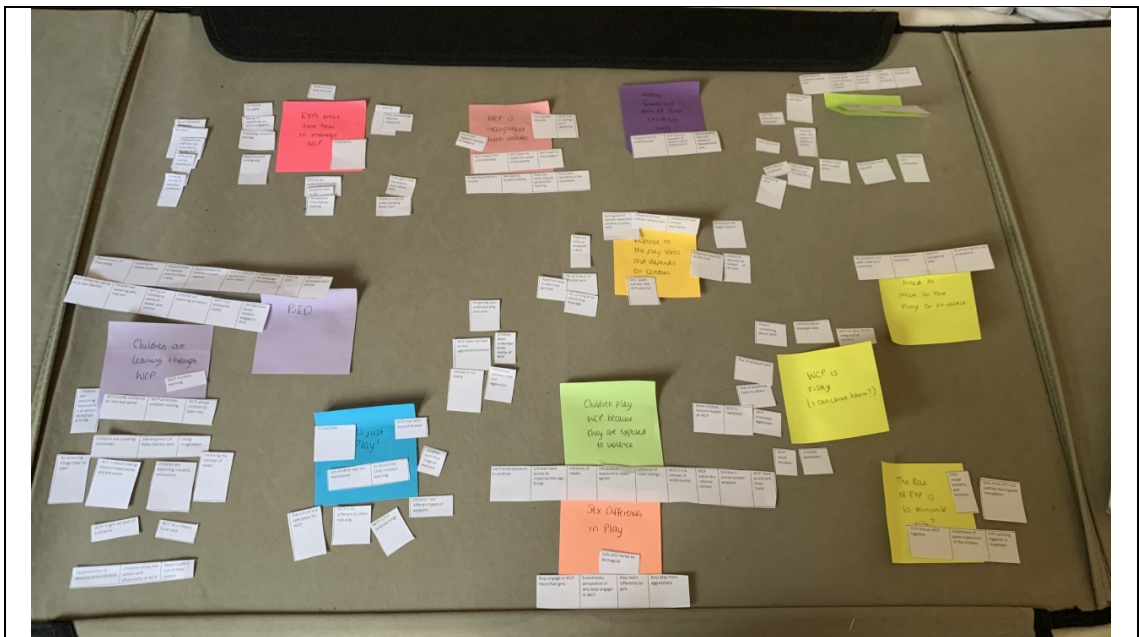17. No professional guidelines
18. Inexperienced staff are not sure how to manage WCP
19. Uncertainty
20. Need to avoid incongruity
21. It's difficult
22. There are limits on acceptable WCP
23. Conflicted thoughts
24. Differences across practitioners' approach in the same setting
25. Allowing (or not) is personal preference
26. WCP can give rise to safeguarding concerns
27. Concerns about language used
28. OK, so long as no concerning language
29. WCP might be part of a schema
30. WCP as a 'means to an end'
31. WCP has value
32. WCP involves learning
33. WCP SHOULD be allowed
34. WCP has become more acceptable
35. Role of the EYP is to scaffold learning and interactions
36. EYPs modelling caring/helping roles in WCP
37. EYP role to model safe ways to engage in WCP
38. Educating children about soldiers
39. Making time for WCP deliberately
40. Extending WCP
41. EYPs model empathy and kindness
42. EYPS joining in with WCP
43. Teaching safety and respect for dangerous objects
44. EYPs discuss WCP together
45. Importance of good supervision of the children
46. EYPs working together is important
70. Opportunities for language development
71. Sharing skills
72. WCP is an accessible form of play
73. Children are creating storylines
74. Development of early literacy skills
75. Using imagination
76. WCP builds resilience for the real world
77. WCP promotes problem solving
78. WCP allows children to take risks
79. Boys engage in WCP more than girls
80. Evolutionary perspective of why boys engage in WCP
81. Boys learn differently to girls
82. Boys play more aggressively
83. Setting/cohort Context-dependent whether to allow WCP
84. Looking at the bigger picture
85. Response depends on context of the play
86. Response depends on the child
87. EYPs 'watch and see' how WCP pans out
88. Policy guides response
89. Belief that all settings are in agreement
90. Influence of local context- military area
91. Influence of local context- deprivation
92. EYPs try to understand the play
93. EYPs acknowledge different viewpoints
94. Research says its OK
95. There is a lack of understanding about WCP
96. EYPs don't have the time to learn about WCP
97. Perspective informed by training
98. Opportunities to develop physical skills
99. Children enjoy the action and physicality of WCP
100. Need to get it out of their system
101. You can't ever really stop WCP
102. Children want WCP on their terms
103. The more you allow it, the less they do it
104. Importance of openness around WCP
105. it's important to have good communication with the children
106. No touch rule (actions and sounds no touching)
107. WCP needs to have boundaries
108. Knowing your children well
109. WCP is about making sense of experiences and the world
110. Fantasy is not reality
111. Pre-school is a safe place for WCP
112. Children are exploring morality and justice

47. WCP makes EYPs uncomfortable
48. WCP does not match the values of the setting
49. Don't want to encourage it
50. Let children express themselves
51. (It should be) Child initiated learning
52. It's just play
53. WCP is no different to other role play
54. Difference between play and aggression
55. WCP does not lead to real aggression/violence
56. Projecting adult understanding onto play
57. WCP is fun (and exciting)
58. Children don't understand the reality of WCP
59. WCP allows for taking on a new identity
60. Children are exploring who they are
61. WCP gives children a sense of power and control
62. Children are exploring emotions
63. WCP is an emotional outlet
64. Confident and louder children engage in WCP
65. Development of friendships
66. Learning to resolve conflicts
67. Opportunities to develop communication skills
68. Opportunities for children to work together
69. WCP is a bid for connection with others

113. Exploring the concept of death
114. Re-enacting things they've seen
115. Children are exploring boundaries of what's acceptable in life
116. Weapons are not inherently bad
117. WCP may be an expression of children's family lifestyle/culture
118. Banning WCP may cast shame on lifestyles/cultures
119. Can't avoid exposure to violence
120. Children have access to inappropriate-age things
121. Influence of media
122. Influence of exposure to video games
123. Influence of older siblings
124. WCP in the context of world events
125. WCP within the national context
126. Children's stories contain weapons
127. WCP more prominent since Covid
128. Children 'use' different types of weapons
129. Automatic negative reaction to weapons
130. Where do you draw the line?
131. Girls WCP tends to be magical
132. WCP has been around forever
133. Re-direction to a safer place as a technique
134. Distraction as a technique
135. Need to change the play
136. Re-directing the use of weapons
137. Some children become fixated on WCP
138. WCP is repetitive

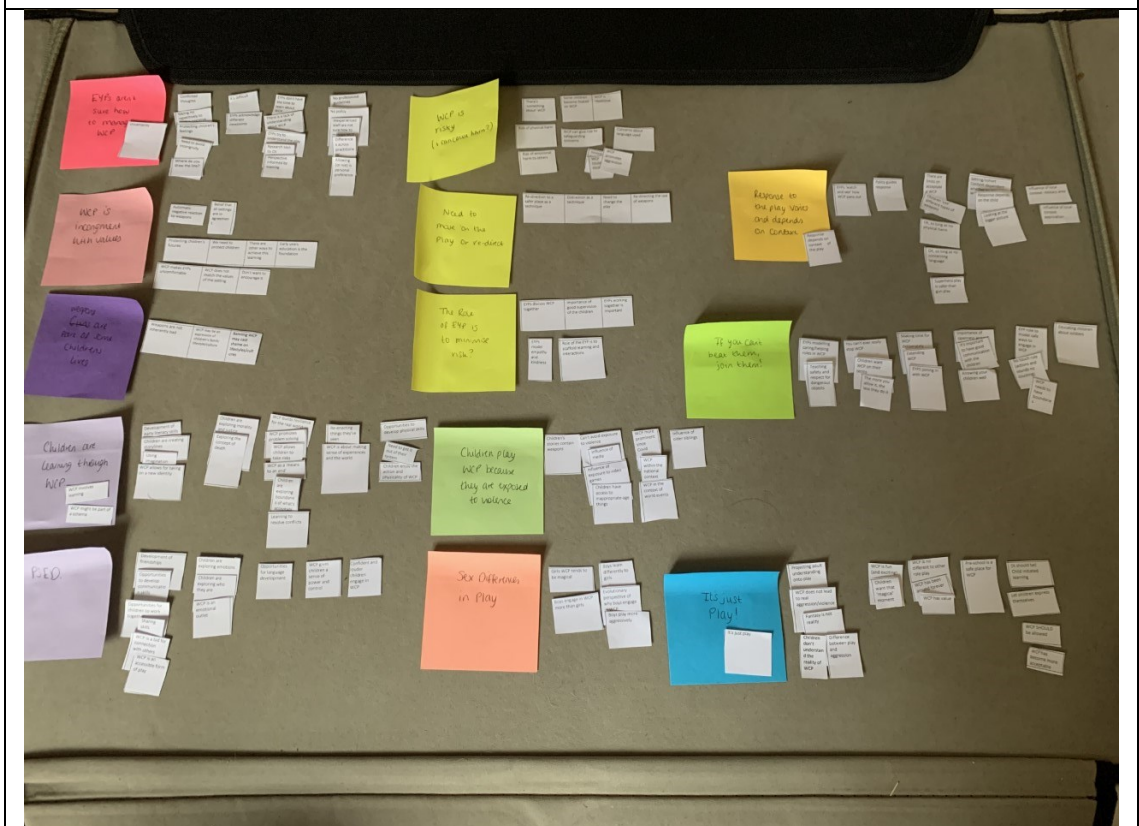# Appendix L: Development of themes

It is recognised that these photos are not all clear/ large enough to read the text, but they are provided as an indication of the data analysis process.

Initial development of themes by grouping codes

The development of some potential 'candidate' themes

Candidate themes were tweaked and altered

The development of two overarching themes began

The Role of the EYP in WCP

Uncertainty → Lack of policy & guidelines
↘ Conflicted thoughts
↘ Where do you draw the line?

If you can't beat them, join them... → You can't evr truly stop them (Banning WCP doesn't work)
→ Joining in with WCP
→ Setting boundaries

EYPs are the most valuable resource in the room [this one probably needs renaming...] → Response depends on context
→ { Moving the play on? Distraction Scaffolding } Safeguarding / protecting children
We don't want to hear saying "no" — distraction + redirection Contextual

Making Sense of WCP

Aggressive Play Themes (can that be tolerated?) → Physical Risks
↘ Incongruence with EY values
↘ Acceptable limits (for unkes language, violence, exclusion)

Learning Opportunities → Making sense of world + experiences
→ Developing skills for life
→ Working towards EY goals
→ Making sense of themselves + others

It's just Play! → Children should be able to express themselves
→ Adults project their understanding
→ Weapons aren't inherently bad

Why WCP? → Fun and exciting
→ Influence of popular culture
→ Sex differences?

Two initial thematic maps were created (one for each overarching theme)

MAKING SENSE OF WCP

1. The threat of WCP
- 1.1. Incongruence with EY values
- 1.2 The need to protect children
- 1.3 There are limits to 'acceptable' WCP

2. Some children are drawn towards WCP
- 2.1 There's 'something' about WCP
- 2.2 Influence of popular culture
- 2.3 Sex differences in WCP

3. Learning Opportunities presented by WCP
- 3.1 Working towards ELGs
- 3.2 Developing skills for the 'real' world

4. It's just play!
- 4.1 Making sense of the world and experiences
- 4.2 Children should be able to express themselves
- 4.3 Projection of adult understanding onto WCP

THE ROLE OF EYPs IN WCP

5. Uncertainty
- 5.1 Lack of professional guidelines
- 5.2 Cognitive Dissonance
- 5.3 Where do you draw the line?

6. Response depends on context

7. Discouraging WCP

8. If you can't beat them, join them
- 8.1 Banning WCP does not work
- 8.2 Joining in with WCP

After using pen and paper to physically develop and arrange themes, the researcher used computer software to continue development.

Appendix M: Code to theme index

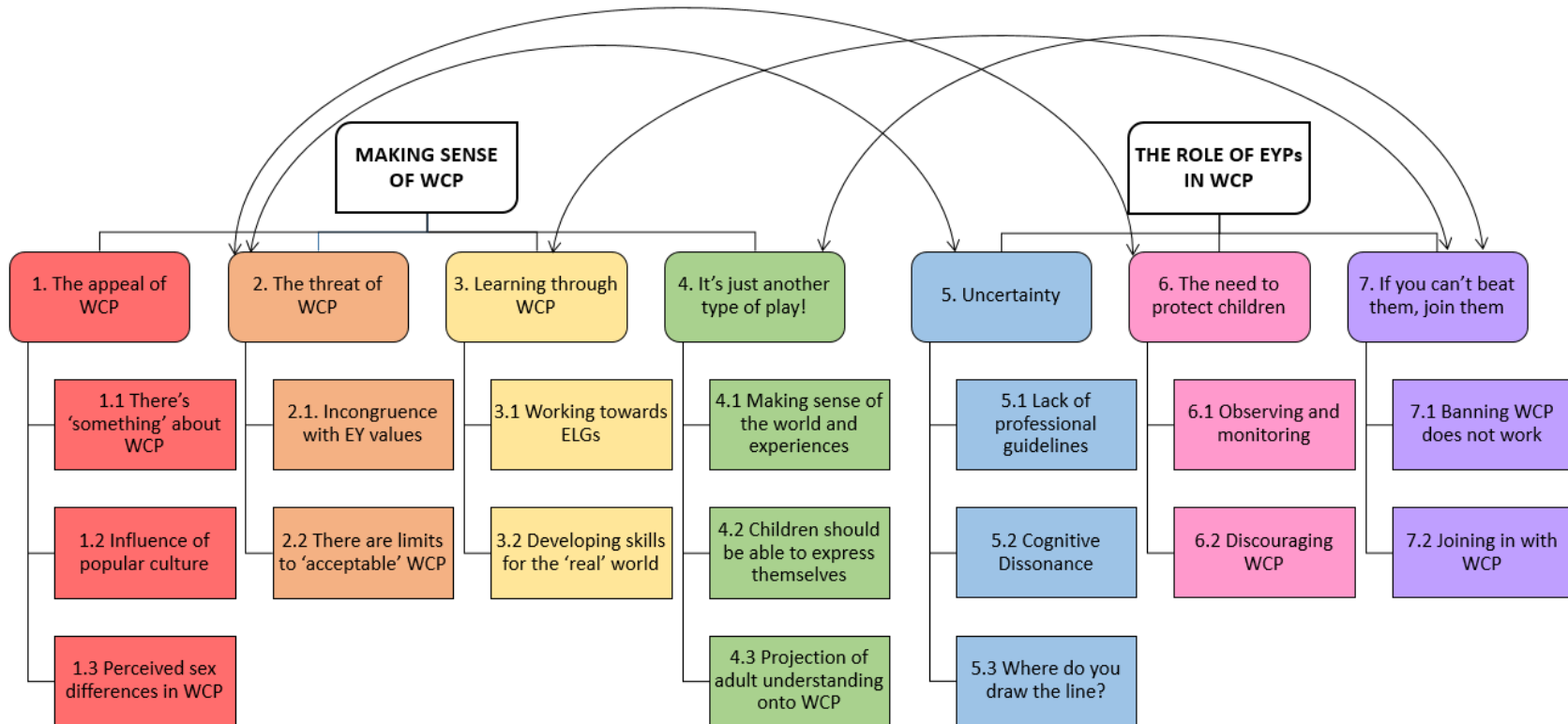| The appeal of WCP	
There's 'something' about WCP	There's 'something about' WCP
	WCP is fun (and exciting)
	Children enjoy the action and physicality of WCP
	Need to get it out of their system
	WCP is an accessible form of play
	WCP is an emotional outlet
	Confident and louder children engage in WCP
	WCP gives children a sense of power and control
	Children want that 'magical' moment
	Children 'use' different types of weapons
Influence of popular culture	Children have access to inappropriate-age things
	Influence of media
	Influence of exposure to video games
	Influence of older siblings
	WCP more prominent since Covid
	Can't avoid exposure to violence
Sex differences in WCP	Boys learn differently to girls
	Boys play more aggressively
	Boys engage in WCP more than girls
	Evolutionary perspective of why boys engage in WCP
	Girls WCP tends to be magical
The threat of WCP	
Incongruence with EY values	Early years education is the foundation
	Risk of physical harm
	Risk of emotional harm to others
	WCP promotes aggression
	Concerns about language used
	WCP does not match the values of the setting
	Some children become fixated on WCP
	WCP is repetitive
	Innocent bystanders
	WCP makes EYPs uncomfortable
	There are other ways to achieve this learning
There are limits to 'acceptable' WCP	There are limits on acceptable WCP
	OK, so long as no concerning language
	Superhero play is safer than gun play
	Ok, so long as no physical harm
	WCP can give rise to safeguarding concerns
	WCP could escalate
Learning through WCP	
Working towards ELGs	Opportunities for language development
	Sharing skills
	WCP might be part of a schema
	WCP as a 'means to an end'
	WCP has value
	WCP involves learning
	Children are creating storylines
	Development of early literacy skills
	Using imagination

	Opportunities to develop physical skills
	WCP allows for taking on a new identity
	Children are exploring who they are
	Development of friendships
	Children are exploring emotions
	Opportunities to develop communication skills
	Opportunities for children to work together
	WCP is a bid for connection with others
Developing skills for the wider world	WCP builds resilience for the real world
	WCP promotes problem solving
	WCP allows children to take risks
	Learning to resolve conflicts

It's just another type of play!	
Making sense of the world and experiences	Influence of local context- military area
	WCP in the context of world events
	WCP within the national context
	WCP may be an expression of children's family lifestyle/culture
	WCP is about making sense of experiences and the world
	Children are exploring morality and justice
	Exploring the concept of death
	Re-enacting things they've seen
	Children are exploring boundaries of what's acceptable in life
Children should be able to express themselves	Let children express themselves
	(It should be) Child initiated learning
	It's just play
	WCP has been around forever
	WCP is no different to other role play
	WCP SHOULD be allowed
Projection of adult understanding onto WCP	Difference between play and aggression
	WCP does not lead to real aggression/violence
	Automatic negative reaction to weapons
	Fantasy is not reality
	Weapons are not inherently bad
	Projecting adult understanding onto play
	Children don't understand the reality of WCP

Uncertainty	
Lack of professional guidelines	No policy
	No professional guidelines
	Policy guides response
	Differences across practitioners' approach in the same setting
	Allowing (or not) is personal preference
	Inexperienced staff are not sure how to manage WCP
	Belief that all settings are in agreement
	EYPs acknowledge different viewpoints
	Research says its OK
	There is a lack of understanding about WCP
	EYPs don't have the time to learn about WCP
	Perspective informed by training

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Cognitive dissonance	Uncertainty
	It's difficult
	Conflicted thoughts
	Banning WCP may cast shame on lifestyles/cultures
Where do you draw the line?	Where do you draw the line?
	Children's stories contain weapons
	Need to avoid incongruity
	EYPs try to understand the play

The need to protect children

Observing and monitoring	Setting/cohort context-dependent whether to allow WCP
	Looking at the bigger picture
	Response depends on context of the play
	Response depends on the child
	EYPs 'watch and see' how WCP pans out
	Knowing your children well
	Pre-school is a safe place for WCP
	Importance of good supervision of the children
	EYPs working together is important
	EYPs discuss WCP together
Discouraging WCP	Influence of local context- deprivation
	Don't want to encourage it
	Saying no repetitively to WCP is negative
	Protecting children's feelings
	Protecting children's futures
	We need to protect children
	Re-direction to a safer place as a technique
	Distraction as a technique
	Need to change the play
	Re-directing the use of weapons

If you can't beat them, join them

Banning WCP does not work	You can't ever really stop WCP
	Children want WCP on their terms
	The more you allow it, the less they do it
	No touch rule (actions and sounds, no touching)
	WCP needs to have boundaries
	Importance of openness around WCP
	It's important to have good communication with the children
	WCP has become more acceptable
Joining in with WCP	EYPS joining in with WCP
	Teaching safety and respect for dangerous objects
	EYPs modelling caring/helping roles in WCP
	EYP role to model safe ways to engage in WCP
	Role of the EYP is to scaffold learning and interactions
	Educating children about soldiers
	Making time for WCP deliberately
	Extending WCP
	EYPs model empathy and kindness

Appendix N: Final thematic map

MAKING SENSE OF WCP

THE ROLE OF EYPs IN WCP

1. The appeal of WCP

- 1.1 There's 'something' about WCP
- 1.2 Influence of popular culture
- 1.3 Perceived sex differences in WCP

2. The threat of WCP

- 2.1. Incongruence with EY values
- 2.2 There are limits to 'acceptable' WCP

3. Learning through WCP

- 3.1 Working towards ELGs
- 3.2 Developing skills for the 'real' world

4. It's just another type of play!

- 4.1 Making sense of the world and experiences
- 4.2 Children should be able to express themselves
- 4.3 Projection of adult understanding onto WCP

5. Uncertainty

- 5.1 Lack of professional guidelines
- 5.2 Cognitive Dissonance
- 5.3 Where do you draw the line?

6. The need to protect children

- 6.1 Observing and monitoring
- 6.2 Discouraging WCP

7. If you can't beat them, join them

- 7.1 Banning WCP does not work
- 7.2 Joining in with WCP

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Appendix O: Proposed framework for conceptualising and responding to WCP

A note to EYPs:

The following framework is suggested for use by EYPs in EY settings. It may be useful to introduce this within team meetings or supervision/reflection spaces as a first step.

The author refers to weapon and conflict play (WCP) as any such play where objects, or imagined objects, are used as weapons towards another person or object (real or imagined). WCP may occur in different contexts e.g. war games, fantasy play or superhero battles etc., and with different weapons e.g. sword, gun, lightsaber, magic wand and so on.

It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that it may <u>not</u> *just be boys with guns* but that any child may show an interest in, or participate in WCP, and this may look quite different across different play scenarios.

This framework encourages staff, as reflective practitioners, to "look beyond the weapon" to thoroughly examine the function that this play could be fulfilling for the child(ren). Above all, when observing WCP in the setting and making decisions as to how to approach it, practitioners are encouraged to apply their professional knowledge of the child and understanding of the wider contextual factors.

Practitioners are encouraged to reflect on the nature of play more generally e.g.:

- Play is a way of learning and acquiring information
- Play can be a method through which children explore and re-enact things they have observed and/or experienced (the meaning may not always be obvious to an observer)
- Play can be a chance for children to problem solve and test out theories and ideas (this can be both physically and mentally)
- Play is affected by social, cultural and environmental contexts

It is important to keep these points in mind when reflecting on WCP.

CONCEPTUALISING AND RESPONDING TO WEAPON AND CONFLICT PLAY

Characteristics of effective learning	Area of learning	Observe: What are children doing?	Consider: Why might they be playing in this way?	Response: Where might you go from here?
Finding out and exploring *Playing with what they know* *Being willing to "have a go"* *Being involved and concentrating* *Keeping on trying* *Enjoying achieving what they set out to do* *Having their own ideas (creative thinking)* *Making links (building theories)* *Working with ideas (critical thinking)*	Personal, social & emotional development	Are they playing alone or with others? Are they showing co-operation and/or compromise? Are they demonstrating empathy or perspective-taking? Are they taking on a new role or identity? Are they managing emotions (self-regulation)? Are they managing conflict/disagreements?	Is the game exciting and fun? Do they wish to feel powerful or strong? Do they enjoy playing in groups? Are they seeking to develop friendships? Are they using WCP to work through things they are anxious/ worried about? Does playing in this way give them confidence?	**Scaffold**: Self-regulation, resolution of conflict, perspective-taking, problem solving **Discuss**: Violence, emotions, being kind *Teach language e.g. "Stop. I don't like that"* **Extend**: Model caring roles within WCP e.g. medic or use of healing potions *Are they following the setting rules?* *Monitor wellbeing*
	Communication & language	How are children communicating? Are they making sound effects? What language can you hear?	Is it a language- accessible form of play? Are they practicing conversation? Are they developing sustained, shared attention?	**Extend**: What vocabulary could you add? *Are they using concerning language?*
	Physical development	Are they developing fine motor skills? Are they developing proprioception, balance and co-ordination? Are they developing gross motor skills?	Are they seeking out ways to enjoy large physical movements?	**Discuss**: How we can we stay safe? **Extend**: Use of targets to bring skill into weapon use *Are they physically hurting each other? Can the play be redirected or should it be stopped?*
	Literacy	Are they developing or following a storyline? Are they making sounds that might be important for phonics?	Are they interested in stories?	**Discuss**: What is the story? Who are the characters? **Scaffold**: Relevant mark making
	Maths	Are they using mathematical language such as number, shape, size or measure?	Are they interested in construction?	**Scaffold**: How many? How big? One more/less?
	Understanding the world	Are they representing different roles? Are they representing events and experiences? Are they exploring concepts such as morality, justice or death?	Are they making sense of the things they've seen/heard or experienced? Are there people who use weapons in their lives?	**Discuss**: Who uses weapons and why? How can we be safe using them? Talk about different cultures and livelihoods, life/death and good/bad
	Expressive arts & design	Are they using their imagination to act out scenarios and/or create weapons? Are there 'bad guys'?	Do they wish to re-create or re-experience things they have seen? Are they exploring fantasy v.s. reality?	**Extend**: Who are the 'bad guys'? Why are they bad? Explore their imagined worlds - can they describe it or draw it?

REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY	*PRACTITIONER CONSISTENCY*	*MANAGING RISK*	*RULES AND BOUNDARIES*	*SAFEGUARDING*
What are your values and beliefs? *How does WCP 'sit' with you? Why?*	*Agree on responses* *What are the values of your setting?*	*Is it 'real' or playful aggression?* *How can you support 'careful' risk-taking?*	*What are the acceptable limits?* *Can you co-construct rules with children?*	*Remain alert to safeguarding concerns* *See WCP within a context*

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